

Commentary

Voters in the Age of Affect

Is it Trump's posture, or is it simpler than that?

Noah Rothman

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Though it enjoys a level of political dominance unseen since the 1920s, the Republican Party's agenda is stalled. Yet, despite their failure to repeal and replace ObamaCare, Republicans are damned like Sisyphus to keep trying. Republican office holders must now administer health care's taxes and subsidies, and the rest of the GOP agenda cannot advance without freeing up the revenue dedicated to the administration of ObamaCare. A dysfunctional, one-party Congress led by an unpopular neophyte in the Oval Office should precipitate a backlash among voters. But that outcome is far from certain. Ubiquitous surveys and studies dedicated to uncovering the mystery that is the curious and contradictory Trump voter suggests that this may indeed be a new political epoch.

Nationally, Trump's job-approval rating hovers around 40 percent. By contrast, a recent *Wall Street Journal*/NBC News survey of adults in "Trump country" (e.g. the counties that voted for Donald Trump) found the president enjoying a 50 percent job approval rating. Reflecting on these numbers, *WSJ* columnist Jason Riley observed that the political world may still be operating on a set of assumptions that do not apply to Trump; critically, that voters are transactional and that their support for politicians is contingent upon delivery.

"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," Cato Institute scholar and pollster Emily Ekins told Riley. That assertion is supported by the findings of another survey. A *Washington Post*/ABC News poll taking the temperature of the potential midterm electorate found that registered voters prefer a Democrat-led Congress over Republicans by a staggering 14 points. Democrats shouldn't celebrate too soon, however. The survey also showed that those who "strongly support" Trump are more motivated to vote in 2018 than are those who strongly disapprove of the president, and by a whopping 11-point margin.

This should not be. Voters should be discouraged by legislative failure, internecine feuding, and sprawling legal investigations into a nascent presidency. Voters should be repulsed by a party that sends to Congress members who physically assault journalists. They should be disgusted by a president who describes people on television he dislikes as "psycho" and "bleeding badly from a facelift." They should be unnerved by the fact that this president spent months spinning an

erroneous exculpatory tale about his campaign's links to Russian-affiliated operatives only to pivot to defending those links when the lie was exposed for what it was. But they're not.

This is politics in the age of affect. As Riley observed, the voters who have received disproportionate scrutiny from the press demonstrate time and again that their support for the president is not contingent upon his achievements but his posture. He speaks to their concerns, even if he is ineffectual in his attempts to address them. His speech is not overburdened with pompous language. He does not moralize; he does not lecture; he clings to his character flaws like a security blanket. He eats poorly and his physique reflects it. Trump is no Olympian figure; he gets down into the mud even when he shouldn't.

Republican political professionals are starting to build an identity for their party around Trump's effective affectation. If Republican voters no longer care about the policies that allegedly so vexed them in the Obama years, then they will have to run on the cultural anxiety that Donald Trump so effectively marshals. There may be no better way to accomplish that than to use the political press as a foil.

A striking McClatchy report in June indicated that Republican strategists are preparing to rely heavily on media-bashing to retain control of Congress in 2018. "The press is held with disgust and contempt," said Tobe Berkovitz, an advertising expert who advises state-and district-level campaigns. "Battling the press isn't a bad strategy."

It is, however, possible that political reporters and analysts are reading more into this moment than it deserves. Perhaps Trump's voters are as transactional as anyone, but we're reading the receipts wrong. Maybe Trump's prickly demeanor and bull-headedness is part of his appeal, but not all of it.

The polling suggests that something simpler may be at work here. Only 40 percent approved of Donald Trump's job performance in the latest Bloomberg survey released on Monday, but it also found that 58 percent of respondents reported feeling closer to realizing their career and financial goals (a record high since the question was introduced in early 2013). On the economy and "creating jobs," Donald Trump dramatically outperforms his overall job-approval numbers (46 and 47 percent approval, respectively). The *Washington Post*/ABC News poll confirmed Bloomberg's findings. Despite his abysmal 36 percent job approval rating in that survey, 43 to 41 percent reported approving of Trump's handling of the economy.

Surely some of this is perceptual; the Trump administration's handling of the economy is six months old and characterized not by substantive reforms but by aesthetics and gestures. It is also aspirational. After eight years of recession and a sluggish recovery, Trump-country voters are exhausted by insecurity. The benefits of the Trump years are tangible for Trump voters, even if political journalists see them as illusory. Maybe political analysts are poring over the Trump voter to their own detriment. Maybe it's still the economy, stupid.