



Mueller report will give Trump a fleeting approval bump

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March 25, 2019

President Trump seems to have won a political victory with the Mueller probe, which cleared him of conspiring with Russians during the 2016 president election, according to Attorney General William Barr.

But the Mueller findings will probably produce a modest and temporary bump in Trump's approval rating, with voters promptly refocusing on issues that concern them most: the economy, health care and education. Like most presidents before him, Trump's reelection prospects will most likely turn on the state of the economy in 2020, and whether voters felt Trump has made them better off in the long run.

The probe by special counsel Robert Mueller into a possible conspiracy between the Trump campaign and Russian operatives has been a matter of intense interest for hard-core partisans and cable news pundits. But ordinary voters care a lot less. In a Gallup poll from last October, voters ranked the Russia investigation last among 12 issues they said they care most about.

Russia investigation is not a big issue for voters

Democrats care a lot more than Republicans. In a February Washington Post poll, 65% of Democrats felt Mueller had already proven some connection between Trump and Russia. Even if all of those Dems change their mind, they're still not likely to become Trump supporters. Only 19% of Republicans felt there was a connection—and almost all Republicans support Trump—so there's not much of a gain for Trump there, either.

Among independents, 43% felt there was a Trump-Russia connection and 44% felt there was not. So some of those 43% could swing from Trump skeptics to Trump backers. That would be a big boost for Trump. About 40% of voters characterize themselves as independent—more than those who say they're either Ds or Rs—so that's a meaningful bloc of voters. But independents tend to be pragmatists who care much more about pocketbook issues than ideology, so Trump may not win them over, either.

Of the Trump supporters who put him in the White House in 2016, about half were true believers likely to stick with Trump no matter what, according to a detailed analysis of voter preferences by Emily Ekins of the Cato Institute. A small group of Trump supporters were

disengaged voters who liked Trump's appeal to the downtrodden but don't follow issues such as the Mueller investigation. That leaves about 40% of Trump voters who may not like Trump personally, but who think his economic policies are helping the country.

President Donald Trump speaks with the media after stepping off Marine One on the South Lawn of the White House, Sunday, March 24, 2019, in Washington. The Justice Department said that special counsel Robert Mueller's investigation did not find evidence that Trump's campaign "conspired or coordinated" with Russia to influence the 2016 presidential election. (AP Photo/Alex Brandon)

More

Higher approval ratings

That leaves the portion of voters likely to swing toward Trump simply because Mueller cleared him of involvement with Russia hard to identify and probably very small. Trump's approval rating before the Mueller conclusion was 42%, in a fivethirtyeight composite of polls. It will probably drift up a little, but the small portion of persuadable voters suggests it probably won't crest 50% or even 45%. And as the Russia probe fades, voters will once again focus on jobs, paychecks, health care costs, their 401(k) plans and Trump's trade dispute with China.

There's also the possibility that the Mueller report—which has only been summarized by Attorney General William Barr and hasn't been fully released—contains other revelations damaging to Trump. Barr conspicuously said in a summary of the report that it “does not exonerate [Trump]” of criminal activity. Democrats in the House of Representatives will undoubtedly keep probing for details that could suggest Trump committed a campaign-finance felony or insurance fraud or tax evasion or some other crime. Democrats could blow it by pushing too hard and making their own inquiries look like the “witch hunt” Trump claims. On the other hand, the Mueller report could be a blessing in disguise for Democrats, if it buries the idea of impeaching Trump, which is likely to be a political loser for them.