

GWU Battleground Poll LXIII
Down but Not Out: A Case for GOP Optimism about the 2018 Elections

Republican Analysis
By: Ed Goeas and Brian Nienaber

Introduction

The unique characteristics of the Trump candidacy and his continuing unique style of leadership have led us and other pollsters to reflect on our methods of measuring public opinion. We are continuing to experiment with different ways to measure voter attitudes about President Trump, and several of these new methods are used in this polling.

The 2016 campaign had an unusual set of candidates. Both Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton spent much of the 2016 campaign with a majority of the electorate holding an unfavorable impression of them. In fact, both of them frequently had a majority of the likely electorate holding strongly unfavorable views of them. However, Donald Trump also often had a significant portion of the electorate with strongly favorable views of him. For all her strengths as a candidate, Hillary Clinton struggled to cultivate a similar level of passion among her supporters.

These passionate Trump supporters were key to his 2016 victory. The importance of this segment to the Trump campaign is a critical factor for analyzing the decisions and actions of the Trump administration. The President and his allies are committed to maintaining this passionate support. From campaign style rallies to partisan rhetoric to policies that fulfill campaign promises, the President clearly relishes playing to this base. Observers may sometimes be surprised by the words or actions of the Trump administration, but understanding the importance of these passionate Trump supporters explains much of this rhetoric and activity.

Yes, There are Troubling Signs Now

This latest Battleground Poll fielded March 4th through the 8th among N=1000 likely 2018 voters does find troubling signs for Republican candidates across the country. A majority of voters think the country is on the wrong track. Republicans trail on the generic Congressional ballot by nine points, which is well outside the expected Democratic advantage on this ballot. A majority of voters disapprove of the job performance of President Trump. More than three-in-four voters have an unfavorable impression of

Congress. Fully thirty-nine percent (39%) of voters think that members of the Trump campaign committed crimes and actively assisted Russia's efforts to influence the 2016 election. A majority of voters believe that federal policies are not helping to improve their financial situation.

In a traditional political environment, the data above could be seen as indicators that Republicans are headed for a catastrophic number of losses in state, local, and federal races across the country. However, this is not a traditional political environment, and one of the most important lessons from the 2016 election cycle is that the American electorate is willing to overlook a lot in exchange for personal economic opportunity.

In addition, strong U.S. Senate candidates can often transcend the national trend and localize these elections. In 2018, the Republican Party will have the advantages of strong incumbent candidates, fewer seats to defend, and fewer seats to defend in contested states. Many of these candidates and the GOP challenger candidates in seats being defended by the Democrats will have ample opportunity to localize these races instead of facing a potentially challenging national political environment.

Signs for GOP Optimism

Indeed, there is ample evidence in this survey that Republican candidates can make an emphatic case on the merits of Republican governance.

The job approval for President Trump (42% approve/55% disapprove) had a follow-up that found a considerable number of voters (12% of the overall electorate) disapprove of the job performance of the President while still like some of his policies and actions. So, even after the tumultuous past year, there is still an opportunity for the President to move his job approval to majority approve by converting these reluctant disapprove voters into supporters.

In addition, in the job approval by issue section, President Trump already enjoys majority job approval ratings on the issues of the economy (51% approve) and jobs (52% approve) as well as notably strong approval ratings on taxes (47% approve) and national security (48%).

| Issue | Approve | <i>Strongly Approve</i> | Unsure | Disapprove | <i>Strongly Disapprove</i> |
|--------------|----------------|--------------------------------|---------------|-------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Economy | 51% | 37% | 4% | 45% | 32% |
| Jobs | 52% | 38% | 7% | 41% | 27% |

As seen in the chart above, the intensity advantage on the pocketbook measures of the economy and jobs reinforces the advantage the President has on them. Among voters with strong views, the President has a five-point advantage on the economy (37%-32%) and an eleven point advantage on jobs (38%-27%).

In 1998, Democrats defied expectations about their Congressional and Senate losses in part by making an affirmative case about Presidential led economic growth. In 2002, Republicans defied electoral expectations in part by making an affirmative case about Presidential led efforts to bolster national security.

As voters are deciding between the parties in the 2018 U.S. Senate and Congressional Elections, GOP candidates will be able to paint voters a picture of increased economic opportunity through Republican policies. In many elections, this type picture is very appealing to significant portions of the electorate.

There is also a clear floor of support for any Republican candidate. This survey tested the job approval for President Trump on ten issues. Just under one-third of likely voters (32%) approve of the job performance of President Trump on nine or ten of these ten issues.

Reversing a trend seen in previous wave elections, while Congress continues to suffer from historically low favorable ratings, the job approval for “your Member of Congress” is actually majority approve (50% approve/37% disapprove). Many Members of Congress will be able to run campaigns based on their unique success in the Washington that both they and their constituents find troublesome.

In addition to their unique and specific themes, Republican candidates for Congress and the Senate will be able to tout tax reform specifically and increased economic opportunity specifically. The tax reform law is already at parity with voters (45% favor/44% oppose) before the vast majority of the electorate has seen its benefits. As workers see increased take home pay and parents are able to use 529 accounts to subsidize elementary and secondary tuition bills, support for this law is certain to grow.

| Statement | Agree | Unsure | Disagree |
|---|--------------|---------------|-----------------|
| Most of the time, elected officials get in the way of economic growth | 72% | 5% | 23% |
| I am optimistic about where I will be financially five years from now. | 72% | 4% | 24% |
| Our economy makes it too tough for the middle class to make ends meet. | 68% | 2% | 30% |
| In America, anyone can get ahead if they work hard enough. | 66% | 2% | 32% |
| The next generation will have more opportunities in life that I had. | 50% | 6% | 44% |
| I think Congress and the President are working to improve my financial situation. | 39% | 3% | 58% |
| Federal policies are helping to improve my financial situation. | 37% | 5% | 59% |
| I think the next generation will be better off economically than I am now. | 37% | 7% | 56% |

As seen above, there is a broad agreement on the conservative principle that government is often an impediment to economic growth as well as finding that the overwhelming majority of the electorate (72%) are optimistic about where they will be financially five years from now and that a majority of voters (50%) think the next generation will have more opportunities in life. Optimism fueled by more favorable personal economic circumstances can be very powerful at creating goodwill for the incumbent party in Congress.

Last, it will be incredibly challenging for the Democrats to run a nationalized single-issue campaign against Republican candidates. As seen in the chart on the next page, we tested seven different news stories and asked voters to select how much they had been following this particular story. For five of these seven stories – immigration reform and dealing with Dreamers, the Parkland, Florida school shooting, the conflict with North Korea, and the FBI/special counsel investigation into Russian attempts to influence the 2016 election – a majority of voters said that they have been closely following this story. This was the most attentive category a voter could select. This high level of concern about this diverse number of issues means that it will be impossible to motivate the electorate to vote against Republican candidates because they hold the wrong position on a specific issue. Too many voters are too concerned about too many issues.

| News story | Closely | Somewhat | A little | Not at All | Unsure |
|--|----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-------------------|---------------|
| The school shooting at a high school in Parkland, Florida. | 72% | 22% | 4% | 2% | 0% |
| Efforts by Congress to reform our immigration system, including how to deal with “dreamers”, illegal immigrants who were brought to America as minors. | 56% | 32% | 7% | 5% | 1% |
| The conflict with North Korea over their attempts to develop nuclear weapons. | 53% | 35% | 7% | 5% | 0% |
| The tax reform law passed in December 2017. | 51% | 31% | 9% | 8% | 1% |
| The ongoing investigation by the FBI and a special counsel into Russian attempts to influence the outcome of the 2016 Presidential election. | 50% | 29% | 10% | 11% | 0% |
| The ongoing discussions about discrimination and harassment of women in the workplace. | 47% | 31% | 10% | 13% | 0% |
| The opioid epidemic | 37% | 38% | 10% | 15% | 1% |

Conclusion

In any campaign, one of the most important jobs is to assess the strengths and weaknesses of both your candidate and your opponent. Campaigns can and have made terrible missteps when they are unable or unwilling to acknowledge the strengths of the opposing campaign. The time of any campaign is much better spent on affirmative efforts to win the hearts and minds of potential supporters than it on spewing vitriol about the opponent. Too many Democratic candidates seem content to just run as “not Trump.” While this is appealing to a segment of the electorate, it fails to acknowledge that President Trump has found a way to appeal to a unique segment of the electorate that has generated intense loyalty to him. Treating these voters with disdain because they fail to be dismissive of the President is a strategy that is

doomed to failure. Oprah Winfrey herself recently urged candidates running for office to “...*not spend all your time talking about your opponents. Do not give your energy to that which you really don’t believe in. Do not spend an ounce of your time on that.*” This is sage advice that far too many Democratic candidates are going to ignore this cycle.

Indeed, the historical trend and some data in this survey indicate that Republicans could suffer significant losses in the fall elections. While this may occur, there is a clear opportunity for Republican candidates across the country to appeal to voters on pocketbook issues like a growing economy, more jobs, and a tax reform that puts more money in the hands of most voters. Time and again voters have been willing to overlook a lot of missteps in order to increase personal economic opportunities for themselves.