

## **Democratic Strategic Analysis:**

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In the aftermath of one of the most bitter campaigns in modern memory, many Americans remain deeply unsettled, struggling to make sense of the country's new trajectory. President-elect Trump's ascent to power fundamentally defied familiar partisan and political patterns. As such, the national mood is defined by widespread uncertainty about a President-elect whose favorability has improved but is still quite negative, as well as doubts about Trump's ability to square his campaign promises with his Party's Congressional leadership. At the same time, with Democrats' political strength now at a record low, the opposition Party must work quickly to find its bearings, especially focusing on defining a clear set of goals and principles when it comes to economic and political reform.

As Democrats turn their strategic attention to midterm elections in 2018, it will be crucial to focus on the key constituencies that they fell short with in 2016 – independents, women, rural voters, older voters, and voters in the Midwest. Independents, in particular, will present a challenge. Eager for change, a plurality of these voters went for Trump on November 8<sup>th</sup>, and are largely optimistic about the prospect of a Trump administration. Still, when asked about the direction of the country in the weeks following the election, the majority of independents report that they believe the country is on the 'wrong track'. Like their Democrat and Republican counterparts, independent voters are highly concerned with jobs and the economy – issues that the Democratic Party will need to establish a stronger platform on to move forward successfully.

### **The Post-Election Environment**

Nearly one month since Election Day, a sense of anxiety continues to pervade the electorate. Dissatisfaction with the trajectory of the country remains, with a solid majority of voters (58%) believing the nation has gotten off on the wrong track compared to only 27% who say it is heading in the right direction. Unsurprisingly, the most pessimistic voters are those who are dismayed by the election results; more than seven-in-ten Democrats (72%) believes the country is off on the wrong track, a majority of independents (56%) agree, and even Republicans are divided in their outlook on the future (44% 'right direction' and 44% 'wrong track').

Moreover, when asked to describe how they feel about the results of the election, nearly half of voters say that they are either 'concerned' (23%) or 'scared' (26%), with slightly more expressing the most troubling of these two options. At the same time, one-in-seven voters is 'excited' (14%) and one-in-three is 'hopeful' (33%). Roughly mirroring the demographic divides in the election, levels of fear and concern are highest among younger and minority voters—particularly African Americans (35% 'concerned', 49% 'scared'), Latinos (34% 'concerned', 35% 'scared'), and millennials (36% 'concerned', 23% 'scared')—while hope and excitement are most prevalent among white men (42% 'hopeful', 20% 'excited'), evangelical Christians (41% 'hopeful', 20% 'excited'), and white non-college graduates (44% 'hopeful', 19% 'excited'). Independents are largely hopeful about the next administration (44% 'hopeful', 10% 'excited'), though nearly one-quarter report being 'concerned' (22%), and 16% report being 'scared'. It is notable, however, that even the groups most ardently supportive of Trump tend to express optimism rather than excitement.

Despite the polarized responses to the final outcome, the data clearly show that most voters are happy to see the election over, with a majority (52%) saying they found the coarse language of the campaign 'repulsive'. However, vast differences emerge along partisan lines, with Democrats the most offended by

the tenor of the race (78% ‘repulsive’) and Republicans largely responding to it with a shrug—31% saying it was not a big deal and 30% saying it was offensive, but understandable. Among independents, fully 49% say the coarse language was repulsive, and 17% found it offensive, but understandable. At the same time, however, a majority of Americans (54%) also says that the tone of the election had no impact on whether they voted or how they cast their ballot, though roughly one-third (33%) say it did make them less likely to vote for one of the candidates and 7% say it made them less likely to vote for President. Women were more turned off by the tone of the race than their male counterparts, with 37% of women saying the tone of the race made them less likely to vote for a candidate, compared to 27% of men. Less surprisingly, among Trump voters, 84% report the language in the campaign made no difference in their behavior, while a 56% majority of Clinton voters say the language made them less likely to vote for one of the candidates. In perhaps an inauspicious sign for the civility of future races, a majority of independents (57%) also say the language had no impact on their vote.

The contentious nature of the long election has reframed the issue agenda for American voters. Economic anxiety continues to fuel widespread desire for Washington lawmakers to focus on jobs (8% most important issue) and the economy (15%). Division in the country is at the top of Americans’ issue agenda, as well; one-in-five (21%) say that it is the most important issue that needs to be addressed. Healthcare (11% most important issue), dysfunction in government (9%), and foreign threats (5%) round out the top issue concerns.

Democrats (32%) place much more of an emphasis on division in the country, with Republicans (12%) seemingly less concerned with the idea of unifying a fractured populace. Among independents, the economy (14%) and jobs (8%), division (13%), and dysfunction in government (14%) all compete for attention. Younger voters under the age of 45 (26%), nonwhite voters (26%), and college educated voters (25%) also consider division in the country to be the chief concern.

### **Leadership in the Democratic Party Moving Forward**

Despite winning the popular vote by over two million votes, and more votes overall in Congressional races, Democrats now find themselves at a historic low point in terms of political strength, both in Washington and across the country—badly outnumbered when it comes to governorships and state legislatures. In addition to the challenge of negotiating with a unified Republican government for the next two years, Democrats also must find a common voice and agenda with which to define their brand of leadership in this new era. A solid economic message and frame will be the most critical element of the Democratic platform moving forward.

As the Democratic Party begins the process of soul-searching and rebuilding, the data suggests that Senator Bernie Sanders can serve as a source of strength and leadership for Democrats, both in their efforts to unite internal divisions as well as to expand their ranks. In part, Sanders’ profile remains strong because he wasn’t attacked in the general election. A solid majority (56%) of voters hold a positive opinion of him – a stronger favorability rating than other leaders in Washington, including the President-elect.

The data reveal Sanders’ potential to appeal to a diverse group of voters. In addition to remaining popular with key groups of the Democratic base, such as millennials (67% favorable), non-white voters (72% favorable), and women (60% favorable), Sanders also holds unique appeal among independents (55% favorable), moderates (57% favorable), and white voters (51% favorable). Sanders is also net positive among non-college educated voters (49% favorable, 35% unfavorable), though his profile is only split among non-college educated whites (40% favorable, 39% unfavorable). In the Midwest, Sanders is particularly popular (61% favorable, 27% unfavorable).

In addition to Senator Sanders, President Obama remains quite popular, with a majority of voters offering a positive opinion of his tenure in office (53% approve, including 42% strongly approve), putting him on track to be one of the most popular outgoing Presidents in recent history.

The President's support remains intense among key components of the Democratic base, including young, minority voters – his highest approval ratings coming from voters under 45 (58% approve, 38% disapprove) and African Americans (91% approve, 3% disapprove). Since the last Battleground survey, the President's approval rating has flipped among white women (49% approve, 47% disapprove), and remains solidly net-positive among independents (49% approve, 40% disapprove). This data suggests that the President can play a major role in motivating key components of the Democratic coalition over the next several years if he chooses to be involved.

### **Post-Election Image of the President-Elect and Republican Leadership**

Despite a boost in popularity from his election night victory, President-elect Trump still remains an unpopular and deeply divisive figure. Trump's profile remains net-negative overall, with 45% expressing a positive opinion of the candidate compared to 49% who view him unfavorably. Although Trump's personal image has improved significantly since the last Battleground poll (36% favorable, 61% unfavorable), he is still far behind where President Obama was after his victory in 2008 (75% favorable, 22% unfavorable) and slightly behind President Bush's approval rating in 2000 (48% favorable, 39% unfavorable).

As was consistently the case throughout the election, perceptions of Trump's personal image are sharply divided along gender, racial, partisan, and generational lines. While men have a net positive opinion of Trump (50% favorable, 43% unfavorable), a majority of women continue to express negative views of him (41% favorable, 54% unfavorable), though his image has improved noticeably among women since the last poll (32% favorable to 62% unfavorable). Republicans (85% favorable, 11% unfavorable), white voters (53% favorable, 41% unfavorable) and voters over the age of 65 (53% favorable to 40% unfavorable) represent Trump's strongest bloc of supporters, while non-white voters (21% favorable, 72% unfavorable), and millennials (32% favorable, 73% unfavorable) are some of his most adamant detractors. Independents, in particular, appear to be warming to Trump. In the last Battleground survey, independents were solidly net-negative in their opinion of Trump (28% favorable, 64% unfavorable); today, they are closely divided in their opinions of him (44% favorable, 42% unfavorable).

Trump has had some success since being elected, and many swing voters want to give him the benefit of the doubt. Indeed, the data suggests that Trump is improving how the public perceives him, with nearly half of Americans (47%) saying that what they have seen of the President-elect since his victory has improved their impression of him, including nearly one-in-three (32%) who say they feel this way strongly. Nearly four-in-ten (38%) voters say that what they have seen of Trump since the election has made them feel less favorable towards the President-elect, and just over one-in-ten (11%) say his actions in the intervening weeks have made no difference in their opinion of him. Independents are more positive about the Trump, with half (50%) saying they feel more favorable towards him since the election, and less than one third (30%) saying they feel less favorable towards the President-elect.

Americans are generally ambivalent, at best, about other members of the Republican leadership team. Vice President-elect Mike Pence's ratings may be wanting (44% favorable, 37% unfavorable), but they are more positive than those afforded Trump. Voters are split in their feelings towards Paul Ryan (35% favorable, 36% unfavorable), though Democrats (15% favorable, 60% unfavorable) and independents (27% favorable, 35% unfavorable) are more critical of the House Speaker. Senate Majority

Leader Mitch McConnell draws solidly net-negative ratings (17% favorable, 33% unfavorable), even as his familiarity is limited (25% no opinion, 25% never heard).

### **Looking Ahead to the New Administration**

President-elect Trump's candidacy was defined in part by bold and often dubious promises about the country's future. Less than two months before he enters the Oval Office, voters have mixed expectations of Trump's ability to deliver on those promises. The President-elect's signature campaign pledge—building a wall on the US-Mexican border, paid for by our neighbor to the south—elicits particularly strong doubts; just 17% of voters find it very likely that action will be taken to build a wall, 24% think it is somewhat likely, while a majority thinks it is either not very likely (25%) or not likely at all (30%). Nearly two-thirds of voters are also skeptical of the Trump administration's ability to end America's military involvement overseas (8% very likely, 21% somewhat likely, 38% not very likely, 25% not at all likely).

Voters are more sanguine about Trump's professed ability to defeat ISIS (24% very likely, 29% somewhat likely, 23% not very likely, 18% not at all likely). And there is somewhat more faith even in Trump's capacity to accomplish aspects of his economic platform, such as reforming the tax code (33% very likely, 38% somewhat likely, 15% not very likely, 9% not at all likely) and ending trade deals (25% very likely, 35% somewhat likely, 20% not very likely, 8% not at all likely). Voters largely believe that Trump will repeal Obamacare (44% very likely, 35% somewhat likely, 11% not very likely, 6% not at all likely), but are less convinced that he will privatize Medicare (15% very likely, 33% somewhat likely, 27% not very likely, 16% not at all likely). Many are hopeful that the Trump administration will deliver on improvements to roads and bridges (26% very likely, 40% somewhat likely, 20% not very likely, 11% not at all likely). Democrats may have some difficulty gaining traction and impact in their public critiques of Trump, because voters are already skeptical of his administration's ability to follow through on his campaign promises.

As his ability to fulfill these campaign commitments will bear heavily on judgments of his abilities as President, voters will be watching Trump's actions closely. While many—most—Americans may be pleased by Trump's seeming evolution on such issues as climate change and torture, those words will need to be backed up by deeds in order to convince a skeptical public of his intentions, abilities, and willingness to disappoint his Party's base, especially in Washington, D.C. Democrats, for their part, would be wise to embrace the leadership of one of the few leaders who can broaden their ranks with something the Party has been lacking for too long—a compelling economic message that marries Americans' desire for economic *and* political reform.

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