The Battleground: Democratic Perspective
April 25th, 2016

Democratic Strategic Analysis:
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The Political Climate

The tension and anxiety recorded in last year’s Battleground survey are still very much indicators of the national mood. Dissatisfaction with the trajectory of the country and the economy remain strong, and people are seeking a change in direction. This high level of discontent, however, does not directly translate into disapproval of the president or Democratic candidates, as might be expected. Americans do want a change in direction, but not the reactionary change represented by the frontrunners in the Republican Party.

Levels of voter engagement are high, with 91% reporting that they are very or extremely likely to cast a ballot in the 2016 race. High-intensity media coverage of the candidates of both parties has placed the Presidential election at the center of public attention, with an overwhelming majority of voters saying that they are following the election either very or somewhat closely (89%). Party loyalists and undecided voters alike plan to participate in the race, with identified Democrats and Republicans outpacing independent voters by only a slight margin in their intention to vote. The gap in vote enthusiasm between the parties has diminished, as well.¹

The President’s job approval numbers are at the highest level since after his re-election in 2012 (50% approve, 46% disapprove), in contrast to recent Battleground surveys that registered his approval rating between 41% and 45%. His support has jumped, in many cases significantly, in every region of the country except the Northeast, which is already one of the regions with the most positive assessments of the president’s job performance. These numbers indicate that the President can play a major role in assembling and motivating the Democratic coalition. As in past years, the President’s support is most intense among young, minority voters, with his highest approval ratings coming from voters under 45 (54% approve, 43% disapprove), and African Americans (96% approve, 2% disapprove). Gender continues to be a major dividing line in support for the President – 41% of men approve and 56% disapprove, while 58% of women approve and 37% disapprove. However, in spite of the President’s high approval ratings, deep seated concerns about the trajectory of the country persist. Fully 60% want the country to move in a different direction with the next administration, with only 35% hoping to continue with the policies of the Obama administration.

¹ As the Battleground Poll samples only likely voters, it is impossible to discern from this data the impact of the primaries so far on voters who do not regularly participate in elections.
As they look forward to a new era of political leadership, voters have been deluged with high-octane campaign coverage of the top Presidential contenders in recent months. With Donald Trump leading the Republican pack, Americans are disillusioned with the political climate that has come out of this campaign – the majority of Americans indicate that they find the language that has been used throughout the campaign to be offensive, and 49% go as far as saying that it is repulsive and has no place in a Presidential politics. Minority voters (58% vs. 47% of whites) and women (59% vs. 39% for men), in particular, indicate high levels of disappointment with this language. Republicans (37%) and independents (40%) are less bothered by the tone of the campaign than Democrats (66%).

A Change-Oriented Electorate

Fueled by economic anxiety and disillusionment with the political process, voters continue to hope that the next President will focus most heavily on the economy (19%), and dysfunction in government (14%). Voters’ intensifying frustration with their government has pushed reform near the top of the issue agenda, indicating that Americans perceive a clear link between government dysfunction and the government’s lack of progress in addressing the challenges they face. Americans are divided, however, about how involved the government should be in addressing these concerns. Voters are evenly split over whether the government in Washington should see to it that every person has a job and a good standard of living (46%), or whether the best thing that the government can do is to get out of the way and let the free market help people succeed (46%). While liberal and conservative voters are polarized on either end of the spectrum of this issue, moderates swing heavily towards preferring higher levels of government involvement, with 57% indicating that government leaders should ensure a job and a good standard of living. With jobs numbers on a positive trajectory over the last several months, fewer voters cite jobs as their primary concern (10%, as opposed to 14% in 2015), but economic anxiety remains the major prism through which voters are viewing these elections and the various issues up for debate. Health care (8%), Social Security (5%), and the deficit (5%) are also of concern to the electorate, though less significant than unease over foreign threats (11%), which is likely driven by an increase in coverage of terrorist attacks abroad and the increased media presence of the Islamic State. Forty-six percent of Americans are at least somewhat concerned about another terrorist attack affecting their families, including 52% of women.

While concern over an immediate economic recession has lessened slightly in recent years, a vast majority (72%) still express concern about the possibility of an impending downturn hurting their families. Unease is especially concentrated among independent voters (76%), affirming that the candidate with the strongest, most-trusted economic platform will be best-positioned to grab swing votes on Election Day.

Uniformly and in growing numbers, Americans are deeply concerned about the next generation’s economic future. The majority of Americans doubt that the next generation will be better off economically than the current one (27% yes, 65% no), an attitude that is consistent with last year’s numbers (24% yes, 69% no). While most Americans are confident that the Democratic Party is best-suited to fight for the middle class, provide good health care, and address the concerns of ordinary Americans, perceptions of economic turbulence throughout the Obama administration have
contributed to trepidation over entrusting Democrats with the economy (53% favor Republicans, 42% favor Democrats) and jobs (51% favor Republicans, 43% favor Democrats).

One source of Democratic vulnerability comes from voter opposition to international trade agreements. Democrats are clearly divided on the subject: 32% think they are good for the economy, while 33% believe they are bad. Democrats should be concerned by how negatively these agreements are viewed by independent voters, who feel they have been bad for the economy by a margin of 49%-22%. Independent men oppose trade deals by a margin of 57%-23%, and 51% of those who see jobs as their top concern think that trade deals are bad for the economy. In large numbers, millennial voters view trade deals in a negative light, as well, with 46% of those under 45 citing them as bad for the U.S. economy, and only 30% viewing them as positive for the economy. Both college and non-college educated voters oppose trade deals as well, breaking with past trends.

**Image of the Frontrunners**

As we move closer to the summer conventions and Election Day in November, economic anxiety and political disillusionment are driving forces in candidate popularity, as well. While Donald Trump’s delegate lead and indisputable frontrunner status is remarkable when placed in the context of his overwhelmingly high unfavorable marks (65% of voters view the Republican frontrunner unfavorably, compared to 32% who have a favorable impression of him), his popularity is partially explained by voters’ perceptions of his economic savvy. That being said, the level of animosity voters express against Trump is intense across all major demographic, partisan, and regional categories, including a staggering 90% of African Americans and 82% of Latinos; 71% of women; and 60% of independents.

Voters who profess a positive opinion of Trump constitute a narrow demographic profile, largely limited to white, blue-collar men. A closer look at Mr. Trump’s base of support, however, illuminates a major factor in explaining his domination of the primary contest. Trump’s supporters overwhelmingly consider themselves to be very conservative, hardline Republicans; a demographic profile that typically turns out for primary elections at a higher rate than their more centrist counterparts. This suggests that, for all the talk about Mr. Trump’s poor organizational capabilities, particularly on the ground, he has enjoyed an invaluable advantage over his competitors: he holds a base that is comprised of some of the most dedicated voters in the country.

While Trump will certainly have a serious challenge ahead of him in winning over independents should he capture the nomination, the numbers somewhat dispel the notion that it would be impossible for Trump to unite the Republican Party. When asked whether they would consider voting for Trump as a general election candidate, 73% of Republicans said they would consider casting their ballots for Trump, including 66% of Republican women.

As the likely Democratic Nominee, Hillary Clinton also faces the prospect of campaigning in a general electorate where a majority of voters (56%) views her unfavorably. In most elections, this figure might be daunting – however, the challenges of her public profile seem relatively small when compared to Trump’s.

Clinton’s popularity profile is defined largely by gender, marital status, and race, with the data showing large variations between voters who view her favorably or unfavorably. While the former
Secretary of State is viewed in a positive light among a majority (51%) of women, only 33% of men say they feel the same. The disparity is even more profound along racial and ethnic lines. While Clinton is extremely well-liked among African Americans (90%), only 33% of white voters have a favorable impression of her. Meanwhile, Latinos are essentially split on their opinions of the former Secretary of State, with 49% saying they view her favorably, compared to 51% who view her unfavorably. Unmarried voters tend to view Clinton more favorably (53%) than married voters (37%), and unmarried women in particular are shown to support Clinton in large numbers (73%). Arguably the most troubling numbers for Clinton are her marks among independents, 61% of whom view her unfavorably – an almost identical figure to that of Trump.

Still, Clinton enjoys a strong network of support among the Democratic base, with more than seven-in-ten Democrats who consider themselves either soft or hardline members of the Party expressing a favorable opinion of her. Furthermore, while the above figure regarding her profile among independents is troubling, self-described political moderates are far less critical of her, with a solid plurality (44%) of these voters saying they view her favorably. This figure stands in stark contrast to the mere 25% of self-described moderate voters who view Donald Trump in a favorable light. Bill Clinton also remains an asset, with a net positive favorability of 54% to 41%, including among independents (49%-44%) and moderates (61%-31%).

Despite the increasing tension in the Democratic primary over the past several months, Clinton also appears to have an easier path ahead of her than Trump, should she emerge the nominee and seek to unify the Democratic Party. Nearly nine-in-ten Democrats say they will consider voting for Clinton should she win the Democratic nomination. This includes a solid plurality (46%) of millennial voters. While a slight majority of these voters say they would not consider voting for Clinton, given the strong support these voters have expressed for Senator Bernie Sanders, her present standing among this demographic suggests that the challenge in winning over millennials is not insurmountable.

General Election Outlook

When it comes down to head-to-head matchups, both Hillary Clinton and Bernie Sanders are shown to beat Donald Trump. In a contest between Clinton and Trump, however, the former Secretary of State defeats the businessman narrowly (46%-43%). In a contest between Sanders and Trump, the Senator bests the Republican frontrunner by a wider margin (51%-40%).

Clinton’s support is particularly strong in the South and the West, while Trump presents a slightly more formidable challenge in the states where the President’s approval ratings are lowest: the Mountain states and the Central Plains, likely driven by working-class economic anxieties that have persisted throughout the President’s administration. Secretary Clinton beats Trump soundly among women (54%-35%), African Americans (91%-7%), and Latinos (52%-35%).

Senator Sanders beats Donald Trump clearly in every region of the country except the Mountain states, where they tie 46%-46%. Sanders capitalizes on populist overlap with Trump, beating the businessman among non-college graduates, and among voters who view jobs and the economy as the most important issues for the next administration.
If Clinton is to be the Democratic nominee, it will be crucial to focus on independent voters. In the Trump-Clinton match-up, the businessman beats the former Secretary of State 42%-37%. Sanders beats Trump among independent voters 46% to 38%. Independent voters, like the rest of the electorate, are most strongly focused on the economy (15%) and dysfunction in government (16%).

Trump does major damage to the Republican Party’s brand. The greatest discrepancy between confidence in the Republican Party and Donald Trump is on foreign affairs, where voters have greater confidence in Republican Party over the Democratic Party by a slight margin of 48% to 44%. However, when forced to choose between Clinton and Trump, voters trust Clinton over Trump on this issue by a margin of 60% to 33%. Voters also view Clinton as more capable than Trump to fight for the middle class (56%-34%), and care about people like themselves (53%-35%).

The most important challenge for the Democratic Party and Hillary Clinton is to develop a more compelling economic profile, vision, and plan. Republicans have an 8-point lead over Democrats on the issue of jobs and an 11-point lead on the economy. Trump has some credibility with voters as a businessman and job creator, and is tied with Clinton on jobs and the economy. Expanding her margins there would solidify her advantage on the ballot. Independent voters are essentially split between the two candidates, but leaning slightly toward Trump. Undecided voters are also unsure which candidate would be better on economic matters; while their sample size is small, the data suggests that they, too, narrowly favor Trump. Clinton is competitive with Trump on Taxes and leads soundly on other dimensions. A strong economic message coming out of the primary would provide a crucial lift for her campaign.

Now, thinking about the issues facing this country...I am going to read you a list of issues. Please listen as I read the list and tell me, for each one, whether you have more confidence in - the Republican Party, or the Democratic Party to deal with this

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Issue</th>
<th>GOP Party</th>
<th>DEM Party</th>
<th>Both</th>
<th>Neither</th>
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<tr>
<td>Caring about people like you</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>5%</td>
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<td>Fighting for the Middle Class</td>
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<td>55%</td>
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<td>The economy</td>
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Legend:
- **GOP Party**
- **DEM Party**
- **Both**
- **Neither**
- **Unsure**
Now, thinking about issues facing the country...I am going to read you a list of issues. Please listen as I read the list and tell me, for each one, whether you have more confidence in - Donald Trump, or Hillary Clinton to deal with this issue.

- Caring about people like you: 35% for Donald Trump, 53% for Hillary Clinton, 1% for Both, 10% for Neither, 1% for Unsure.
- Fighting for the Middle Class: 34% for Donald Trump, 56% for Hillary Clinton, 1% for Both, 7% for Neither, 2% for Unsure.
- Foreign Affairs: 33% for Donald Trump, 60% for Hillary Clinton, 0% for Both, 6% for Neither, 2% for Unsure.
- Jobs: 47% for Donald Trump, 46% for Hillary Clinton, 0% for Both, 6% for Neither, 2% for Unsure.
- Health care: 40% for Donald Trump, 53% for Hillary Clinton, 0% for Both, 4% for Neither, 2% for Unsure.
- Taxes: 47% for Donald Trump, 46% for Hillary Clinton, 0% for Both, 4% for Neither, 2% for Unsure.
- The economy: 46% for Donald Trump, 47% for Hillary Clinton, 0% for Both, 1% for Neither, 5% for Unsure.