

The Battleground: Democratic Analysis

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Over six months into a turbulent Presidency, and Donald Trump has become an even more profound force for division and polarization than many thought possible. In this sense, he is living up to his critics' worst predictions, driving a deep wedge between his political party and the rest of the country, while remaining capable of provoking fresh waves of shock and dismay from even the most jaded observers. With a 24-hour news cycle defined by credible allegations of criminal—and potentially treasonous—misconduct, internal White House chaos, and an abject failure to achieve any major legislative accomplishments despite unified GOP control in Washington, voters are becoming increasingly alarmed about the direction of the country under Trump's stewardship. Beyond disliking and distrusting the President, voters also strongly disapprove of Congress, and are mixed in their feelings toward their own member of Congress in this political environment.

Still, Trump's missteps have not translated to unambiguous gains for the opposition party. Democrats enjoy a narrow advantage in the generic congressional trial heat for the 2018 midterm elections, yet trail their Republican counterparts on most major issues, including voters' persisting central concern: jobs and the economy. In order to win next November, Democrats will need to do more than "lean in" on frustration with the President and the Republican Congress—though that certainly is a key element of positioning the party for victory; in addition, Democrats must make a far stronger case that they possess bold solutions to the major challenges facing the country and the capacity to effect dramatic change should voters hand them the reins of power.

Trump Effect: Hemorrhaging Confidence of Independents and Other Key Voting Constituencies

Already a deeply controversial figure, President Trump's personal unpopularity has grown since the last Battleground poll. Just 41% of voters view the President in favorable terms, while 56% hold an unfavorable opinion of the Commander in the Chief (compared to 45% favorable, 49% unfavorable in December), including 50% "strongly" unfavorable. This includes very low marks among women (61% unfavorable), millennials (64% unfavorable), voters with a college degree (61% unfavorable), and independents (57% unfavorable).

Among independents, Trump's popularity has diminished by a notable margin (38% favorable, 57% unfavorable with 47% "strongly" unfavorable, compared to 44% favorable, 42% unfavorable in December). Even non-college educated whites—heralded as the key constituency that delivered Trump's electoral college victory—are showing signs of erosion and growing disenchantment with the President over his first months in office (59% favorable, 37% unfavorable, compared to 63% favorable, 30% unfavorable in December). And Trump continues to affect a deep gender gap, with women holding him in particularly low regard (35% favorable, 61% unfavorable, down from 41% favorable, 54% unfavorable in December) even as men are now evenly divided in their opinions of the President (48% favorable, 50% unfavorable, down from 50% favorable, 43% unfavorable in December). As has been the case in past Battleground polls, younger voters tend to think less of the President than their older counterparts. Nearly two-thirds of voters 18-34 have an unfavorable impression of Trump (34% favorable, 64% unfavorable—in line with the 32% favorable, 63% unfavorable ratings we saw in December), as do more than six-in-ten

voters between the ages of 35-44 (37% favorable, 61% unfavorable, down from 45% favorable, 50 unfavorable in December). A majority of pre-retirement voters now view Trump in negative terms (46% favorable, 51% unfavorable, ticking down slightly from 48% favorable, 45% unfavorable in December) and seniors are now divided (47% favorable, 48% unfavorable), a notable decline from the previous poll when a majority held a positive view of Trump (53% favorable, 40% unfavorable).

Americans are similarly critical of Trump’s handling of the office. A solid majority of voters disapprove of Trump’s job performance thus far (42% approve, 55% disapprove), in stark contrast with President Obama’s approval rating—despite the onset of the Great Recession—at the same point in his first term (53% approve, 42% disapprove). An overwhelming number of Republicans remain supportive of the President in this regard (85% approve, 12% disapprove), though a majority of independents disagree, offering negative marks for Trump’s job performance (40% approve, 55% disapprove) and falling more in line with the opinions of Democrats (4% approve, 94% disapprove) who are among Trump’s most vociferous critics.

Not only do majorities of voters dislike the President and disapprove of his performance as President, but only 39% of voters believe that Trump has followed through on his campaign promise to get things done and make changes that will help working families. Fully 56% of voters believe Trump has failed on this front, including majorities of independent voters (55%) as well as voters living in solid Trump states (52%). However, Democrats still have work to do in communicating these failures to white non-college educated voters; the majority in this group still believe that Trump is succeeding on this score (54%).

Still, despite the President’s problems with his personal and professional profiles, he remains more popular than other key leaders in his party. Trump’s favorable marks are currently higher than Speaker Ryan (36%), Majority Leader McConnell (19%), Attorney General Sessions (28%), Vice President Pence (30%). Democratic Congressional leaders, including Chuck Schumer (27% favorable, 29% unfavorable), who is unknown to a solid majority of voters, and Nancy Pelosi (33% favorable, 50% unfavorable) also have weak personal profiles.

| Donald Trump Ratings (7 months in to the first-term of his Presidency) | | | | Net Diff |
|---|-----|-----|-------|-----------------|
| ID: Favorable / Unfavorable (no opinion) | 41% | 56% | (3%) | -15 |
| Change since December 2016 | -4% | +7% | (+3%) | -4 |
| Job: Approve / Disapprove (unsure) | 42% | 55% | (3%) | -13 |
| Job / Economy: Approve / Disapprove (unsure) | 50% | 45% | (5%) | +5 |
| Job / Foreign Affairs: App/ Disapprove (unsure) | 40% | 55% | (5%) | -15 |
| Job / North Korea: App / Disapprove (unsure) | 43% | 53% | (5%) | -10 |
| Effectiveness: Get things / Not done (unsure) | 39% | 56% | (5%) | -17 |

Driving the Debate: Trump’s Words and Actions Have Consequences

The President’s words and actions may be intended to address the divisions in our country, but in his first seven months in office, he has done more to unify Americans against him than for him. He is not faulted on every front, however.

While more voters approve of the President’s handling of the economy than disapprove, underlying numbers suggest they remain skeptical as to whether or not he is fulfilling the economic-populist oriented philosophies espoused on the campaign. Currently half (50%) of the electorate approve of the President’s

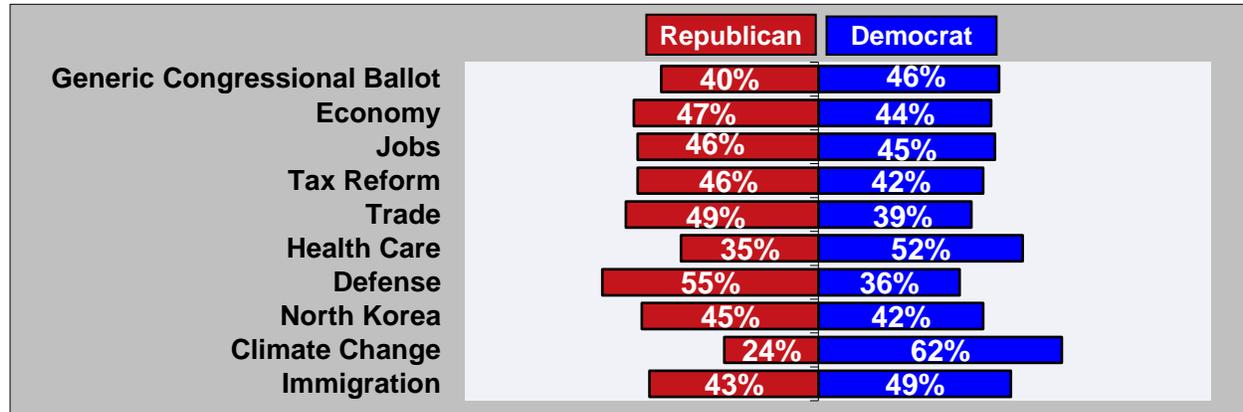
economic stewardship, compared to 46% who disapprove. This includes solid majorities of independents (53%), ticket splitters (54%), and voters in key Midwestern battleground states (56%). The President's base of non-college educated whites also remains firmly behind him (66% approve). Still, the majority of voters see Trump's economic policies as doing more to help the haves than the have-nots, with 56% believing the President is doing more to help the wealthy and big corporations than working families, including 54% of independents.

Moreover, a commanding majority of Americans (71%) express concerns about Trump's un-Presidential behavior. This is even more true among women (76%), especially working women (78%), African American women (92%) and single women (81%). While he holds some strength in the economic arena, voters are much more critical of the President's performance on foreign policy—the area where voters worry most about the consequences of Trump's rash responses. Fully 55% disapprove of his handling of foreign affairs, including majorities of independents and women (52% and 60%, respectively). Unsurprisingly, the president's poor marks are driven largely by incredibly low approval numbers among Democrats, 95% of whom disapprove of the administration's foreign policy. Approval among Republicans is still solid at 81%. A major factor contributing to the President's low marks on foreign policy has been the administration's handling of tensions with North Korea. Currently 53% of voters disapprove of Trump's response to the crisis. These feelings are further highlighted by voters' apprehensions regarding the President's bellicose and proactive statements, with nearly seven-in-ten (68%) of voters worried that Trump's word or actions could see the country accidentally wrapped into an international conflict. This includes 71% of women and 67% of independents.

Following the failed attempt to repeal Obamacare, voters now trust Democrats over Republicans on the issue of healthcare by a large 17-point margin (52% to 35%). This represents one of the largest leads since July 2009, when President Obama was at a similar point in his first term: In July of 2009, Democrats held a 21-point advantage on the issue of health care (51% to 30%). The current advantage enjoyed by Democrats includes solid leads among independents (43% to 32%), self-described moderates (47% to 30%), white voters (47% to 39%), middle class voters (52% to 36%), and women (56% to 32%). Furthermore, the health care debate has led a majority of voters (53%) to believe that it is a good thing that Congress failed to repeal and replace the Affordable Care Act. Republicans, and to a lesser extent, the President himself, appear much more vulnerable to voter blowback on this than Democrats, with a majority of voters saying they blame either Congressional Republicans (34%) or the President (18%) for the failure to enact any new healthcare laws, compared to only 30% who blame Democrats.

Another continuing economic worry for Democrats, especially when it comes to their appeal to white-working class voters in the Rust Belt, is the lack of trust voters associate with the party when it comes to trade. Democrats currently find themselves in a ten-point hole on this issue (49% to 39%), with non-college educated whites in particular trusting Republicans over Democrats by an astounding 62% to 26%. Majorities of union households (55%), independents (51%), ticket splitters (53%), and voters in the Midwest (54%) also trust Republicans more on this issue. As this issue buttresses debates on the economy and jobs, as well as campaign finance reform, it is of particular importance that Democrats gain ground on this front.

How Trump’s words and actions impact the balance of power in Washington remains to be seen, considering that similar percentages of voters believe that members of Congress are giving him just the right amount of support (33%) or not enough (31%). However, only 22% believe that say that members of Congress are being too supportive.



Overall, when asked whether they would support a Republican versus a Democrat, if the elections were held today, Democrats enjoy a 6-point edge (46% to 40%). They maintain a similar edge among independents, but a full 37% are undecided. The question is especially open among independent women, who are more undecided than independent men (45% to 31%). Regionally, in addition to very solid leads in the Northeast (51% to 34%) and West (56% to 33%), Democrats also lead by 7 points in the Midwest (45% to 38%). Democrats also hold good leads among groups representing their traditional base such as millennials (51% to 31%) and non-white voters (60% to 24%), though they need to improve. In another encouraging sign for the party, Democrats are overwhelmingly preferred by voters with a college education (51% to 36%). Ticket-splitters prefer Democrats by a small margin (35% to 30%) and moderates are virtually tied between the two (37% Democrats, 35% Republicans).

As we witnessed in the 2016 general election campaign, negative views of Trump do not necessarily translate into dividends for Democrats. Currently, 1 in 5 Americans who disapprove of the President’s job performance either remain undecided (14%) or supportive of Republican candidates (6%) in the generic congressional trial heat. Just as many Clinton voters as Trump voters are undecided when it comes to what party they would pick in a general ballot (10% each).

With dysfunction in government being a top priority for the President and Congress to address in our previous survey (9% first choice, 13% second choice), voters remain eager for change, but they are still searching for a likely vessel for that change. Democrats need to be the party of change – politically and economically. But right now, voters are still giving the president some credit for trying to reform Washington and bring major changes (52% agree-42% disagree), including 50% of independents.

In the near-term, disagreements on the future direction of the party seem likely to dominate headlines, but Democrats need to pivot as fast as possible to articulating a comprehensive, powerful economic vision that unites and mobilizes the party’s base, while speaking to those in the middle, too, about the need for improved quality of life for families. Democrats and Republicans are statistically even on the core issue of jobs (45%-46%) and on how to handle the economy by three points (47% Republicans to 44% Democrats). Comparing this to President Obama’s first six months in office, when voters trusted Democrats more on

the economy by 14 points (47% to 33%) illustrates how far the party has fallen on this issue. The current gap is even more pronounced among key groups such as independents (49% to 30%), ticket splitters (50% to 30%), and non-college educated whites (63% to 28%). Republicans also win on this issue among the traditionally Democratic voting bloc of union households (50% to 44%).

While terrorist attacks and the ongoing conflicts with ISIS will remain wild cards in the political arena, the one foreign policy issue that will draw in all the major political players is the escalating situation on the Korean Peninsula. Republicans enjoy a prominent advantage on which party is better suited to handle national defense (55%-36%), including a commanding lead among independents (52%-41%). However, voters are more split on who they trust to handle this specific issue, with Republicans and Democrats statistically tied 45% to 42%. While this advantage should not be discounted, Democrats have closed the gap on this issue since President Obama's few months in office when Republicans bested Democrats on national defense by a staggering 20 points (53% to 33%).

Leading Figures: Time in Washington Favors the Outsiders

As the Democratic Party continues the process of soul-searching and rebuilding, the data again underscores that Senator Bernie Sanders remains a source of strength and leadership for Democrats. While Sanders' overall marks are down slightly from the last Battleground poll (56%), he remains the most popular leader in Washington. A majority (52%) of voters hold a positive opinion of Sanders, including 55% of voters in the Midwest and 55% of self-described moderates, as well as solid pluralities of independents (47%) and white voters (47%). Another emerging voice is the first term U.S. Senator from California, Kamala Harris; despite net positive favorability (16% to 9%), her popularity is limited by low name recognition. Promoting voices who can make a compelling economic case as to why voters should support Democrats, and why GOP officials should be held accountable for Trump's words and actions, will go a long way toward helping their party regain political power in elected offices across the country. To win Congressional races, Democrats need to make the case against Republicans and their agenda, not just rely on fallout from the Trump administration.

Bottom Line

In conclusion, Trump's presidency, in just his first seven months in office, has proven to be as polarizing a force as we have seen in modern American politics. With record low approval ratings across demographic, partisan, and regional lines, President Trump has already reshaped countless political norms in dangerous and destructive ways. Furthermore, with the chaos surely to continue and intensify into the next year, it is difficult to see how the challenges facing the administration, and the GOP more broadly, do not continue to mount even further. Still, Democrats should not fall again for the fallacy of assuming that Trump's (self) destructive behavior will automatically yield electoral victory in 2018 and beyond. To the contrary, despite some encouraging numbers on the generic congressional ballot and healthcare policy, Democrats remain in need of a winning message, particularly when it comes to the economy, that can convince voters they are prepared to tackle head on the massive challenges facing working families, while bringing the change to Washington that voters so urgently desire.