

REPORT TO HOUSE MAJORITY FORWARD

OCTOBER 2019 SUBURBAN WHITE WORKING
CLASS VOTERS FOCUS GROUPS



October 21, 2019

METHODOLOGY

This report covers the results of our research: two groups of White non-college voters (men and women) and two groups of White college-educated voters (men and women). The groups were made up of voters from NJ-02 and NJ-03 and were conducted in New Jersey by Expedition Strategies, Global Strategy Group and Normington Petts on October 15-16, 2019.

OVERVIEW

Issues

No single problem came across as a dominant concern among voters. We heard fairly consistently about immigration, taxes, healthcare, education, and national security. Other issues, such as abortion rights, and government spending, came up far less frequently. National security and immigration were bigger issues for non-college and college men, while the women were more concerned about education and guns. Syria and impeachment did not come up as priorities until the moderators brought up those topics. Neither did trade deals although Trump got some initial credit for being “tough” on trade.

Trump has some standing with many of these voters. The fact that he is a businessman is regarded as a positive and he has credibility on issues related to America’s place in the world. As one respondent noted: “I watched regulation send out entire industries to other countries.” Several noted variations on this story of how America was in decline and how Trump is working to reverse that decline – particularly when it comes to helping business, bringing control to the immigration system and trade (generally speaking – not on specific deals, which most do not know anything about).

Most of the respondents – across all of the groups – said they side with Trump on immigration. Almost to a person, immigration was described as a matter of bringing “control” to our borders and immigration system (the treatment of children at the border barely came up during the groups). However, support for “control” did not necessarily mean support for a wall – nobody explicitly said they support a wall and several clearly said they do not support a wall.

Education came up repeatedly. Nobody said college should be free but several mentioned the need to have affordable college and several mentioned the need for higher-quality education and for teacher raises. In fact, several noted that while the economy is doing well, teachers are still struggling with pay that is too low. Several mentioned the need to fund special education.

With the exception of the aforementioned reference to teachers, nobody agreed that they are “struggling” economically. For that matter, nobody said they are angry at corporate America or special interests. They reserved and focused their anger on the politicians, who they see as mostly useless – other than Trump (who is not viewed as a politician). In addition, when we asked which party people would trust in a recession, more said the GOP than said the Democratic Party and those who said the GOP tended to say it was because the GOP would be better for business.

Most said the economy is doing well, although some of the college-educated men suggested that it is growing weaker. That group was also the most divided over whether the tax cuts were a good idea (some mentioned the SALT problem and some said the tax cuts gave the economy a short boost but did not produce lasting economic gains).

Party Views

The cynicism was everywhere regardless of education level about Congress and DC. Corruption, lack of care for the people, self-interest are thought to be the norm and the views of the parties were mostly low. Views of the party are not particularly clearly defined although the GOP was mostly seen as anti-tax and the Democrats are mostly viewed as pro-tax. The GOP is associated with siding with the wealthy but more so in terms of Trump positions. Most found it difficult to disassociate the party from its president. The Democratic definition seems to be mostly related to the current positions the party is viewed as taking (i.e. several clearly said today’s party is different from the party of the past). This was the case among non-college men, who mentioned that Democrats used to be for working people. The non-college groups were more favorable towards the GOP, although both groups of women mentioned the GOP being more for the wealthy while Democrats were trying to look out for everyone.

Several said Trump (and by extension the GOP) is fighting to put America First (pro-borders, pro-American jobs and “take care of us. And take care of the United States and not what everybody else is doing”) while the Democrats are helping non-citizens. Democrats were also cited as the party that cares about “human rights” such as “gay issues” and the party of “the working class.”

To the extent there is clear differentiation, the Democrats have more credibility on health care than the GOP. Views of the ACA were not particularly negative and when the idea of dismantling ACA was raised, voters quickly focused on the lack of a GOP alternative plan.

Drug prices were universally viewed as a “huge” problem, but inextricably tied to the cost of health care generally and out-of-pocket costs specifically. Neither party was seen as focused on the problem, although many assumed that efforts to address health care would include a focus on drug prices. There was almost no sympathy for pharmaceutical companies. Even when specifically pressed about the presence of Pharma companies in New Jersey, voters believed that there was enough profit in the system to absorb lower costs. Current prices were viewed as set on the basis of “greed” and “monopoly” and because “they can charge whatever they want” rather than a product of the cost of research and development of new medicines. Currently, people believe there is “no control” over pricing. The cost of diabetes medicine and Epi-Pens came up the most often as examples of the problems people have with drug prices.

Most did not have high personal bills for medicine although some respondents had particularly tragic personal experiences such as the woman whose father stopped taking life-saving medicine due to the cost and did not tell anyone (which suggests he felt there was nothing that anyone could do about it).

When we asked for reactions to the Democratic prescription drug legislation, the response was positive and we did not hear significant concerns or skepticism, other than doubt that the GOP would agree to pass the bill. However, some asked if the \$2,000 cap is too high - and it’s notable that none of the respondents seem to be currently spending enough to hit this cap. There was no sympathy for the pharmaceutical industry or concern that curbing their pricing power would hurt the industry in general or in NJ particularly since “they are rich.”

Medicare for All produced a great deal of confusion. Some respondents initially liked the idea because it sounds like it suggests everyone will have coverage. Non-college women in particular thought it sounded good. However, when they learned it represents a single-payer plan, voters quickly raised concerns about how it takes away choice, puts health care decisions in the hands of government, and how it is paid for (this was particularly an issue with college-educated men). College-educated women commented several times that the proposal is socialized medicine, and they didn’t support it.

Trump’s views on trade also were widely supported, although nobody across the four groups had much specific knowledge about his proposed “new NAFTA.” Trump is seen as fighting to bring back American industry and jobs after years where nobody was taking on that fight. For that reason, those who had a view on the “new NAFTA” assumed it would be good for the country and said Congress should pass it because it “would bring industry back to the United States.” Only a small handful of college-educated men said Trump’s tariffs have hurt the economy. Many voters said it would make them more favorable towards their Democratic member if they acted to work with Trump on trade.

Perceptions of Trump

The core perception voters bring to the discussion of Trump is that he is a businessman, not a politician. Because he is not a politician, the standards that would apply to a politician are not applied to him. His businessman persona also gives him credibility on economic issues, including trade. He is seen as fighting to bring business back to the U.S., which is seen as a good thing. He is also viewed as being personally out of control, while having an agenda that is promoting control – control of the flow of work between the U.S. and abroad, and pro-military and pro-law enforcement.

Perceptions of Trump on a personal level were fairly consistent across the groups: he is seen as both ridiculous and tough. Specifically, he was described as “goofy” and “a joke,” “an egoist” and lacking impulse control¹. But he is also seen as “strong” and “a New York American” and “brash.” His treatment of women and “womanizing” came up sporadically. Some of the women – college and non-college – found this objectionable but the men seemed to largely minimize the impact of issues related to that aspect of his behavior.

Their Member

Few had specific knowledge of their Member of Congress, although there was a general understanding that Democrats control the House and their district had swung towards Democrats despite being a traditionally Republican area.

Impeachment

Almost nobody in the groups said they are intentionally following impeachment news. Several are avoiding it. There was a great deal of ambivalence about impeachment and apparently more support for dropping it than pursuing it. The proceeding is seen as dominating the Democrats’ agenda. At least one person in each group could clearly articulate the charge against Trump and Ukraine. No one thought the charges were related to Russia. Voters were divided on whether Trump’s actions were appropriate or not or criminal or not even though they all seemed to agree that the charges involved Trump trying to enlist the Ukraine to “dig up dirt” on Joe Biden. So, the question in their minds was whether the significance of this rises to the level of impeachment and whether this process will dominate the government’s work. The inherent sense of corruption of all politicians allowed space for many to believe that what Trump did was commonplace, and ultimately several were ready to let Trump off the proverbial hook by characterizing the charges as “politics” without digging deeper to determine if the charges are impeachable or not. Few called it a crime although some mentioned he abused his power.

Common Ground

Voters struggled to find an area where the parties agree on policy – even setting politics aside. This means that parties are seen as standing for distinct points of view. On education, some felt the parties might agree on policies, but not on funding.

When we asked if Congress should be working with Trump, none said they hope their Member of Congress will agree with Trump never or always. When asked what Congress should try to work with Trump to achieve, immigration was the dominant response – and as we heard in the beginning of the conversation, that would mean controlling immigration. That was followed by reference to national security as an area where they hope the President and their Member can find areas of agreement.

Global warming was not cited as a major priority in any group, but when it came up several said it is a concern. None said it is not a concern, and most said the fact that Trump dismissed it as a “Chinese Hoax” (they brought that up) was a problem and an area where they disagree with Trump. The issue never came up among college men.

The Syria situation clearly confused the voters. Several had the sense that we are pulling out of a bad situation. Several believed the U.S. might not be treating the Kurds as well as we should or that we were abandoning them as allies, but nobody described the Syria move as a bad idea or expressed concern for how it might affect U.S. national security. No one mentioned ISIS or Russian expanded influence. The withdrawal was met with mostly lack of concern and certainly with more positivity than negativity. One respondent asked how we can secure the border in Syria, but not our border with Mexico.

¹ Not comprehensive list of the personal negatives: also tyrant, shady, controlling, inappropriate, overbearing, too much, immoral, untruthful, arrogant, ridiculous, egomaniac womanizer, short-tempered, degrading, rude and others. Several referred to use of Twitter in a negative light.

Throughout all of the groups we heard a great deal of confusion about where the parties stand on guns to the extent where we heard comments such as “I think they both want to find some type of resolution to get the guns off the streets” (from a non-college woman). Trump seems to have confused a lot of people about whether he wants to do something on guns – even to the extent that in the college male group some said we could have gotten gun control legislation if the Democrats had not become distracted by impeachment.

There was also a great deal of confusion about where the parties stand on taxes. The GOP was widely described as standing for the wealthy and also as the party that stands for lower taxes for middle-class people. Democrats were widely described as being in favor of tax hikes but it was less clear whose taxes they might hike. The party was variously described as standing for the poor, for the middle class and also secretly being personally elite, so that further muddles the picture. Neither party was viewed by most voters as firmly on their side. The view of one college women was indicative of the situation: “I feel like the middle class; we’re just stomped. Nobody cares. It’s either take care of the poor or tax the rich.”

APPENDIX

Party Brand

Perhaps related to the Trump impressions, when we asked about what animals or vehicles the qualities they associated with the parties, the GOP was associated with toughness and untrustworthiness while Democrats were associated with weaker, if perhaps nicer animals, and also duplicity.

Some key responses when asked for animal or vehicles that they associated with the parties, and why follow.

GOP

- Snake – “sneaky, can kill you”
- Lion – “powerful;” (positive view)
- Lion – “image of Lion King, sitting up on the Pride Rock, looking down at everyone and telling them what to do”
- Lion – “skilled and survivor. Good hunter”
- Lion – “a lot of Republicans like to roar a lot...sometimes they maybe eat their young”
- Lion – “feed off of others. Predators”
- Pig – “greedy;” “gluttonous and they’re greedy, and they want to gorge themselves at the expense of the general public”
- Jackass – “all about themselves”
- Bull – “overbearing;” “stubborn;” “bull-headed...kind of extreme;” “stomp on people...stubborn”
- Tiger – “leader of the pack”
- Sloth – “slow-moving...don’t really do much”
- Giraffe – “they think they’re just bigger and better than everybody else is”
- Bear – “conservative, shy unless provoked”
- Bear – “hoarding. Whatever they can hold onto to, they will do their best to hold onto it and they’re very protective of those things, no matter what anyone says.”
- Wolf – “pack animals. Group together.”
- Coyote – “they’re single. They don’t group together.”
- Monkey – “flinging poop”
- Ostrich – “in the sand, they don’t want to see anything”
- Alligator – “just lays there holding a whole lot of cards until something comes along, and then it pounces on it.”
- Boar – “goes after whatever it wants because it knows it’s got the tusks to pretty much injure whatever it wants”
- Mercedes – “elite class. They strive for big business, big business lobbyists. On the flip side of that, I can say almost the same for the Democrats.”
- Truck – “middle class people”
- Jeep – “hard at work...it carries the military, sort of associate that with America and going to jobs.”
- Van – “you get one person just sort of driving a bunch of people around”
- Kia – “I think they would have two cars, okay, a Kia and a (not public) Maserati”
- Ford Pinto – “simple, bare bones, nothing flashy...you live and hope it won’t blow up”

Democrats

- Bee – “it benefits many other creatures”
- Monkey – “they dance and put on a show”
- Monkey – “carefree, laid-back. Happy.”
- Monkey – “all over the place, half the time. I don’t think they know what they’re really doing.”

- Unicorn – “whimsical”
- Dog – “protecting and loving but if they need to fight, they do what they have to”
- Dog – “trustworthy... for the most part”
- Jackal – “says one thing and does another”
- Koala bear – “caring and cuddly... It’s really nice to be caring, and I mean no offense, but maybe not well-executed”
- Bird – “free... you want to be gay and get married, go ahead”
- Cheetah – “fast. Sometimes in a good way. Sometimes bad”
- Lion – “they would just attack you...there was no middle ground there”
- Turtle – “they have reasons and things, but it’s slower and takes time to get it all done. Like the Obamacare and the healthcare, it took years...”
- Wolverine – “tenacious. They lock onto an issue and they just beat it and beat it until they need another one to jump on to”
- Horse – “tend to not move where you want them to”
- Sheep – “they just follow”
- Sheep – “everyone wants to get in line.... It’s just whatever they can do to draw attention to themselves.”
- Groundhog – “right now they have their heads and everything else underground”
- Doctor Doolittle’s push-pull – “you don’t know which way they really want to go”
- Ant – “everyone is a small part in a large collective”