

The Battleground: Democratic Perspective

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Democratic Strategic Analysis:

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As the 2020 campaign cycle begins in earnest, the findings from the most recent Battleground survey reveal an electorate with an ever-deepening sense of frustration toward the status quo in Washington—evident not just in voters' dissatisfaction with the President (though Trump's ratings remain spectacularly bad), but also in their persistent exasperation with the state of the American polity—the major institutions and the individuals charged with leading them. Even more important for Democrats is voters' pronounced economic anxiety. The last of these, in particular, has been manifest for the better part of two decades, despite the political and media elites' fawning to the contrary—a dynamic that only exacerbates the sense of alienation among voters and non-voters alike—and appears unlikely to improve without serious and bold economic initiatives from the Democrats. Indeed, “change” promises, once again, to be the by-word of this election, as voters continue to cast about for an alternative to a political class they believe either fails to hear them—or does hear them, and yet fails to act.

Democrats' strong showing in the 2018 midterms was a solid step toward rehabilitation from the disastrous 2016 elections, though it would be a mistake to treat those results as a necessary predictor of success moving forward. In fact, despite the President's historic levels of unpopularity, voters continue to profess favorable opinions of his stewardship over the economy and job creation (a qualified assessment, to be sure, given their expectations of yet another significant downturn); moreover, they tend to side with Republicans over Democrats on these issues, as well. Overall, this data continues to illustrate Democrats' inherent weakness to respond on the economy, and if the Party does not rectify this soon, it will find itself in serious jeopardy for the 2020 election.

Indeed, Democrats still face the challenge of articulating a bold, compelling economic vision that rises above the safety of platitudes, or that seeks to convince voters that a reprise of the economy of the 1990s or the early 2010s is sufficient to address the scale of the economy's persistent failings—a perilous gambit that cedes the dimension of change to the opposition and ignores voters' fears and their aspirations for the future. Democrats have major advantages on healthcare and education which contributed largely to their success in 2018. The challenge facing the Party ahead is to translate those advantages into a bigger economic frame. As important, Democrats stand to profit immensely by capitalizing on the President's and his Party's glaring vulnerabilities regarding their ties to the same powerful special interests that dominate American politics and government and are at the root of voters' desire to chart a decidedly new course. Pursuing these strategies will require more than just highlighting the President's flaws; they will require some measure of risk from Democrats as they offer a bold new trajectory and true security—economically, domestically, and internationally—for the American people.

The Political Environment

Nearly nine months out from the Iowa Caucuses, and a full nineteen from the general election, a deep sense of anxiety continues to pervade the American electorate. Dissatisfaction with the trajectory of the country remains strong, with a solid majority (57%) of voters believing that the country is heading down the wrong track compared to only 35% who say it is heading in the right direction. Unsurprisingly, while

Republicans (74% right direction) overwhelmingly approve of the way things are going, a majority of Democrats (92% wrong track) and independents (60%) express pessimism. Women (62% wrong track) also tend to be more negative in their outlook than men (50% wrong track).

Economic worries continue to be a driving factor behind this anxiety—a trend that has persisted for the better part of two decades. Despite benign assessments of the state of the economy *writ large*, Americans' economic insecurity and lack of faith in the fundamentals of the economy is evident, as fully 59% of voters say they are either "very" or "somewhat" worried about the country suffering an economic downturn in the near future. Moreover, levels of concern would be significantly higher if not for Republican voters' unwillingness to brook even indirect criticism of Trump, as less than one-third of Republicans express concern (32% very/somewhat worried) compared to two-thirds or more of independents (67% very/somewhat worried) and Democrats (80% very/somewhat worried). Not surprisingly, economically marginalized groups are among the most nervous, including African American voters (75% very/somewhat worried), Latinx voters (76% very/somewhat worried), rural voters (60% very/somewhat worried), and low-income voters (70% very/somewhat worried). Notably, majorities of voters who identify as middle class (58% very/somewhat worried) and as working class (63% very/somewhat worried) are more fearful than not about the prospects of an impending recession.

Voters' gloomy assessments of the country's direction contribute to low views of elected leaders in Washington. Nearly seven-in-ten (67%) voters currently hold an unfavorable impression of Congress, including a majority of Democrats (58%), independents (67%) and Republicans (76%). In keeping with historical trends, voters are more positive when it comes to their own members of Congress (54% approve), though this disparity between the institution and individual members has decreased in recent years.

Voters are split on the posture their member of Congress should adopt in dealing with President Trump. Overall, 24% of voters say their member of Congress is not supportive enough of Trump compared to 18% who say they are too supportive. Over four-in-ten (41%) voters say their member of Congress' support of Trump is just about right while another 16% are unsure. Among independents, 20% say their member of Congress is not supportive enough compared to 14% who say they are too supportive. 42% of independents think their members' level of support for the President is just about right, including 52% of independent women.

Views of President Trump

The President remains an unpopular and deeply controversial figure among a large portion of the electorate. Only four-in-ten (40%) voters currently have a favorable opinion of the President compared to 55% who view him unfavorably. The intensity of the animosity towards Trump is also quite stunning, as 48% of voters have a "strongly" unfavorable opinion of the President compared to only 27% who have a "strongly" favorable opinion of Trump. The President's personal profile is also heavily underwater among independents, with 57% viewing him unfavorably, including 43% who feel that way "strongly."

The President's job approval ratings largely mirror those of his personal image, with 43% of voters currently approving the job he is doing as President, compared to 52% who disapprove. And while the President continues to enjoy near-universal levels of approval among his Republican base (92% approve), his support among independents is solidly net-negative (32% approve, 51% disapprove), with independent women (30% approve, 57% disapprove) in particular holding very negative views about his tenure to date. Trump's low ratings among these voters represents a significant obstacle for his administration moving forward as he tries to broaden his base of support. To no one's surprise, Democrats

display almost universal displeasure with the President (93% disapprove), including a staggering 85% who say they disapprove “strongly.”

As has been the trend since he was elected, African Americans (83% disapprove, incl. 69% “strongly” disapprove) and Latinx voters (69% disapprove, incl. 59% “strongly” disapprove) continue to be among the President’s strongest detractors. There is also a very large gender gap with men—of whom 50% approve and 46% disapprove—and women—of whom 37% approve and 60% disapprove. And while the President’s rating among seniors is somewhat mixed (45% approve, 50% disapprove) his ratings among millennials (34% approve, 58% disapprove) is an ominous sign for the Republican Party’s future, and highlights the complexity of the GOP’s challenge, which continues to be not just racial, ethnic, and along gender lines, but generational too.

Driving the President’s poor approval numbers are a mix of questions about his handling of certain issues and his leadership style. Nearly half (49%) of all voters currently say they find the President’s style and comments to be frequently insulting and believe that he has the wrong approach on too many issues, including a 47% plurality of independents; only 23% of independents believe the President “tells it like it is and has the right approach.” Even one-third (33%) of voters who approve of the President’s job performance overall still say they are at least somewhat bothered by his style and tone.

Voters’ assessments of the President’s performance on individual issues also differ dramatically depending on the subject. Currently, a majority of voters disapprove of Trump’s handling of healthcare (33% approve, 58% disapprove), immigration (41% approve, 56% disapprove), and foreign affairs (41% approve, 54% disapprove). A plurality of voters also gives the President negative marks on his handling of taxes (45% approve, 47% disapprove), with voters only giving him a slight edge over Democrats in Congress in regard to whom they trust more on the issue going forward (47% trust Trump vs. 44% trust Democrats). These later data-points are strong indictments of the President’s—as well as the Republican Congress’—failure to sell the merits of his signature legislative accomplishment to date to the American people.

The President’s low profile on healthcare is also particularly notable. Since the last Battleground Poll, the President’s disapproval ratings on healthcare have remained solidly net-negative (55% disapprove in previous poll), and a majority of voters trusts Democrats in Congress more than him on the issue (55% trust Democrats vs. 35% trust Trump). Congressional Democrats are also trusted more than the President on education (59% to 32%), as well his signature issue of immigration (51% to 42%)—the latter of which is quite remarkable considering the President’s repeated campaign to keep the subject at the forefront of American political discourse. Still, considering the significant role the issue of healthcare played in the ultimate outcome of 2018 midterms, the President’s trust-deficit on this issue specifically represents one of the Democrats’ strongest advantages going forward—though Democrats will need to offer a strong alternative in order to leverage this advantage in the context of a presidential election, which is much more a choice between two competing visions than a referendum on a president’s first term.

Donald Trump Job Performance Ratings				Net Diff	
Issues	% Approve	% Disapprove	% Unsure	Likely Voters	Independents
Overall Job Performance	42%	52%	5%	-10	-19
Economy	57%	38%	5%	+19	+31
Foreign Affairs	41%	54%	5%	-13	-18
Taxes	45%	48%	7%	-3	-14
Jobs	57%	34%	9%	+23	+38
Immigration	41%	56%	3%	-15	-27
Healthcare	33%	58%	9%	-25	-43

In spite of all these extent vulnerabilities, Trump continues to hold a significant buffer in the form of voters' willingness to give him credit on the economy. Since the last Battleground Poll, the President has increased his economic job performance numbers by 6-points (51% approve in previous battleground poll), with a 57% majority of voters now saying they approve of his economic stewardship compared to 38% who disapprove. Equally as important, a similar majority (57%) also says it approves of his work on job creation, a 5-point increase from the previous poll (52% approve in the previous Battleground Poll). Overall, over nine-in-ten (94%) Republicans say they approve of the President's job on the economy, as do a majority of most demographic and regional subgroups, but especially men (66% approve), white voters (63% approve), rural voters (62% approve), and white blue-collar voters (72% approve). Independent voters also give the President strong ratings on the economy and jobs (62% and 60% approve, respectively).

As a result of his strong numbers, voters also currently trust the President more than Democrats on moving the economy forward (52% trust Trump vs. 40% trust Democrats) and future job creation (50% trust Trump vs. 39% trust Democrats). In a troubling sign for Democrats, Trump is trusted more on these two vital issues by a number of important swing constituencies, including independents (+35 on economy, +37 on jobs), white women (+8 on economy, +8 on jobs), and self-described moderate voters (+19 on economy, +20 on jobs). Voters place more modest levels of trust in Trump over Democrats on the issue of National Security (47% to 43%), but it is his advantage on the economy and jobs that pose the greatest challenge for Democrats, particularly as Democrats have never won the White House when trailing on this central front.

Donald Trump vs. Democrats in Congress on the Issues			Net Diff	
Issues	% Trust Trump	% Trust Dems	Likely Voters	Independents
Jobs	50%	39%	-11	-37
The Economy	52%	40%	-12	-35
National Security	47%	43%	-4	-22
Taxes	47%	44%	-3	-32
Special Interests	37%	43%	+6	-14
Immigration	42%	51%	+9	+3
Health Care	35%	55%	+20	+17
Education	32%	59%	+27	+20

The 2020 Election

While the election is still a long way off, the Democrats' current electoral prospects appear to be somewhat of a mixed bag. Voters express a clear sense of animosity towards President Trump, yet those negative views have not necessarily translated into positive views of Democrats. Currently, more voters have a negative view of the Democratic Party than positive (43% favorable, 46% unfavorable), including pluralities of independents (21% favorable, 44% unfavorable) and self-described moderate voters (29% favorable, 41% unfavorable). Speaker Nancy Pelosi is currently viewed unfavorably by 53% of voters (compared to 37% favorable), including 54% of independents (vs. 25% favorable). The speaker does, however, enjoy solid support among her Democratic base, of whom 70% view her favorably.

Currently, the Democrats hold a five-point advantage in a 2020 generic congressional ballot (Dem 42%, GOP 37%), which is down slightly from the eight-point lead they held before the 2018 midterms. The gender gap seen in previous Battleground Polls also remains alive and well, with women supporting the Democrats by an 18-point margin (Dem 48%, GOP 30%), and men the Republicans by a 9-point margin (Dem 35%, GOP 44%). The marital gap is perhaps even more stunning: married men are voting Republican by a 16-point margin (Dem 34%, GOP 50%), while married women are split (Dem 39%, GOP 38%). Single women are voting Democratic by an enormous 54-point margin (Dem 65%, GOP 11%), and single men by 10 points (Dem 43%, GOP 33%). Independents, meanwhile, appear completely up for grabs, with a whopping 68% of these voters fully undecided. And while self-described moderate voters currently prefer Democrats by a 13-point margin (Dem 30%, GOP 17%), a 52% majority of these voters are also uncommitted.

Democrats continue to lead among their traditional base targets such as millennials (Dem 45%, GOP 32%), African Americans (Dem 67%, GOP 7%) and Latinx voters (Dem 58% to GOP 27%). Continuing the trend from recent Battleground Polls, Democrats also remain the preferred choice of voters with a college education (Dem 46%, GOP 30%), including a staggering 23-point lead among college-educated women (Dem 50%, GOP 27%). Democrats also hold a 9-point advantage among college-educated whites (Dem 44%, GOP 35%), the same margin we saw in the previous Battleground Poll. Maintaining an advantage among these typically suburban voters who proved decisive in the Party's takeover of the House of Representatives will be crucial to Democratic hopes next November, as will ensuring record turnout of the base and attracting registered voters with less consistent vote history to the polls. Notably, Republicans continue to hold a double-digit advantage among non-college educated whites (Dem 26%, GOP 54%), with this group showing no signs of a shift since the last Battleground Poll (Dem 32%, GOP 54% in March 2018).

As for the issue agenda, voters put their confidence in Democrats over Republicans on several key policy dimensions, with the most notable being education (54% trust Dems vs. 30% trust GOP) and health care (54% trust Dems vs. 30% trust GOP). On both issues, Democrats' advantage among independents is particularly noteworthy (+47 for education, +54 for health care). Additionally, Democrats also have an 8-point advantage on immigration (48% trust Dems vs. 40% trust GOP) and are competitive on taxes (43% trust Dems vs. 41% trust GOP), presenting the Party an opportunity to make inroads into what have traditionally been Republican strongholds.

At the same time, Democrats continue to face real challenges in bolstering their credentials on the economy and job creation—two issues that voters currently trust Republicans more on (37% trust Dems vs. 49% trust GOP on the economy; 38% trust Dems vs. 46% trust GOP on jobs). And while Democrats can reduce these deficits by exposing how Republicans' economic policies have focused more on appeasing wealthy special interests at the expense of most American people—a point bolstered by the findings that voters trust Democrats more than Republicans when it comes to dealing with special interests (42% trust

Dems vs. 28% trust GOP), it is difficult to envision a purely critical argument sufficing on its own, especially given that half or more of independents believe neither Congressional Democrats or Republicans or the President are up to the task of dealing with special interests at all. Therefore, it is imperative that Democrats develop a strong economic platform that employs a clear anti-special interest frame, contrasts with Republicans, and appeals to and energizes voters to show up in record numbers next November.

Republicans vs. Democrats in Congress on the Issues			Net Diff	
Issues	% Trust GOP	% Trust Dems	Likely Voters	Independents
The Economy	49%	37%	-12	-1
National Security	48%	38%	-10	+7
Jobs	46%	38%	-8	-4
Taxes	41%	43%	+2	+11
Immigration	40%	48%	+8	+23
Special Interests	28%	42%	+14	+15
Education	30%	54%	+24	+47
Health Care	30%	54%	+24	+54

Bottom Line

Given the high levels of dissatisfaction with the direction of the country and the country's political leaders, the American electorate remains fundamentally change-oriented. And while the President's unpopularity certainly continues to present opportunities for the Democratic Party moving forward, attacking Trump will not be enough, particularly with a significant number of voters seemingly able to reconcile their misgivings about Trump with positive ratings of his handling of the economy. As 2020 continues to come closer into focus, Democrats will be best served by advancing an audacious, forward-thinking agenda that takes on the powerful special interests and delivers real change for the American people, exploiting the dimensions where the Party already enjoys advantages (though has failed to capitalize with proposals that tinker around the edge of real reform) and advancing on terrain where they continue to trail (i.e. the economy).