

Battleground Poll 66 **The 2020 Election: Trump Losing His Bargain with Middle Class Voters**

Republican Analysis

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In the 2016 election and in the intervening years, many voters, particularly middle-class voters, were willing to make a political bargain. They would accept President Trump's volatile and often crude style in exchange for the benefits of a growing economy. The coronavirus crisis and the subsequent economic devastation it has wrought appears to have severely dampened if not broken this bargain. Without the optimism and upward mobility from a growing economy, many voters are left to dwell on the President's brusque demeanor.

In the Battleground Polls conducted throughout the Trump administration we have asked a three-way option as a follow up to the traditional job approval question for the President. The question asks voters to select from the options of:

- Donald Trump's style and comments are frequently insulting, and he has the wrong approach on many issues,
- Donald Trump's style and language bother me, but he is raising important issues, or
- Donald Trump tells it like it is and he has the right approach on the issues I care most about.

In our October 2019 Battleground Poll, fifty percent (50%) of middle-class voters identified with one of the last two categories of Trump raising important issues (17%) or telling it like it is (33%). Now, in this latest Battleground Poll just forty-four percent (44%) of middle-class voters are in these last two categories. More importantly, a majority (54%) of middle-class voters now fall into the first group that feel the President has both the wrong style and the wrong approach on issues.

This decline is particularly pronounced among white middle-class voters. A majority (51%) of white middle-class voters now select the choice that President Trump is insulting and has the wrong approach on many issues, an increase of six-points on this measure since October. This growth is fueled by white middle-class voters leaving the last category, tells it like it is and has the right approach, which has seen a decline of five-points since October.

Most importantly, the declining support of white middle-class voters translates directly to ballot support of Donald Trump in this latest Battleground data. Last October we tested the President against a “generic” Democratic nominee. (As Celinda Lake has pointed out over the last thirty years of conducting Battleground Polls, the generic candidate gives you the strongest results because voters assume the positive qualities and have no negatives put before them). In that October study, Donald Trump led on the ballot with white middle-class voters by nine-points. In this latest Battleground Poll, on a Trump/Biden presidential ballot, Joe Biden leads Donald Trump fifty-two percent (52%) to Donald Trump’s forty-four percent (44%) and with the “definite” vote leads forty-seven percent (47%) to thirty-eight percent (38%) among middle-class voters. Normally a successful nationwide Republican campaign is winning a majority of middle-class voters, driven by winning white middle-class voters by about twenty-points.

This erosion of goodwill among middle-class voters is a microcosm of the broken bargain that has put the President in such a challenging political situation with so many demographic groups. Yes, the President maintains a strong and enthusiastic base who fully support him. He fans the flames of their intense support on almost a daily basis. However, for many of the reluctant Trump supporters who were willing to put up with his persona in exchange for economic prosperity, the current economic climate no longer upholds this bargain. Throughout this survey, we have seen this decline in support and increase in frustration amongst a variety of demographic groups, but none with so much impact as self-defined middle-class voters who represents fifty-nine percent (59%) of the total electorate, driven specifically by middle-class white voters who represents approximately forty-six percent (46%) of the electorate.

The National Political Environment – Energized and Polarized

This is a highly energized and polarized electorate. Eight-in-ten (80%) of likely voters indicate that they are extremely likely to vote. Trump voters (80% extremely likely) and Biden voters (82% extremely likely) are at near parity in terms of enthusiasm about voting.

In terms of polarization, just seven percent (7%) of voters are undecided on the Presidential ballot and more than eight-in-ten (81%) voters say they have made a definite choice for President. Just

six percent (6%) of voters are undecided on the generic Congressional ballot. On the name identification questions for Trump and for Biden, voters who have favorable views of both men (3%) and voters who have unfavorable views of both men (7%) are in the single digits. In the 2016 election, those with unfavorable views of Trump and Clinton made up almost one-quarter of the electorate. These 2016 dual unfavorable voters broke in the last week and proved decisive in Trump's victory.

There is also a notable polarization when voters evaluate Trump's job performance. His overall job approval rating is forty-two percent (42%) approve with overwhelming approval among Republicans (87%), particularly partisan Republicans (91%). On the nine issues tested, Trump's job approval rating is within five points of his overall rating with three exceptions – the economy (50% approve) and jobs (50% approve) where he is notably higher and dealing with COVID-19 (37% approve) and protests/race relations (36% approve) where he is notably lower. However, on every one of these issues, his approval rating with Republicans and with base Republicans is among the highest marks he gets from any demographic group. Indeed, his approval rating among base GOP voters on these issues is at ninety percent above on every issue except dealing with COVID-19 (85% approve) and dealing with protests and race relations (85% approve).

The issue handling series between the two presidential candidates also illustrates this deep level of polarization. Nine issues are tested to see if voters prefer Trump or Biden to handle this issue. More than three-in-four voters (77%) either select Trump (32%) or Biden (45%) on every issue asked. For Trump, a similar trend is seen as in his job approval by issue ratings. Comparing his overall job approval rating of forty-two percent (42%), on eight of the nine issues tested Trump is selected within five points of that mark, ranging from the economy (47%) to health care (39%) and dealing with COVID-19 (39%). Only on the issue of dealing with protests and race relations (36%) is Trump selected at a rate not within five points of that forty-two percent mark.

In addition, as seen below, there is not a single issue where Trump has both majority job approval and has the advantage over Biden on the issue handling question. This is a challenging position for an incumbent candidate.

Issue	Approve	Disapprove	Trump Lead/Deficit		Trump	Biden	Trump Advantage
The economy	50%	48%	2%		47%	49%	-2%
Foreign Affairs	41%	56%	-15%		40%	56%	-16%
Taxes	45%	51%	-6%		46%	50%	-4%
Jobs	50%	47%	3%		46%	50%	-4%
Immigration	41%	57%	-16%		40%	57%	-17%
Health Care	42%	55%	-13%		39%	57%	-18%
Dealing with the COVID-19 crisis	38%	60%	-22%		39%	57%	-18%
Handling economic recovery	47%	50%	-3%		46%	51%	-5%
Dealing with protests and race relations	36%	61%	-25%		36%	59%	-23%

The Economy and Key Issues – Challenges Now and an Uncertain Fall

President Trump is facing perhaps the most challenging re-election campaign in modern times. At the very least, this environment is as challenging as Carter’s 1980 re-election when the twin challenges of a stagnant economy and the Iranian hostage crisis caused many voters to question his ability to lead. The political environment today with high unemployment, a stagnant economy, nationwide civil unrest, and a massive health pandemic is certainly leading many voters to question the ability of President Trump to lead.

More than three-in-ten voters (31%) report that their household has been directly impacted by unemployment either by losing their job themselves (9%), having an immediate family member lose their job (17%), or both (5%). Harry Truman and Ronald Reagan were both fond of the quip

that a recession is when your neighbor loses his job and a depression is when you lose yours. For a significant portion of the electorate, we are in a depression, no matter what any economist says. This unemployment impacted group of voters includes more than one-quarter (26%) of Republicans and more than one-quarter (27%) of Trump 2016 voters. Right now, a solid majority of these unemployment impacted voters (58%) are voting for Biden.

The most decisive issues for the 2020 Presidential election look to be economic recovery, jobs, and the COVID-19 pandemic. If these are the decisive issues come November, the President will have a very challenging path to re-election. His job approval rating is upside down on economic recovery (47% approve/50% disapprove) and on dealing with COVID-19 crisis (38% approve/60% disapprove). In addition, Biden has the advantage and is the choice of the majority of the electorate on both of these issues. However, for jobs, President Trump does have a majority approval rating (50% approve) though Biden has a narrow four-point advantage on jobs in the issue handling test.

This situation illustrates well how events outside the control of either Presidential campaign could have a major impact in the outcome of the Presidential race. Imagine the impact if states are successful at sufficiently getting the COVID-19 outbreak under control and are able to fully reopen economically. Or imagine the impact if a widely available COVID-19 vaccine comes to the market in the fall and provides immunity to millions of Americans. Or imagine the impact if COVID-19 has a second spike in cases which leads to even more economic stagnation and higher unemployment. Neither campaign has much control over any of these scenarios, all of which could swing millions of votes.

The Path to Victory for Trump and for Congressional Republicans

Absent a stunning economic turnaround or a vaccine being developed faster than ever in human history, President Trump's next best path to victory is to recreate the dynamics of his 2016 race against Hillary Clinton. As noted earlier, in that race about one-quarter of the electorate held unfavorable views of both Trump and Clinton. This group broke decisively for Trump, providing him with the needed votes to win the Electoral College. As noted earlier, on this survey just seven

percent (7%) of voters hold an unfavorable view of both Trump and Biden. In addition, Biden holds a thirty-one-point lead (47%-16%) with this dual unfavorable group. At this stage, Biden has been able to define this race as a contest between Trump and not Trump. The Trump campaign needs to turn this into a contest between Trump and a partisan Democrat opponent who has been in public life for more than four decades with a record worthy of scrutiny and critical review by voters.

Trump could also raise his re-election chances by focusing relentlessly on his achievements on issues that matter to voters and where he has or has had a majority approval rating. These are pocketbook issues like jobs, the economy, and taxes. In addition, he could take a less combative tact on dealing with the COVID-19 crisis and cede some decision-making authority to health policy experts. Republican Governors in states as diverse as Maryland and Ohio have won great earned media praise and made impressive gains on their job approval ratings with this approach.

For Congressional Republicans, this data is not so challenging. Despite all the political environmental winds in their face – Biden’s double-digit lead, Trump’s declining support among middle class voters, voters trending toward Biden on key issues – the generic Congressional ballot finds Republicans at a disadvantage of just six points (44%-50%). We continue to be of the mind that the strong advantage Democrats have in holding supermajority districts provides them with an inherent five-point advantage on this measure. In terms of intensity, there are as many Republicans (91%) selecting the GOP on the generic Congressional ballot as there are Democrats (91%) selecting the Democrat candidate. In addition, Republicans have majority support among key Congressional voting blocs like rural voters (57%), white seniors (53%), and voters with some college education (50%).

The Road Ahead for the Presidential Campaign -- Even under 100 days is a Lifetime

In the Oliver Stone movie *Any Given Sunday*, a story following a professional football team for a season, the final play we see comes at the end of a conference championship game. The grizzled coach, played by Al Pacino, looks at the clock before this final play and remarks that “four seconds is a lifetime.” Indeed, the game is decided in these four seconds. Oliver Stone made other more

explicitly politically oriented films, but this axiom about how much can change in such a small amount of time is wholly appropriate for politics.

If the election were held today, this data points to a Biden win and most likely a fairly decisive one. However, the election is not today or even in the near future. Over two full months remain for events, campaign tactics, and debates to intervene. Right now, for many voters this Presidential election is about Trump versus an inoffensive alternative. However, despite Biden's majority favorable rating just twenty-eight percent (28%) of voters have strongly favorable views of him and just thirty-five percent (35%) of voters indicate they are definitely voting for him. These voters are in a common area for this stage of the campaign. They are frustrated with the incumbent and have not heard anything particularly bad about the challenger. So, they give the challenger a strong image and make a commitment to the challenger on the ballot. Neither of these views are entrenched or intractable.

Running the Last Campaign – “Should He, Can He?”

A common lament from political operatives on both sides of the aisle is candidates who want to run the last campaign, despite the differing realities of the present campaign. In the vast majority of campaigns, the strategy and tactics from the previous campaign are wholly unsuitable for the current campaign, and that remains a key question in Donald Trump's re-election campaign.

From the very beginning Donald Trump was a very unique candidate. He entered the presidential race five years ago with very high name ID. While his image was net negative (approximately 35% favorable and 55% unfavorable), both his positive image and negative image was extremely intense by election day 2016. In fact, 2016 was the first time in modern day presidential elections that a nominee from either party had over a 50% unfavorable rating going into the election, and both Hilary Clinton and Donald Trump had a 50% unfavorable rating . . . strongly! What was often missed in the often-sole focus of the negatives of both candidates is that with the approximate 35% of the voters who were favorable to Donald Trump 32% or 33% were strongly favorable, whereas Hilary Clinton never broke 17% strongly favorable.

The other unique thing that developed in the 2016 Presidential Election because of the high negatives of both candidates was throughout the fall campaign approximately 24-25% of the voting electorate held unfavorable feelings about both candidates . . . they became the swing vote of the 2016 Election. In fact, exit polling showed that of the total electorate voting on Election day in 2016, 19% of voters disliked both candidates. Through the fall neither candidate registered more than 20% of that swing vote, and yet in the key states like Florida, Ohio, Pennsylvania, North Carolina, and Wisconsin that swing vote broke 3 to 1 for Trump in the last week of the campaign. This movement was confirmed by our private polling in those states in the last week of the 2016 Election.

That brings us to the four years of the Trump Presidency, which developed very early into four identifiable voter groups driven by President Trump's negative image ratings, which regardless of increases and decreases in his job approval has never dropped below 54% or risen above 57% throughout the entire four years. Those four groups are; (1) the Trump "base" voters made up of 33-34% of the electorate and are rock solid in their support of President Trump, (2) the "soft" Republican base made up of approximately 11-12% of the electorate who like the President's policies, do not like his persona, but put a priority on his policies, (3) Independent voters made up of 11-12% of the electorate (mainly Independent voters, soft Republicans, and soft conservative Democratic voters) who like the President's policies, do not like his persona, and put a priority on his persona, and 4) The anti-Trump base which is made up of approximately 40% of the electorate.

What we have seen from the soft Republican base is they liked what they saw in the President's economic policies and "locked-in" after the President got his tax policy signed into law. That was why we have seen President Trump's job approval in the 45% approve range for almost three years. What we have seen with the Independent voters over the last four years is that while they have not given the President positive ratings on his job approval (because of their focus on persona), when asked about his job approval on specific issues like the economy or jobs they rank him in the high 50's. For example, suburban women (always mentioned as a key target group) were unfavorable towards the President but as late as last October were giving him a 61% approval ranking on his handling of the economy. That was a major factor in the political bargain with the white middle-class voters mentioned at the beginning of this strategic analysis.

However, the 2020 Election may be the case where the Trump campaign desperately wants to run the last campaign but cannot seem to get there. Right now, just seven percent (7%) of voters have an unfavorable view of both Presidential candidates and in this latest Battleground Poll these voters are breaking strongly in Biden's favor. In 2016, this group was nearly one-quarter of the electorate and it broke strongly in favor of Trump. The Trump campaign cannot hope that cataclysmic events break in their favor as they did in the 2016 election. They seem driven by the need to negatively define Biden on their terms . . . the need to define Joe Biden as old and weak mentally . . . the need to define Biden as a lifelong partisan Democrat being controlled by the left wing "progressives" of the Democratic Party.

Because Donald Trump's negatives have not changed throughout his entire presidency, hovering at that fifty-five percent (55%) range, including 50% strongly unfavorable, the assumption that those numbers are not going to change any more than his negatively perceived persona is a good one. Turning this into a race where voters are choosing between two deeply flawed candidates like the 2016 campaign, may present the best ingredient for victory for the Trump campaign. But this latest Battleground data clearly shows it is not the only ingredient needed. The biggest hit to the President's support has not come from his persona and brusque demeanor on display these last five months through his handling of the coronavirus pandemic and racial and social unrest. Where the President's support has taken the biggest hit is lacking of a strong economic message on the economy, jobs, and taxes. Yes, two and a half months can be a lifetime in a political campaign, but time to get on the right message path to the right voter group is growing short.