

GWU Battleground Poll LXII **Negative Emotions are the Key Turnout Catalyst for Mid-Term Elections**

Republican Analysis

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Mid-term elections are often about voting against something. For example, the historic Republican gains in the 1994 mid-term elections were about voter frustrations with the liberal policies of the Clinton administration, especially a failed attempt at health care reform. Not since the calm and decisive leadership of President George W. Bush in the wake of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks inspired scores of GOP candidates in fall 2002 to run as Bush allies, have candidates of either party run with their close ties to the President as a key theme in their campaign. The 2018 cycle will be no different.

This latest Battleground Poll fielded during a typically tumultuous week for President Trump, August 13th through the 17th. This was a week filled with talk that the United States was engaged in a potentially cataclysmic showdown with North Korea that even included coded talk about the possibility of the use of nuclear weapons. In addition, just one day prior to the beginning of fielding, President Trump provided remarks that many saw as insufficient regarding racially motivated crimes in Charlottesville, Virginia.

Despite this poor cycle of earned media, Republican candidates begin this 2018 election season in a political environment that is at worst, mixed. The Congressional generic ballot has the Democratic Party with an advantage of just six points (46%-40%). Given the institutional five-point advantage that Democratic super districts provide, this generic ballot can be seen as effectively even. In fact, Republicans have a seven point advantage (43% to 36%) in the Nation's competitive Congressional Districts.

On job approval rating for their Member of Congress, voters overall are closely divided (43% approve/45% disapprove) though as one would expect, the intensity is with voters who disapprove (19% approve strongly/29% disapprove strongly). However, the intensity of this Congressional job approval rating is notably lower in GOP controlled Congressional Districts (-5%). This along with the substantial issue handling advantages the Republican Party enjoys on key issues like tax reform (+4%), trade (+10%), and national defense (+19%) provide a clear roadmap for Republican candidates.

Just as in most past election cycles, Republican candidates in 2018 will need to run as their own brands. They do not need to completely repudiate President Trump. Indeed, the President has a base of unimaginably unflappable supporters that fall somewhere between the twenty-seven percent of voters (27%) with a strongly favorable image of him to the forty-three percent of voters (43%) who approve of the job he has done "dealing with North Korea". Coming off a week where some commentators were suggesting President Trump's indelicate diplomacy with North Korea might lead to an attack with

nuclear weapons, this approval rating on this issue is a strong demonstration that Trump has an immovable base of support.

In a similar measurement, voters overall divide closely on whether their Member of Congress' level of support for President Trump is just about right (33%) or not supportive enough (31%) while another twenty-two percent (22%) of voters think their Member of Congress is too supportive. However, in competitive Congressional Districts, almost two-in-five voters (39%) think their current Member of Congress is not supportive enough of President Trump. There is a clear opening for Republican candidates, both incumbent and challenger, to run as someone who will support the President when his policies merit support and who will oppose the President at other times.

Many of the measures of President Trump on this survey reinforce the merits of brand style campaigns. Majorities of voters hold an unfavorable impression of him (56%), disapprove of his overall job performance (55%), and think he has not been effective at getting things done (56%). However, a plurality of voters approve of his job performance on the economy (50%), and majorities of voters think he has been keeping his campaign promises (52%) and think he has been trying to make major reforms and has been stymied by Washington elites (52%). On the other side again, strong majorities of voter agree that Trump's behavior has not met their expectations (71%), that Trump's words and actions could lead to an international conflict (68%), and that Trump is doing too much to benefit the wealthy and big corporations (56%). The clear opportunity here is for GOP candidates to embrace shaking up and challenging the status quo in Washington to create economic opportunities for all while being opposed to boorish behavior, loose talk, and only helping those at the top.

As noted earlier, Republican candidates can connect with a broad swath of the electorate by building on the advantages the GOP has on the issues that touch every American voter – tax reform, trade, and national defense. Every voter deals with taxes, buys imported goods, and wants to live in a country safe from foreign threats. Offering to partner with Trump to lower taxes, make trade more fair, and provide a strong national defense will be a very enticing offer for the electorate.

Republican candidates should also be not as fearful of two potential major issues in the campaign – health care reform and the potential involvement of Trump campaign officials with Russian operatives.

On health care reform, voters split on who is most to blame for the failure to improve the health care system – thirty five percent (35%) blame Republicans in Congress, thirty percent (30%) blame Democrats in Congress, and nineteen percent (19%) blame President Trump. Despite most earned media portraying this as a failure of Republicans, voters spread the blame much more evenly.

At the end of the day, voters chose to keep the evil they knew, than risk putting their support behind the evil they did not know. When asked their assessment of whether the failure to repeal Obamacare was a good thing or a bad thing, a majority (53%) of voters believe this failure was a good thing. In fact, even

in GOP controlled CD's, forty-four percent (44%) of voters shared the view that the "repeal and replace" failure was a good thing. There was widespread voter dissatisfaction with this process and its outcome. This gives GOP candidates an additional opportunity to offer health care reform down the road that better fits the needs of most Americans, rather than a "my way or the highway" approach.

The much discussed in Washington probe of potential ties of the Trump campaign with Russian operatives also is not an issue that is generating negative emotions for voters, with the exception of the "hard core" Democratic base. After a brief explanation and three options, a strong majority (58%) of voters select that the behavior of the Trump campaign was normal (36%) or unethical but not illegal (22%). Just one-third of voters (33%) think the actions of Trump campaign officials were illegal. This is not the level of voter outrage that becomes a major issue for a wave election.

Last, Republicans will also have the advantage of running against the leaders of the Democratic Party. While voters may be frustrated or dissatisfied with some issues, the alternative they will have will be elevating Nancy Pelosi to Speaker of the House and elevating Chuck Schumer to Majority Leader of the Senate. A plurality (50%) of voters have an unfavorable impression of Nancy Pelosi while Chuck Schumer is less well known but still upside down (27% favorable/29% unfavorable).

In the 2016 election, a notable portion of the electorate had a negative impression of Trump but still voted for him. These voters decided the alternative was even worse or that they could endure some boorish behavior in exchange for substantial changes in Washington. In the 2018 election, Republican candidates will have a similar opportunity to provide voters with both the opportunity to continue making changes for the better on issues that matter while avoiding the failed policies of the past that the Democrats will be offering.