

The Battleground: Democratic Analysis

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By Celinda Lake, Daniel Gotoff, Gary Ritterstein, Corey Teter, and Hayley Cohen

As the midterm election cycle picks up steam, American voters continue to harbor adverse feelings toward President Trump, a continually robust force for division and polarization. Voters continue to hold mixed feelings about the economy, and amidst a 24-hour news cycle defined by scandals, uniquely discordant partisan policy battles, and the ever-looming investigation into Russian election meddling, voters continue to be alarmed about the direction of the country. Beyond disliking and distrusting the President, voters also strongly disapprove of the Republican-controlled Congress, though they do reserve more positive feeling towards their own member of Congress.

The overall sense of animosity towards the President and elected officials in Washington appears to have opened the door for Democrats, who now lead by 8 points on a generic 2018 congressional ballot, to make gains in the upcoming midterms. Still, while voters express disdain for the President's handling of several critical issues such as healthcare, immigration, and foreign policy, they do profess favorable opinions of his stewardship over the economy and job creation, with the jury largely still out on his (and the Republican Congress's) central accomplishment of the tax reform law. What remains to be seen is how much these issues, as well as the unexpected ones that are sure to arise before November, will impact voters support for candidates in 2018. That being said, Democrats certainly have an opportunity to capitalize on the current environment, especially if they are able to combine the enthusiasm on the left with the new inroads forming to centrists and independents, especially independent women, to mount challenges to Congressional Republicans. To mobilize turnout and persuade the swing, Democrats must establish stronger credentials on the economy.

Trump Bottoming Out, Alienating Independents

Trump's unpopularity and overall status as a deeply controversial figure has remained largely unchanged since the last Battleground poll. Overall, 42% of voters say they approve of the job he is doing as President compared to 55% who disapprove of his performance. The President continues to hold onto the support of his Republican base (86% approve, 10% disapprove), but the number of independents who disapprove of the President has increased by 5 points since the last Battleground poll (from 55% in August 2017) and now stands at a near two-to-one margin (60% disapprove compared to 34% approve). Meanwhile, Democrats' display near universal displeasure with the President (92% disapprove), including a staggering 83% who say they disapprove "strongly".

Behind Trump's high disapproval ratings are questions about his agenda and style, as well as his policies and actions. Of those who approve of the President's job performance, 37% say they still have "real questions" about his agenda and style; 75% who disapprove of his job performance also reject his policies and actions (that amounts to 15% and 43%, respectively, of the overall electorate). Among independents who approve of Trump's job performance, nearly half (48%) have questions about his agenda and style; 64% of independent who disapprove of his job performance reject his policies and actions as well.

	Donald Trump Job Performance Ratings			Net Diff	
	% Approve	% Disapprove	% Unsure	Likely Voters	Independents
Overall Job Performance	42%	55%	4%	-13	-26
Economy	51%	45%	4%	+6	EVEN
Foreign Affairs	38%	56%	5%	-18	-35
North Korea	41%	53%	6%	-12	-24
Taxes	47%	48%	5%	-1	-8
Jobs	52%	41%	7%	+11	+6
Dealing with Congress	38%	57%	6%	-19	-33
Immigration	43%	56%	2%	-14	-29
Healthcare	39%	56%	6%	-18	-36
National Security	48%	47%	5%	EVEN	-5
Dealing with Gun Violence	39%	55%	6%	-16	-25

When it comes to the President's handling of specific issues, voters are willing to give him credit on the progress of the economy. Currently over half (51%) of the electorate approve of the President's economic stewardship, compared to 45% who disapprove. A similar majority (52%) of voters also says it approves of the President's work on creating jobs. Overall, over nine-in-ten (93%) of Republicans say they approve of the President's job on the economy, as do majorities of white voters (56%), Latinos (52%), and voters between the ages of 35-44 (54%), 45-64 (51%), and 65 or older (53%). Independents are split on the President's handling of the economy (47% approve, 47% disapprove).

On many of the non-economic issues, however, majorities of voters disapprove of Trump's job performance. On foreign affairs, 56% disapprove (38% approve), a 2-point drop since the previous survey, including 3-point drop among those who strongly approve. On dealing with Congress, 57% disapprove (38% approve); on immigration, 56% disapprove (43% approve); on gun violence, 55% disapprove (39% approve); and North Korea, 53% disapprove (41% approve). On healthcare, 56% disapprove (39% approve), which is consistent with the previous Battleground poll that showed a majority of voters have more confidence in Democrats to handle this issue (50% to 35%). Among these issues, over six-in-ten independents disapprove of the President's handling of healthcare (64%), dealings with Congress (64%), immigration (64%), and foreign affairs (65%). These numbers provide a major opening for Democrats running for Congress and statewide.

On taxes and national security, voters are split: 48% approve and 47% disapprove of his handling of national security, while the opposite (47% approve and 48% disapprove) is true for his handling of taxes. These figures suggest that the overarching debate around these issues has polarized voters such that these issues may not necessarily favor one party or the other. Indeed, on the issue of taxes specifically, voters' opinions could hinge on which party is able to make the stronger case that the new tax law is good or bad for voters. Currently, it appears to be a complete tossup, as voters are split on their opinions of the new tax law (45% favor and 44% oppose it, with 12% still undecided). Independents remain slightly more skeptical of the President on both issues, with 50% disapproving of his handling of national security, and 51% disapproving of his handling of taxes.

Democrats Solidifying Strength for 2018

Voters' gloomy assessments of the country's direction contribute to an abysmal view of our elected leaders in Washington. Nearly eight-in-ten (78%) voters currently hold an unfavorable impression of Congress, including overwhelming majorities of Democrats (82%), independents (82%) and Republicans (71%).

Voters are, however, more positive when it comes to their own members of Congress, with around half (50%) of the electorate saying they approve of the job the representative is doing. One of the few trends that spans across parties, Democrats (50% approve, 38% disapprove) and Republicans (54% approve, 35% disapprove) offer more praise towards their own members than independents (42% approve, 42% disapprove). Voters living in non-competitive congressional districts (50% approve, 37% disapprove) are also slightly more likely to give their representative positive marks than voters living in competitive districts (49% approve, 40% disapprove).

In a way, Trump has become a wedge issue, as voters are split on how Congress should deal with him. Overall, 26% say Congress is not supportive enough of Trump (down 5 points from the previous poll), compared to 20% who say members are too supportive (down 2 points from the previous poll). Over four-in-ten (41%) voters say Congress's support of Trump is just about right (up 10 points from the previous poll). This landscape is reflective of competitive congressional districts (23% say too supportive, 26% say not supportive enough, 36% say just about right). Unsurprisingly, nearly half (49%) of Republicans say Congress is not supportive enough while one-third (32%) of Democrats say they are too supportive.

In a generic congressional match up, Democrats now have a 9-point edge (49% to 40%), up 3 points from the previous survey in August 2017 (46% to 40%). 12% of voters are undecided, a noticeably small figure this far out from election day. The data also reveals a pronounced gender gap with Democrats enjoying a much more pronounced lead among women (+26) than Republicans have among men (+10). This gap is arguably most significant when looking at white women, a group President Trump carried in 2016, but that now prefers Democrats by 12 points (51% to 39%).

There has also been a significant shift in support towards Democrats among independents. Democrats have expanded their edge among independents to 18 points (44% to 26%) up from 11 points (43% to 32% in August 2017). This Democratic advantage is, in large part, due to an overwhelming lead among independent women (51% to 20%). Democrats also have an advantage among independent men (39% to 31%).

Democrats also enjoy consolidated leads among their traditional base targets such as millennials (50% to 33%), African Americans (86% to 6%) and Latinos (59% to 33%). In step with recent Battleground polls, Democrats are preferred by voters with a college education (55% to 35%), including a 9-point advantage among college-educated whites (49% to 40%). Maintaining an advantage among these typically suburban voters, in addition to keeping the Democratic base engaged and enthused, will be crucial to Democratic hopes this November. However, Republicans continue to hold solid advantages among their base of non-college educated whites (54% to 32%), with this group showing no signs of a shifting since the last battleground poll (55% to 29% in August 2017). These non-college white voters

also approve of Trump’s handling of the economy (64% to 32%), which has helped Republicans gain a strong advantage on the issue. Democrats need to be wary of Trump’s moves on the economy, which continue to earn voter approval.

But the data also reveals a key advantage for Democrats: stronger enthusiasm. Among voters who say they are “extremely” likely to vote in the upcoming midterms, 51% prefer Democrats to 39% for Republicans. Among voters who say they are “very” likely to vote, Democrats enjoy a 7-point advantage (47% to 40%). Republicans only lead among voters who say they are “somewhat” likely to vote (45% to 37%).

Mood for Change: Congress is No Help to Long-term Economic Concerns

Nearly 10 months out from the midterms, a sense of deep anxiety continues to pervade the American electorate. Dissatisfaction with the trajectory of the country remains, as a solid majority (59%) of voters believe the nation has gotten off on the wrong track compared to only 34% who say it is heading in the right direction. Unsurprisingly, while seven-in-ten Republicans are happy with the way things are going, majorities of Democrats (92% wrong track) and independents (62%) are pessimistic.

The state of the economy remains one of the most extreme drivers of Americans’ desire for change. However, more than seven-in-ten (72%) voters now say they feel optimistic about where they will be financially five years from now, as they continue to adhere to the core belief that “anyone can get ahead if you work hard enough” (66% agree with that statement).

As we have seen for some time, the real anxiety stems from worries about how much harder that will be, especially for the next generation. While a slight majority (51%) of voters believes the next generation will have more opportunities than they had, when asked if the next generation will be better off economically, only 37% say yes and 56% say no. Voters of all persuasions and socio-economic backgrounds express a negative outlook, including college educated voters (only 33% agree while 61% disagree). It is also notable that voters who identify both as middle class (36% agree, 57% disagree) and upper class (28% agree, 66% disagree) are acutely worried. Democrats must address these anxieties more effectively.

Voters continue to strongly believe that the economy is biased against the middle class; 68% agree with the statement, “Our economy makes it too tough for the middle class to make ends meet.” Voters also express little confidence in the abilities of Congress, the President, or the policies of the federal government to help improve their own financial situation. Indeed, voters tend to agree that elected officials more often get in the way of economic growth than help encourage it.

Do you Agree/Disagree with the Following Statement			
	% Agree	% Disagree	% Unsure
I think Congress and the President are working to improve my financial situation	39%	58%	3%
Federal policies are helping to improve my financial situation.	37%	59%	5%
Most of the time, elected officials get in the way of economic growth	73%	23%	5%
Our economy makes it too tough for the middle class to	68%	30%	2%

make ends meet			
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Referendum of News Events

Voters are paying a lot of attention to news events that could impact their views in the next election. The story that voters are following most “closely” is the school shooting in Florida (72% closely following, 22% somewhat following); independents are also following this story “closely” (58%), more than others stories. Other stories that voters are paying close attention to include the ongoing standoff with North Korea (53% closely, 35% somewhat), the policy debates around immigration reform (56% closely, 32% somewhat), the tax reform law (51% closely, 31% somewhat), and the Russia investigation (50% closely, 29% somewhat). Nearly half of independents are following each of these stories closely as well.

The #MeToo movement continues to permeate the American consciousness, but we see a gender divide emerge in terms of how closely voters follow stories related to sexual harassment. While both are following them to some degree (women 88% to men 86%), women are doing so much more closely (52% to 40%, respectively). Overall, voters are following stories about sexual harassment to a slightly lesser degree (46% closely, 31% somewhat) and the opioid epidemic to a much lesser degree (37% closely, 38% somewhat) than the other stories they were asked about in this survey.

The Russian Cloud of Suspicion

There is growing reason to believe that the ongoing investigation into Russian interference in the 2016 election and possible collusion by the Trump campaign may indeed affect how voters cast their ballots in 2018. Currently, a majority (57%) of voters says the findings from the investigation into Russian election interference will be either “extremely”, “very” or “somewhat” important to their vote decisions (27% extremely, 13% very, 17% somewhat); only 41% say the findings will not be important at all. While it is no surprise that Democrats (82% extremely/very/somewhat important) and Republicans (70% not important at all) are on completely opposite ends on this issue, the investigation could very well carry influence among independents (63% extremely/very/somewhat important, 36% not important at all). Those following the investigation most include those living in California (59% closely) and Florida (62% closely), 65+ voters (60% closely), black voters (67% closely), extremely likely voters (59% closely), all groups which will be important constituencies for Democrats to win in 2018.

A plurality (39%) of voters now believes that officials in the Trump campaign committed crimes and actively assisted Russian efforts – up six points (33%) from the last Battleground poll – while another 16% believe staffers behaved unethically. Around one-third (34%) of voters believes Trump staffers behaved normally, while 7% say they are unsure. Again, while Democrats and Republicans retreat to their partisan corners, more independents believe Trump staffers are guilty of committing crimes than not (40% committed crimes, 28% acted normally). Democrats need to find a more effective way to tie the lack of accountability of the Trump campaign to Republican incumbents.

Bottom Line

As the Trump presidency continues to be one of the most polarizing forces in modern American politics and with chaos sure to continue and intensify as November approaches, it is difficult to see how the challenges facing the administration, and the GOP more broadly, do not continue to mount. Still, Democrats should not fall again for the fallacy of assuming that Trump's (self) destructive behavior will automatically yield electoral victory, especially considering the high marks voters continue to give him on the economy. To the contrary, despite some encouraging numbers on the generic congressional ballot and enthusiasm measures, Democrats must develop a winning message, particularly when it comes to the economy, that can convince voters they are prepared to tackle the massive challenges facing working families while bringing to Washington the change that voters so urgently desire.