

Battleground 68: Divided, but Ready for Solutions

Republican Analysis

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This year began with rioting and an attempted insurrection. Congress began their work by passing a substantial economic stimulus that passed with only support from Democratic members. This shocking break from political decorum and this now all too familiar show of partisan power has fueled an unusual political environment. Too often, both sides have decided their way is the correct one and the only correct policy is agreement with this conclusion.

This attitude fuels a striking amount of political division and polarization on many key measures. However, many voters also remain on the fence about the leadership and direction of President Biden and the Democratic controlled Congress. Despite these divisions and hesitations, voters are enthusiastically in support of an increase in political civility, particularly a civility that focuses on finding compromise policy solutions. On another front, the recent bipartisan negotiations on the infrastructure legislation are a positive sign that civility is poised for a comeback.

Political Divisions

Political divisions run deep across this data. A majority (56%) of voters think the country is on the wrong track, including nine-in-ten Republicans (90%) who think this. However, fully 73% of Democrats think the country is headed in the right direction.

President Biden enjoys a majority job approval rating (53%), including almost universal approval among Democrats (96%). In contrast, 90% of Republicans disapprove of his job performance.

The Democrats in Congress have an overall job approval rating of 45% approve and 52% disapprove, but 85% of Democrats approve. The Republicans in Congress have an overall job approval rating of 29% approve and 66% disapprove though a majority (55%) of Republicans approve.

On the issue of dealing with the COVID-19 crisis, President Biden (24%) has a slightly higher excellent score than former President Trump (18%). Among Republicans, President Biden has an excellent score of just 2% while former President Trump has an excellent score of 37%. The reverse trend is seen among Democrats with President Biden having an excellent score of 47% while President Trump has an excellent score of 2%.

These types of partisan divisions might be expected in such a polarized political atmosphere, but the issue handling section illustrates just how deep these divisions run. Voters were given 9 issues and asked if they thought the Democrats in Congress or the Republicans in Congress would do a better job of handling that issue. These issues spanned the policy spectrum from taxes to health care to immigration to race relations. The striking finding on the political divide is that 41% of the electorate, including 78% of Democrats select the GOP in Congress on zero issues. On the other side of the political aisle, 35% of the electorate, including 70% of Republicans select the Democrats in Congress on zero issues. Strong majorities of voters in both parties believe that those in the other party in Congress are not better at handling even one of the issues tested.

While this polarization might seem to present a generational challenge of winning conversions to a different political party, the chart below illustrates that each party can win support in a more incremental manner. On the charts that follow, the positions one would expect partisan Republicans to take are highlighted in red and positions one would expect partisan Democrats to take are highlighted in blue. Again and again, rural voters, older men, white men, those with less than a college education, and white conservative Christians take positions one would expect a partisan Republican to take. These groups and their adjacent demographic cohorts will be fruitful ground for Republicans to build support in the 2022 election cycle. In addition, Republicans will be well served to try to regain their former level of support among suburban voters, older women, and college graduates.

Demographic group	Right direction	Wrong track		Biden approve	Biden disapprove
<i>All voters</i>	40%	56%		52%	45%
Rural	29%	68%		39%	59%
Urban	53%	45%		64%	32%
Suburban	47%	49%		60%	37%
Men over age 55	33%	63%		44%	54%
Women over age 55	49%	47%		63%	35%
White men	31%	66%		38%	60%
White women	39%	57%		49%	48%
Republican	7%	90%		7%	90%
Democrats	73%	22%		96%	2%
HS grad only	25%	71%		42%	54%
Some college	25%	60%		46%	52%
College grads	49%	47%		60%	37%
White conservative Christians	9%	92%		8%	91%
Non-white conservative Christians	41%	52%		54%	40%

Demographic group	DEM in Congress approve	DEM in Congress disapprove		GOP in Congress approve	GOP in Congress disapprove
<i>All voters</i>	45%	52%		29%	66%
Rural	34%	65%		36%	60%
Urban	55%	37%		22%	72%
Suburban	52%	45%		24%	72%
Men over age 55	35%	62%		31%	65%
Women over age 55	58%	39%		27%	71%
White men	30%	67%		36%	61%
White women	45%	52%		30%	67%
Republican	5%	93%		55%	41%
Democrats	85%	11%		8%	90%
HS grad only	36%	59%		37%	59%
Some college	38%	58%		33%	63%
College grads	53%	44%		23%	74%
White conservative Christians	5%	94%		55%	40%
Non-white conservative Christians	49%	48%		36%	60%

Demographic group	Biden excellent on COVID	Trump excellent on COVID		GOP in Congress on 0 issues	DEM in Congress on 0 issues
<i>All voters</i>	24%	18%		41%	35%
Rural	19%	23%		35%	47%
Urban	23%	11%		46%	24%
Suburban	29%	17%		48%	26%
Men over age 55	19%	25%		36%	45%
Women over age 55	38%	17%		55%	29%
White men	17%	25%		30%	45%
White women	26%	19%		43%	38%
Republican	2%	37%		3%	70%
Democrats	47%	2%		78%	1%
HS grad only	19%	23%		37%	43%
Some college	18%	21%		37%	42%
College grads	29%	15%		46%	26%
White conservative Christians	3%	45%		6%	74%
Non-white conservative Christians	24%	15%		41%	28%

Additional Opportunities for Republicans

Despite this polarization and need for growth in support, there is a clear path for Republicans to make a strong case to voters about the merits of them retaking control of Congress. While Biden does enjoy a majority job approval rating, voters are not fully convinced his leadership is going to make a notably positive impact on their life. A majority of voters continue to believe the country is on the wrong track. Just 24% of voters rate his leadership on dealing with the COVID-19 as excellent.

In a political environment where two-in-five voters (40%) report an economic setback due to the COVID-19 crisis and where 32% of voters select division in the country as one of their top issues, Republicans will be able to offer a contrast to the efforts by Biden on economic recovery, including their largely ignored efforts to offer bipartisan economic recovery legislation. Indeed, in a simulated debate, a majority of voters (50%) select the option that the expanded unemployment assistance provides an incentive for workers to remain unemployed. No Republican in Congress has ever suggested that paying people not to work is sound fiscal policy.

In addition, the issue handling series between Democrats and Republicans shows key issues where Republicans have the advantage. Republicans have the advantage on taxes (+6%), jobs (+3%), and economic recovery (+4%). Pressing the advantage on these pocketbook issues will provide Republicans with the opportunity to make their case with voters on issues that directly affect the everyday lives of voters. A voter struggling to pay their bills or worried about losing their job will be open to persuasion to Republican candidates making the case for fiscally prudent, job creating strategies. This data indicates there will be a significant number of these financially anxious voters in 2022.

On the policy front, the current negotiations on the infrastructure bill do provide another opportunity. Republicans are right to insist that an infrastructure bill spend most of its funding on what reasonable people would call infrastructure like roads, bridges, and expanded access to broadband internet. If a deal can be made to fund these types of valuable, locally focused projects that improve the everyday lives of so many voters, Republicans should take that deal. Roads, bridges, less traffic, and better access to better internet are not ideological issues.

Indeed, one of the unfortunate legacies of the Trump administration is undermining faith for many partisan Republicans in all government. The high unfavorable rating for Anthony Fauci among GOP partisans is a clear manifestation of this legacy. While skepticism about the government will always be a hallmark of Republican politics, there should be more room than there is now for faith in limited government.

Opportunities for Growing Civility

Despite the deep polarization right now, there continue to be strong signs that most voters would embrace a class of politicians committed to increasing political civility. Division in the country is the issue selected most frequently as the top two issue of concern to voters. In a simulated debate, 69% of voters prefer a politician who is willing to work together to get things done, even if it means compromising on my values sometimes versus just 27% who prefer a politician who consistently fights for my values, even if this means not finding a solution very often. Cable news and social media may heap attention on the loudest and most divisive of the political class, but this data shows that voters are hungry for solution oriented, deal making politicians.

The name identification section also provides some comfort about our political environment. Other surveys have touted the increasing mainstream acceptance of the vile assertions made by the Q-Anon online community. However, this data finds that 96% of the electorate either has an unfavorable image (50%) or no image (46%) of Q-Anon. A group that almost all voters think of poorly or not at all is not one on the verge of mainstream acceptance.

In fact, voters expect things to get better even over the next twelve months. Asked to rate the level of political division on a 1-100 scale, the mean score voters select for today is 73.97. However, asked where they think the country will be in one year, the mean score is 69.18, a substantial improvement.

Conclusions

This data illustrates that there is real value for Republicans to be for things and not just stand in opposition to Democratic proposals. Voters have not fully embraced President Biden and his agenda. They remain notably concerned about pocketbook issues and their personal financial security. Republicans who are help find solutions that improve the financial lives of voters will see their standing with voters rise.

Republican improvement with voters can be incremental. It is not just a matter of converting Democrats to our side. We can make improvements through gains with voters sympathetic to the conservative cause who drifted away over the past few tumultuous years. A party that can demonstrate it cares about solutions and is committed to improving the financial lives of voters is one that should expect its ranks to grow.

Indeed, this interest from voters for solutions is closely aligned with their desire for increased civility. Voters are troubles by the division in the country and given a choice, prefer a solutions oriented politician over an ideologically pure one. They expect political division to decrease over the next year.

These voter attitudes present an opportunity for politicians to embrace and to increase civility. This would not be a grandstanding effort to demonstrate superiority of motive over political opponents, but rather a prudent political strategy that will provide voters with two things they so clear want – solutions and unity.