

Battleground 69:
The Honeymoon is Over, but Many Voters Remain in the Middle

Republican Analysis

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The data from our latest Georgetown University Battleground Poll clearly shows the traditional honeymoon for President Biden with voter expectations is over. President Biden now finds himself trying to pass major parts of his initial legislative agenda in a political environment that is increasingly negative, and an image with voters that has turned equally negative. There is no dominant issue on which President Biden can focus to turn around this slide in voter attitudes over the last four months. In fact, voters hold a remarkable level of diversity in their issues of concern.

Voters give low job approval ratings to President Biden overall and on a range of key issues while also giving low job approval ratings to both Republicans in Congress and Democrats in Congress. In addition, on all of the policy issues we examine in this poll – vaccine mandates, election reforms, and student loan debt – voters are split with notable levels of passion on both sides. Voters are remarkably pessimistic about their future economic status. On a longer timeline, voters do express a preference for solution seeking politicians over ideologues. However, voters continue to think the political divide in the country is concerning and they expect this divide to get worse.

On an optimistic note, we created a new voter segmentation for this analysis and found that sixty-five percent (65%) of the electorate self identifies as *neither* a very conservative Republican *nor* a very liberal Democrat. This is a broad coalition of more centrist voters who could provide the support needed for those courageous politicians ready to seek solutions not driven by the ideological extremes, even ones that require compromise.

Political environment

As mentioned above, the political environment is very negative. More than six-in-ten voters (63%) think the country is on the wrong track, including a majority of voters (51%) who strongly believe this. Even among those one would expect to be pleased with a federal government led by a Democratic President and Democratic control of the House and the Senate, fully one-third (33%) of liberal Democrats and a plurality (49%) of moderate to conservative Democrats think the country is off on the wrong track.

The “most important issue” matrix does not offer any easy solutions to improving these attitudes. As seen below, there is no dominant issue consuming voters for which a solution can be aggressively pursued. There is also a remarkable level of diversity with seven of the twelve issues tested being within the margin of error as being a top two choice of voters.

Most important issue	1st Choice	2nd Choice	Combined
Climate change	13%	7%	20%
Division in the country	11%	10%	21%
Rising cost of living	11%	8%	19%
Jobs/economy	10%	10%	20%
Gov't. spending	10%	9%	19%
Immigration	9%	8%	17%
COVID-19	8%	9%	17%
Health care	7%	7%	14%
Racism	3%	7%	10%
National defense/terrorism	2%	5%	7%
Taxes	2%	4%	6%
Crime/drugs	2%	4%	6%

There is also a notable partisan split on which of these issues is most important. Significant numbers of Republicans select immigration (16%), government spending (15%), and rising cost of living (14%). One-in-four (25%) Democrats select climate change. Among Independents, division in the country (14%), rising cost of living (11%), and government spending (11%). So, not only is there is a not a dominant issue where policy successes could quickly change voter attitudes across party lines, even attempting to find policy solutions to appease partisan supporters will be challenging. There is no bill or executive order that can provide a quick solution to the immigration crisis, climate change, or inflation. There is little appetite among the base of the Democratic party for reducing government spending.

Job approvals

The job approval data for President Biden makes clear that his honeymoon with voters has ended. As seen below, President Biden has a majority job *disapproval* rating both on the general job approval question and on seven of the nine issues tested. In addition, those who strongly disapprove of his job performance is at or above 40% on seven of the nine issues tested. This is remarkable level of voter dissatisfaction for a President this early in his term.

Biden job approval	Approve	Unsure	Disapprove	<i>Strongly disapprove</i>
Overall	45%	3%	52%	45%
Immigration	34%	6%	61%	48%
Dealing with Afghanistan	34%	6%	60%	49%
Inflation	34%	7%	59%	48%
The cost of living	35%	7%	58%	48%
Foreign policy	40%	9%	52%	42%
The economy	44%	5%	51%	45%
Working with Congress to pass legislation	43%	7%	51%	38%
Jobs	45%	6%	49%	41%
Dealing with COVID-19	51%	3%	45%	37%

These weak approval ratings are even worse when looking at the political spectrum. On overall job approval, eighty-four percent (84%) of Democrats approve while ninety-two percent (92%) of Republicans and fifty-eight percent (58%) of Independents disapprove. On the ideological spectrum, seventy-seven (77%) of moderate to liberal voters approve, while ninety percent (90%) of very conservative and seventy-five percent (75%) of somewhat conservative voters disapprove. This dynamic replays again and again on the job approval by issue questions. Both overall and across the spectrum of issues, President Biden is failing to win the approval of most voters beyond base Democratic voters.

In addition, on the one issue where President Biden has majority approval, dealing with COVID-19, this survey finds a high level of voter division on one his major policy efforts, mandating the administration of the COVID-19 vaccine.

This poor job approval with voters on so many issues means that President Biden will face a daunting test in the months ahead. He needs to either hope for economic conditions, particularly inflation, to make a stunning recovery or he needs to score some notable policy successes via legislative achievements that hold a promise of a better economic future. These types of successes will be needed to get much of the electorate to change their views from disapproving to approving of his efforts. With fully forty-two percent (42%) of voters disapproving of the job performance of President Biden on every issue tested, there is a significant block of the electorate that is unlikely to change its views.

Additionally, the rise in power, earned media attention, and influence of the progressive wing of the Democratic party looks to make this effort all but impossible. An aggressive and outspoken President focused on solutions and a Democratic controlled Congress could force action and pass compromise legislation on a variety of issues. To many voters, this would look like their representatives in Washington had genuine concern about these problems. Instead, much of the time Congress sits in gridlock while Democratic leaders blame Republican intransigence.

The reality is that the progressive wing of the Democratic party is giving the Democratic leaders of Congress the same problems that the Tea Party wing of the Republican party gave their Congressional leaders over a decade ago. Much of the same dynamic with just different ideologies is in place. Democratic leaders need the support and approval of these ideologically driven members who are seen as champions of virtue to the base. However, the solutions needed for effective governing are unappealing to these politicians who are committed to appealing to these base voters. As the axiom goes, “if your support is based on always providing red meat to the base, you have to do that forever or you become the red meat.”

Indeed, voters are equally frustrated with the Democrats in Congress. A majority of voters (57%) disapprove of the job performance of the Democrats in Congress, including forty-one percent (41%) of voters who disapprove strongly. However, the challenge discussed above will hamper any efforts to improve this rating. Liberal Democrats are quite pleased with the work of Democrats in Congress, giving them a 72% approval rating. Any efforts by the Democrats in Congress to improve their job approval rating by taking actions to build support among moderate to conservative Democrats (59% approve) or Independents (29% approve) are almost certain to raise the ire of these base liberal Democrats. Inaction and blaming Republicans seems to be an appealing tactic to base Democrats, making it challenging for Democratic Congressional leaders to find solutions that do not cause them to lose support among their base supporters.

A piece of good news for the Democrats in this data is the job approval rating of Republicans in Congress. A strong majority of voters (66%) disapprove of the job performance of Republicans in Congress, including forty-three percent (43%) of voters who strongly disapprove. As our polling partner Celinda Lake likes to joke, “often the best part of being a Democrat is getting to run against Republicans.” While voters seem frustrated by the job performance of President Biden, Republican candidates will need to earn the win and make the case that a Republican controlled Congress would do better.

A crucial voter group for Republicans will be the twenty-four percent (24%) of the electorate who approve of their performance and do not approve of the job performance of President Biden. The good news for GOP candidates is that this critical bloc of the most persuadable voters has strong representation in important demographic groups like voters in states with competitive U.S. Senate races (34%), rural voters (31%), older men (32%), white seniors (33%), male non-college graduates (30%), white married voters (30%), and weekly church attendees (32%). Republican candidates should have the resources and language to put forward a strong case to this crucial segment of the electorate.

Vaccine mandates/election reform/ending student loans

One of the boldest moves to combat the spread of COVID-19 by President Biden has been to mandate the COVID vaccine for federal employees and large employers. This bold step followed action by several major employers to require this vaccine for their employees. As seen below, voters are split on both of these mandates. While a majority of voters support these mandates, there is a notable level of intense opposition to these mandates.

Vaccine mandates	Favor	Unsure	Oppose	Strongly oppose
By federal government	51%	2%	47%	41%
By employers	51%	4%	45%	37%

There was little division based on who was making these mandates. Fully 88% of voters had the same view on both mandates – either favoring both (46%) or opposing both (42%).

So, while dealing with COVID-19 was the best issue for President Biden on job approval by issue, his boldest action and the one most likely to stem the spread of this disease is opposed by forty-seven percent (47%) of voters. Even a policy applauded by many experts has raised the ire of a significant portion of the electorate.

Election reform presents another base versus overall electorate challenge for President Biden and Congressional Democrats. One of the biggest debates over election reform is whether state and local officials should set election policies, even if this leads to different rules and standards in different places or whether Congress and the federal government should set one national set of rules and standards. Overall, voters split closely. Forty-seven percent (47%) of voters select a preference for letting Congress and the federal government take the lead while forty-two percent (42%) of voters select a preference for letting state and local officials set these election policies.

Among very liberal Democrats, support for a federally run election system is at eighty-one percent (81%), fully 34-points higher than the level of support among the overall electorate. One could imagine broad support for a bipartisan election reform bill with some federal standards and some freedom for state and local official to set policies that best serve their unique needs. However, it is equally easy to imagine how much outrage a hybrid solution like this one would generate among partisan Democratic voters.

A similar trend exists for ending student loan debt. On the proposed policy to have the U.S. government end the remaining student loan debt for most student loan borrowers, voters are split nearly evenly at forty-seven percent (47%) favor and forty-eight percent (48%) oppose. However, this proposal enjoys seventy-five percent (75%) support among liberal Democrats.

The best policy solution on this issue might be targeted debt retirement for those most in need. However, it is again not hard to imagine the outrage from base Democratic voters for a more targeted debt relief policy like that.

The longer timeline

The current poor political environment is clearly having an impact on the voter perceptions about the future. Fully sixty-six percent (66%) of voters think the national economy will be worse off for the next generation. Pessimistic voters who think the national economy is going to get worse should be open to persuasion on the merits of different leadership in Congress.

In terms of political unity and civility, just seventeen percent (17%) of voters think President Biden has worked extremely hard to restore unity and civility. In contrast, more than two-in-five voters (44%) think the President has worked not at all hard on this goal. A central promise of the Biden campaign was a restoration of civil politics. Significant numbers of voters think the President has not been putting forth enough effort towards this goal.

However, there are cases for optimism about the future of political discourse in this data. Despite how it might seem on social media or what we have observed in qualitative research, more than three-in-four voters (79%) report that they have at least one friend with political views very different than their own. In addition, more than seven-in-ten voters (72%) say they do not have family members with whom they can no longer talk due to politics. Most voters have diverse political views in their friend group and have family gatherings where they can discuss politics and current events without dread.

Even with this friend group diversity, familial pleasantness and support for solutions, voters are still remarkably concerned about political division in the country. The mean score voters give on a scale of 0 to 100 where 0 is none and 100 is edge of civil war is 72.96. Asked on this same scale where division might be in one year, the mean score voters give is 74.05. These scores indicate a significant number of voters think the country is closer to the edge of civil war than it is even to a neutral state.

In addition, when offered the choice between a politician who consistently fights for their values, even if this means not finding solutions very often or a politician who is willing to work together to get things done, even if this means compromising on their values sometimes, fully sixty-six percent (66%) of voters select the deal maker politician. Voters want solutions and are willing to support politicians who pursue solutions.

The center holds the key

Both of us tend to be optimists regarding politics. We have seen enough sensible voters and politicians committed to the highest ideals of public service that we know things are never as bad as they might seem during turbulent political periods. Indeed, we created a new voter segmentation for this analysis called centrists. This segment is defined as those voters who are not very conservative Republicans and not very liberal Democrats. In other words, those voters who are not at the ideological ends of their party. This group makes up an impressive 65% of the electorate.

As you might suspect, division in the country (13%) is the most important issue to a significant number of these centrist voters. On job approvals, these voters hold mixed views about President Biden's job performance (49% approve/48% disapprove) and his efforts working with Congress to pass legislation (47% approve/45% disapprove). For Congress, these centrist voters have a majority disapproval rating for Democrats in Congress (52%) and a majority disapproval rating for Republicans in Congress (68%). Given the current level of political discord, it is not surprising these centrist voters hold middling to negative views about President Biden, both parties in Congress, and the efforts by President Biden to pass bills.

These centrist voters are as similarly divided as the overall electorate on the all the proposals tested in the survey – vaccine mandates, election reforms, and ending student loan debts. This major group often has views that closely align with the views of the overall electorate.

However, the lives and views of these voters indicate there is an opportunity to turn this segment into a political force. Fully eighty-one percent (81%) of these voters indicate they have friends with very different views. In addition, seventy-seven percent (77%) of these voters say they do not have relatives with whom they can no longer discuss politics and current events. The vast majority of this group has friends who challenge their political beliefs and has learned how to manage their more ideologically driven relatives. This group also has a strong preference for deal maker politicians (72%) over ideologically driven politicians (20%).

This is a political environment in which President Biden and both parties in Congress are not living up to the expectations of all but the partisan voters. This 60%+ segment of the electorate is open for persuasion from both parties. The goal for both parties should be to make the case that they better embody the expectations of these voters -- making deals and treating those with different views with respect. This national commitment to deal making and professional courtesy would also do much to improve the largely negative attitudes about the level of political division in the country.

So, while things look bleak today with frustrated voters, a struggling economy, and foreign policy setbacks, there is a path to brighter days. Most voters are not ideologues who want to fight to the bitter end, but rather are pragmatists who want solutions that will improve their lives. Political leaders would do well to work to pass these types of life improving policy solutions.