

THE 2020 ELECTIONS: SIX MONTHS OUT

May 1, 2020

Before anyone ever heard of COVID-19, America was going through the final stages of a political realignment. Then the coronavirus set into motion a tectonic shift, transforming the country in ways none of us could have imagined.

The costs of the pandemic to our society are incalculable. But one thing is certain: The coronavirus will be a defining issue in the 2020 elections – just six months away.

Donald Trump's chances for reelection have diminished significantly due to the outbreak of the COVID-19 virus. His administration's failure to act in January when there were clear signs that the country was facing a pandemic has led to our biggest national crisis since World War II. There are now over one million confirmed coronavirus cases, with more than 60,000 reported deaths. During this same six-week period more than 30 million people have filed for unemployment compensation, while millions more have seen a reduction in their pay. As bad as things may seem now, it could get worse in the next six months if efforts to jumpstart the economy take precedence over containment, or when flu season hits in the fall a few months later.

America was a divided country before COVID-19. Trump's election in 2016 was the culmination of a trend toward tribal politics in our country that began forming in the early 1990's. And early indications are that the fallout from COVID-19 will at least initially exacerbate these divisions rather than begin to bring the country together. This partisan splinter is evident in a recent April 26th Gallup poll, which found that 44% of Republicans say they're ready to return to normal activities right now, compared to only 4% of Democrats.

The question for everyone – including Trump – is what kind of impact the current health and economic crisis will have on the presidential race. Historically, the best predictors of the outcome of a presidential campaign with an incumbent on the ballot are the President's job approval ratings and the state of the economy. The actual mechanics of the campaign matter less unless the candidates go into the final weeks neck-and-neck in the polls.

Working in Trump's favor is the fact that the Electoral College favors Republicans. His campaign will be squarely focused on the math to get to 270 Electoral College votes. There are 24 states with 204 electoral votes that are firmly in the Republican column at this point. Trump's entire campaign is focused on securing the remaining 66 electoral votes. Despite the fact that Trump's presidency has been chaotic, he has a highly organized, well-financed campaign operation that believes it has a clear path to a second term.

For the next 180 days, Trump's campaign will try mightily to make the election about a choice between him and Biden. But given the political landscape, the 2020 Presidential election will likely come down to a referendum on his presidency. The current political environment, which will get worse before it gets better, will make Trump's reelection an uphill battle.

THE STATE OF THE RACE

Prior to the COVID-19 outbreak, Trump entered his reelection campaign in a reasonably good position. The Democratic Party appeared to be facing a long and drawn out primary, with the Democratic Socialist, Bernie Sanders, the likely nominee. Despite the fact that Trump's job approval had never broken 50% during his presidency, he had generally enjoyed high marks on his handling of the economy while overperforming in the states most important to his reelection.

However, in the past 45 days since the outset of COVID-19, Trump's chances of getting reelected have been severely diminished. His administration's mishandling of the virus and the economic devastation that followed have completely reshaped the race in ways that could not have been predicted two months ago. During this same period in early March,

the Democratic Party consolidated behind Joe Biden. This is the earliest that the Democratic party has united behind a nominee in twenty years.

Despite the fact that presidents have historically enjoyed a surge in popularity in times of crisis, Trump's job approval ratings only registered a slight bounce during the onset of the virus before returning to the low to mid 40's where they have been stuck for most of his presidency. It is likely that his mediocre job ratings will face continued downward pressure over the next six months as the country comes to terms with the devastation that the virus has caused to the health and economic well-being of the country.

The failure of the government to properly implement new programs designed to help individuals and small businesses during this crisis will contribute to the headwinds that Trump will likely face in the coming months. There will also be increased interest in assigning blame as the country comes to the realization that a return to some version of normalcy will take much longer than Trump has been promising to the American public.

The six states that were considered battlegrounds before COVID-19 – Arizona, Florida, Michigan, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin – will continue to define the presidential contest. Early polls of registered voters in these states show Biden performing very well against Trump. All these states have suffered significant health and economic consequences from COVID-19, with several being particularly hit hard compared to other states.

According to the Johns Hopkins Coronavirus Resource Center, Michigan, a state Trump carried by less than 11,000 votes in 2016, ranks number seven for positive cases of the virus among all states. Michigan has also suffered economically more than most states in the country. According to the National Tax Foundation 19.8% of workers in Michigan have filed unemployment compensation claims since the outbreak. The virus has also taken a major toll on Pennsylvania residents. The state ranks number six for positive cases of COVID-19 with 16.1% of its workforce filing unemployment compensation claims. Florida is not far behind, ranking eighth in the number of coronavirus cases, with 8.8% of their workers filing for unemployment compensation.

Other battleground states have also suffered significant economic downturns, with unemployment claims as a percentage of the workforce rising to 12.7% in North Carolina and 12% in Wisconsin.

Despite all the challenges the Trump campaign is up against, he still has a lot of positives working in his favor. As the sitting President, he has all the powers that come with the office, including the use of the bully pulpit. Some will argue that he has failed to harness its full power throughout his time in office, but the fact remains that he has an advantage that Biden doesn't and he remains a gifted campaigner who has the skills to dominate in a campaign setting.

Unlike in 2016 when Trump got elected President without a real campaign structure or organization, he has been running for reelection since the day he took office. He has built a highly sophisticated reelection operation with an overwhelming organizational and fundraising advantage over Biden.

TRUMP' STRATEGY FOR REELECTION

Trump's strategy for getting elected in 2016 was built around appealing to his base. He has continued his focus on his base throughout his presidency. He will continue to stick with that approach in his bid to hold on to the White House.

Trump's campaign strategy is quite simple: Tear down Biden, focus on the six battleground states, energize and turn out his base, and make it as difficult as possible for infrequent, anti-Trump voters to turn out in November.

While conventional wisdom is that larger turnout benefits Democrats, that is not necessarily the case in the swing midwestern states. As the Trump campaign has discovered, there were large number of non-voters in these states who would have supported Trump in 2016 if they had turned out.

In a briefing last December for reporters, Trump's campaign laid out their "small county" strategy that targets these Trump voters in the three key midwestern states. In Wisconsin, Trump will put a particular focus on the smallest 48 counties that constitute 22% of the statewide vote, and in Pennsylvania they will target the smallest 45 counties, which make up 20% of the statewide vote.

In the same briefing, as part of their base strategy, they said that they are planning to run a targeted campaign to turn out the 8.8 million people who supported Trump in 2016, but who did not vote in the 2018.

Trump's campaign will have to pay close attention to several subgroups of 2016 supporters who have had a particularly negative reaction to his presidency and have expressed their displeasure at the ballot box for the past three years:

- 1. Non-College Educated White Women:** Support for Trump has begun to erode from non-college educated white women in general, and older ones in particular. While Trump carried these voters by 27% in 2016, they only supported Republican candidates by 14% in 2018. In addition, they have been among the groups hardest hit by COVID-19, which could further accelerate their alienation toward Trump in November.
- 2. Educated White Males:** With the "Trumpification" of the Republican Party complete, educated voters have increasingly become Democrats. It has been reported extensively how educated white women were key to Democrats taking back the House in 2018. The trend among educated voters also extends to white men, who tend to support many of Trump's policies, but are increasingly uncomfortable with Trump's presidency. While Clinton only won 43% of the vote from educated white males in 2016, Republicans only enjoyed a four percent margin with these voters in 2018.
- 3. Suburban Voters:** Most of the Democratic gains in elections since Trump took office were due to a combination of high voter turnout among base Democratic voters, as well as a shift away from Republicans in the suburbs. In the 2018 midterms, of the 69 congressional seats held by Republicans, they were only able to hang on to 32 of these districts. This included Democrats winning seats in the traditional Republican strongholds of South Carolina, Georgia, Texas, Oklahoma, and Kansas. These suburban areas are particularly important in the six key target states.

This will be the first time that Trump has faced these voters since he was elected President.

TRUMP'S ABILITY TO CHANGE THE ARC OF THE PRESIDENTIAL RACE

Given the critical role that Trump's job approval numbers and the state of the economy will play, there's a real question about whether the role of the campaign will affect the arc of the race in a significant way. Past presidential re-election campaign outcomes and extensive academic research suggest that the answer is not much. Since 1980, six presidents have run for reelection: Carter, Reagan, H.W. Bush, Clinton, George W. Bush, and Obama. In elections where the economy was strong and the incumbent's job approval ratings were high, the incumbents (Reagan, Clinton, and Obama) easily won re-election.

Conversely, Carter, and Bush Senior suffered from job approval numbers under 40%, which were tied to a struggling economy. As a result, both suffered crushing reelection defeats.

George W. Bush's successful 2004 re-election is the only campaign that is vaguely analogous to Trump's current position going into the general election. Bush had a 48% job approval number headed into the final days of the election – which is at best the high-water mark for Trump since becoming President.

Significant research backs up these trends and supports the idea that persuasion efforts have little or no impact on the outcome of the general election. This is particularly true in presidential campaigns. The earliest research dates back to 1940, when a post-election analysis found that only eight percent of voters changed their minds about who they were voting for during a campaign.

Alan Abramowitz, an Emory University political scientist, built a "time for a change" election model and accurately predicted the outcome of every Presidential election between 1988 and 2012. His model was based on presidential job approval at the end of June of the election year, the growth rate of real GDP in the second quarter of the election year, and the length of time that the incumbent party had held the White House.

In a report released in 2017, "The minimal persuasive effects of campaign contact in general elections," authors David Brockman and Joshua Kalla conducted a massive study with 49 field experiments and found that efforts to persuade voters had little or no impact in the outcome of the general election. And to the extent that they did have an impact, it was generally long before the actual voting in November.

In many ways, it could be argued that the theory could be applied to Biden's primary campaign where larger forces ultimately played an outsized role in securing the nomination than the strength of his campaign. Throughout the entire Democratic primary season, voters consistently said that the single most important attribute they were looking for in a nominee was their ability to beat Trump in the General Election. By those standards, Biden fit the bill.

None of the traditional metrics of measuring the primary campaigns – whether it was the strength of the organization, fundraising, social media presence, crowd sizes at rallies, or the campaign's momentum – could have presaged that Biden would roll past a field of 24 candidates and wrap up the nomination in a 10-day period in early March.

THE RECKONING THAT TRUMP WILL LIKELY FACE IN NOVEMBER

Trump is the first President in history who has made no effort to be a leader for all of America. Rather than trying to bring the country together, he sought to further inflame our existing divisions.

Trump has based his entire presidency on appealing to his base, focusing on the strength of the economy- which has now collapsed largely due to the failure of his administration to adequately prepare for the pandemic.

Trump's presidency has been exhausting for the American public. The COVID-19 outbreak will likely lead to an even greater yearning for a sense of normalcy in our country. Trump's divisive style has led many to conclude that what the country really needs right now is a competent, calm leader who will bring the country together during what will no doubt be a long road to recovery.

The stronger the desire to remove Trump from the White House, the lower the bar that Biden will need to clear to be elected President.

It is increasingly looking like the country will vote for change by electing Joe Biden, a 77-year old who served 36 years in the U.S. Senate and eight years as Vice President, over Donald Trump, the candidate of the chaotic status quo.

CONGRESSIONAL RACES

Democrats smell blood and appear to have the momentum in congressional races this year. In the most recent March Federal Election Committee filings, Democratic candidates for the U.S. Senate outraised their Republican opponents in races across the country.

It is difficult to overstate the political damage suffered by the Republican Party since Trump became President. In the past three years Republicans have lost 42 House seats (and control of the U.S. House of Representatives), 10 governorships, and well over 450 state legislative seats across the country. Democrats have also taken full control of government in 10 states.

Since Trump was last on the ballot, the realignment of the parties has made it very difficult for Republicans to do well in swing and suburban areas.

There is an increasing fear among congressional Republicans that Trump will take down the party this November. While it was never likely that Republicans would take back the House, their chances of hanging on to the Senate will be directly tied to Trump's fate.

Six months before the election, a lot could happen to change the trajectory of the campaigns in the current volatile political environment. Nevertheless, it looks like it could be a very long year for Republicans running on the Trump ticket.

U.S. Senate

Despite the fact that Republicans have nearly double the seats at risk, 23 to Democrats' 12 seat, Republicans have been favored to hold on to the Senate this November. Declines in Trump's approval, combined with Democrat's strong candidate recruitment and fundraising, have significantly increased Democrats' chances of taking back the Senate this fall.

If Biden is elected President, Democrats will need to pick up a net of three seats to regain control of the Senate. With Alabama's Democrat incumbent Doug Jones likely to lose, Democrats will need to win four seats currently held by Republicans. The most recent Cook Political Report rates eight Republican seats as either "toss ups" or "leaning Republican," with just one Democratic seat leaning Democratic. It ranks the Jones seat as a likely GOP pick up.

There are four Republican seats (Arizona, Colorado, Maine, and North Carolina) that are considered most at risk for Republicans. In all four states, Democratic candidates are leading in the polls. The Democratic challengers also raised more money than their Republican opponents in the first quarter of this year.

In increasingly Democratic Colorado, a state that Secretary Clinton carried by nearly 5% in 2016, former Democratic Governor John Hickenlooper has consistently led incumbent Senator Cory Gardner in polling. The nonpartisan Sabato Crystal Ball has moved this seat to lean Democratic.

Arizona has been trending Democratic since Clinton lost the state by less than 90,000 votes in 2016. In 2018, Democrats picked up a Senate seat, as well as the office of the Secretary of State. By also picking up a Congressional seat, they now control a majority of House members in the state. Mark Kelly, the Democratic nominee for the Senate currently has a nine-point (51% to 42%) lead over appointed Republican incumbent Martha McSally in an April OH Predictive Insights poll. Kelly also has raised more than \$31,000,000, with a \$9,500,000 cash advantage over his Republican opponent.

Maine Republican incumbent Susan Collins is increasingly vulnerable in a state carried by Clinton in 2016. Collins' support for Trump and for Brett Kavanaugh's nomination to the U.S. Supreme Court has significantly cut into her

support among Democratic and Independent voters. In a March Bangor News poll, only 37% approved of the job that Collins is doing as Senator, with 52% disapproving of her performance in office.

Democrats' chances of beating North Carolina Republican incumbent Tom Tillis have improved significantly, with Cal Cunningham securing the Democratic nomination. In a state that Trump carried by less than 200,000 votes in 2016, Democrats made significant gains in the 2018 midterm elections. North Carolina has a high percentage of non-white and educated suburban voters, making it particularly ripe for Democrats with Trump on the ballot this fall. A recent April PPP poll has Cunningham leading Tillis by 47% to 40%.

There are several other races where Democrats have an opportunity to pick up seats. In Montana, popular Democratic Governor Steve Bullock recently entered the race against Republican incumbent Steve Daines.

In Kansas, Republicans are embroiled in an August primary featuring former right-wing Governor Kris Kobach against Congressman Roger Marshall. The winner of the August primary will face State Senator Barbara Bollier, who has \$2,400,000 in the bank as of March 31st.

Democrats also view the Georgia special election this November as an opportunity to pick up a seat. In fact, Republican Senator from Georgia, David Perdue, said this week on a fundraising call that the "State of Georgia is in play. The Democrats have made it that way."

If Trump continues to slide in the polls, even Senate Majority Leader McConnell could be in trouble. He has never been particularly popular in his home state, and the most recent public polling has his approval rating at a dismal 37%. His Democratic opponent outraised him the last public filing.

Republicans' best chance of taking a Democratic seat is in Michigan, where the Democratic incumbent Gary Peters faces Republican John James. An April Fox poll has Peters ahead of James by 46% to 36%.

U.S. House of Representatives

Republicans need to pick up a net of 18 seats to take back the House. There are a number of factors that make it increasingly likely that Democrats will maintain control this November.

Since Trump took office, over 100 Republican members of the House have retired or announced that they are not running for reelection - including 27 this cycle. Compounding these problems for Republicans has been their poor candidate recruitment this cycle, particularly in Michigan, New York, Minnesota, Illinois, and California.

Additionally, the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee (DCCC), the House Majority PAC, and Democratic House candidates all enjoy a significant financial advantage over their Republican counterparts.

The DCCC and its outside super PAC enjoy more than a \$40 million cash on hand advantage over the Republican Congressional Campaign Committee and its outside PAC. Democratic candidates have an even bigger financial advantage. According to Politico, all 42 members targeted by the DCCC's incumbent protection program have over \$1 million cash on hand at the end of March, with all but two having at least twice as much cash on hand as their opponent. With the exception of Congressman Colin Peterson (D-MN), 29 out of the 30 current Democratic members of Congress in districts won by Trump in 2016 have outraised their opponents.

A number of Democratic House pickups in 2018 were in suburban areas that will likely continue to support Democratic candidates this November. In addition, many swing districts are in the blue states of California, Illinois, and New York, which will likely have huge turnouts in a presidential year, making it even more difficult for the GOP to pick up enough seats to take back the House.