

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

The President's Base vs. the Republican Party

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July 18, 2017

The GOP's inability to scrap ObamaCare this week means, among other things, that President Trump will end his first six months in office without a major legislative accomplishment. And one question is how much his supporters care.

Recent Wall Street Journal/NBC News [polling](#) gives the president a 40% job-approval rating among all voters, while 55% disapprove. In [counties](#) Mr. Trump won last year, however, voters still back him by 50% to 46%. Similar results come from a Washington Post/ABC News [survey](#) released Sunday, which found that the president's approval rating had slid to 36% from 42% in April, while his disapproval rating had climbed five points to 58%. Yet among Republican voters over the same period, Mr. Trump's favorability has barely budged and remains above 80%.

Moreover, these polling results reflect voter sentiment since news broke that Donald Trump Jr. met during the campaign with a Russian lawyer who claimed to have dirt on Hillary Clinton — the latest development in the Kremlin “collusion” narrative that has saturated cable news for months. According to the Post/ABC poll, 41% of all voters believe that the Trump campaign helped Russia try to influence the election, but that belief is shared by fewer than 1 in 10 Republican voters.

Six months into the Trump presidency, the media by and large remain unable or unwilling to understand what drives his blue-collar supporters. Journalists continue to prioritize their own political concerns and play down those of the nearly 63 million people who pulled the lever for him in November. In her new book, “White Working Class: Overcoming Class Cluelessness in America,” Joan C. Williams writes that “during an era when wealthy white Americans have learned to sympathetically imagine the lives of the poor, people of color, and LGBTQ people, the white working class has been insulted or ignored during precisely the period when their economic fortunes tanked.”

In an [essay](#) on the rising rate of premature deaths from suicide, opioids and alcohol poisoning primarily among less-educated whites, Carol Graham of the Brookings Institution observes that “poor blacks and Hispanics are much more optimistic about their futures than are poor whites

and, in turn, mortality rates have not increased the same way among minorities.” She adds, “A critical factor is the plight of the white blue-collar worker, for whom hopes for making it to a stable, middle-class life have largely disappeared. Due in large part to technology-driven growth, blue-collar jobs in the traditional primary and secondary industries—such as coal mines and car factories—are gradually disappearing.”

Mr. Trump’s ability to appeal to these voters is the reason he won and the reason his base isn’t abandoning him, with or without a significant legislative victory at the six-month mark. Emily Ekins, a Cato Institute scholar who is part of a politically diverse team of academics and pollsters in the process of analyzing the 2016 election, told me on Monday that Trump supporters are less concerned about his policy agenda and more interested in having someone who understands them occupy the Oval Office. The president’s relentless rhetoric about the “costs” of illegal immigration and free trade, his attacks on outsourcing, and this week’s White House “Made in America” stunt are all of a piece.

“I think there’s a lot of evidence to support the idea that Trump’s main appeal was validating the fears and concerns of a certain segment of Americans who felt they were being ignored by elites in the media, elites in politics, elite Republicans,” said Ms. Ekins. “My reading of the data is that he’s not on a timer or a clock. And it’s not clear to me that his supporters are waiting for him to achieve X, Y and Z policy goals. That’s an example of the press imposing their expectations on voters.”

This is of little comfort to Republicans in Congress. Unlike the president, GOP lawmakers must face voters next year and desperately want some legislative victories to campaign on. For them, a president this far underwater in national polls is cause for concern, given that the party in control of the White House usually drops seats in midterm elections. What the president’s fans and foes alike want to see is economic growth and job creation, and a Bloomberg [poll](#) released Monday showed that a plurality of voters approve of Mr. Trump’s performance in both categories. For now, Mr. Trump can count on his base. The bigger question might be how long he can count on his caucus.