

The 2020 Coronavirus Election

Voting begins in less than six weeks

July 22, 2020

Watching Donald Trump running for re-election is like watching an old Austin Powers movie. Both Austin and Trump walk around without a shred of self-awareness, without a clue as to how the world has changed around them. Trump is starring in a rerun of his 2016 campaign in a different country than the one that elected him president.

Trump changed our politics, but the coronavirus changed our country. Both of these accelerated a new era in American politics. 2020 is not 2016.

In an effort to explain away his abysmal poll numbers, Trump makes the case that today he is in the same position that he was in at this time in 2016, and he still won. The problem with that argument is that it's a complete misreading of the 2020 election. In 2016, voters faced a choice between two candidates. In a re-election campaign, voters will see it as a referendum on Trump's presidency – one that will long be remembered as the coronavirus election. At some level Trump grasps that the election is about him, but he mistakenly concludes that he's an asset, not a liability.

The pandemic's unprecedented health and economic crises have played out during the most decisive period in the presidential campaign. If history is our guide, the most critical phase of the campaign has already passed. A look back at past presidential campaigns clearly demonstrate that the sitting President's job approval ratings and the related trendlines at the end of the election year's second quarter are the best predictors of the election outcome. (See slide 8) By that point voters have begun to lock in on their views on the state of the economy and the direction of the country under the leadership of the sitting President.

Since 1980, four of the six incumbent Presidents who sought a second term were reelected. Reagan, Clinton, Bush, and Obama all enjoyed relatively strong approval ratings by the end of the second quarter of the election year, and continued on a positive track up until Election Day. The two incumbents who were defeated in their reelection efforts - Carter and Ford - came out of the second quarter of the fourth year in office with deteriorating job approval numbers that continued to decline up until Election Day. Trump's precipitous decline in support could not have come at a worse time.

Despite the fact that Trump has never once enjoyed the approval of a majority of the country, he continued to receive relatively strong support for his handling of the economy through the first quarter of 2020. However, Trump's failure to contain the coronavirus and its health and economic consequences put his job approval in free fall by the end of the second quarter of this year. The polls show a clear correlation between the spread of the coronavirus and the continued drop in his approval ratings.

Trump can't escape the fact that the biggest economic and health crisis of our time happened under his watch. In the most recent Wall Street Journal/NBC poll, only 20% of Americans thought that the country was on the right track. The disaffection rates closely tracked with Carter's (in 1980) and Bush's (in 1992), when both incumbent Presidents lost. The same holds true of Trump's current job approval ratings, which closely mirror those of Carter and Bush at this point in their presidencies.

This is particularly significant in an election that will see unprecedented numbers of voters cast their ballots well before Election Day. In six short weeks, the first tranche of states will start pre-Election Day voting.

With every day that passes Trump is running out of runway to turn his campaign around. He would be well served by waking up to how much the country – and its voters – have changed, starting with the political re-alignment that began in the early '90s with the Gingrich revolution and Ross Perot's presidential run. The political shift gained steam over the last decade as racial and ethnic diversity grew steadily and reshaped the electorate. The country hit a tipping point in 2018, when scores of disaffected Republicans that included suburban voters and women turned out in droves for Democrats - even without Trump on the ballot. The midterm elections made clear that being a Republican in these times means being a supporter of Trump – and all the baggage that comes with it.

It can't be over-stated how significant it is that Trump has never faced the voters since the completion of the political re-alignment. Yet, he need look no further than the 2018 mid-term elections to understand the implications on the Republican Party. During Trump's presidency Republicans lost control of the House of Representatives after suffering the loss of 42 congressional seats, and gave up 10 governorships and over 450 state legislative seats.

Trump's chaotic presidency has pushed women, educated, and suburban voters, and increasingly older voters into the arms of Democrats. Millennials and people of color continue to oppose Trump in record high numbers.

While support for Trump has declined across the board with all demographic groups, his decline in support from women, college-educated, and suburban voters is particularly pronounced. According to the July 12th WSJ/NBC poll, Biden is now 23 points ahead of Trump with women voters, which is a 10-point increase from Clinton's margin in 2016. Biden's 28-point gap over Trump with white college women is 21 points higher than Clinton's seven-point advantage in 2016. Biden is now carrying white college men by two points, which is a 16-point increase from Clinton's performance in 2016.

Suburban geographic areas, which tend to have a larger percentage of educated voters, were key to Democrats' success in 2018, and it's very likely that this trend will continue in this year's presidential contest. Biden now leads Trump by six points in the suburbs - a 10-point swing from the 2016 election. (See slide 11)

The political realignment means that the fast-growing states in the south and southwest are the new battlegrounds. Eligible voters in these states tend to be increasingly suburban, with large numbers of young and non-white voters - the very groups who Trump has alienated the most with his backward-looking President.

As Trump heads into the last stretch of his campaign, his opportunities to change the trajectory are limited. The importance of events like the vice-presidential running mate's selection, the party conventions, and the presidential debates have had a limited impact on voters' decision-making for President. In the past 70 years the only time that a vice presidential nominee impacted the outcome of a presidential election was in 1960 when John Kennedy put Lyndon Johnson on the ticket. The last political convention that significantly affected the outcome of a presidential election was in 1968 following the riots at the Democratic convention in Chicago. The last debate that reshaped the outcome of the race was in 1976 when Gerald Ford mistakenly said that Eastern Europe was not controlled by the Soviet Union.

What's more, the coronavirus will put the growing trend of early voting and vote-by-mail on steroids. Even before the pandemic Americans had increasingly opted to vote by absentee ballot and vote-by-mail long before Election Day. In 2016 and 2018 over 40% of voters cast their ballot early, which is double the amount from 20 years earlier. (See slide 14) The coronavirus outbreak and the Trump administration's failure to contain it has greatly accelerated Americans' desire to vote remotely in order to avoid the health risks of voting in person.

A July 10th CBS/YOUGOV poll conducted in three key battleground states – Arizona, Florida, and Texas – adds further evidence to the conclusion that the vast majority of Americans will vote before Election Day. In Texas 78% of the respondents indicated that they plan to vote before Election Day. In Arizona 76% plan to vote early, and in Florida 73%.

There are now five states (Oregon, Washington, Colorado, Utah, and Hawaii) that only allow vote-by-mail with no in-person Election Day voting. As the virus continues to spread largely unabated, 46 states (24 Democratic and 22 Republican) have made the decision to offer vote-by-mail. In at least six swing states - Arizona, Georgia, Iowa, Michigan, Ohio, and Wisconsin - all registered voters will receive an absentee ballot application request form.

As COVID-19 infection rates continue to climb, we should expect more states to encourage people to vote remotely, and earlier, than ever before. The early voting period kicks off in North Carolina on September 4th, followed by Pennsylvania on September 14th and Michigan on September 19th and at least 10 other states – weeks before the first presidential debate on September 29th. By October 8th, another large batch of states will start voting at least a week before the second presidential debate on October 15th. And by the time the final debate is held on October 22nd, over half of the country will likely have already voted. (See slide 15)

There are some aspects of the 2016 race that do shed some further light on the uphill battle Trump faces. According to 2016 exit polls, of the 18% of voters who disliked both candidates, Trump carried this group by 17 points. He carried these voters by between 21% to 37% in the three states – Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin – that put him over the top in 2016. Fast forward to now, when a late June Monmouth poll had Biden with a commanding 34-point lead among the voters who disliked both Trump and Clinton in 2016. Trump is also performing poorly with voters who are currently undecided in this year's election. In a July 21st Reuter's/Ipsos poll, Biden has a 22-point lead over Trump with undecided voters, 70% of whom disapprove of Trump's performance in office.

The 2016 exit polls also revealed that Trump benefited from the seven million votes that were cast in support of third, fourth, and fifth party candidates. When the exit polls forced these voters to make a choice between Trump and Clinton, a majority of them supported Hillary Clinton.

Trump was also aided by facing an opponent who was essentially running for an Obama third term. The country has never been comfortable allowing one political party to control the White House for an extended period of time. In fact, the only time in the past 70 years that one party controlled the White House for 12 years in a row is when Bush was elected in 1988, which amounted to the equivalent of a Reagan third term. Trump's victory was not a mandate for his policies as much as a rejection of Clinton and the lack of desire to give the Democrats 12 straight years in the White House. In 2016, voters considered Trump an agent for change. This year he is running to maintain the status quo. That's not a good place to be in a country that has voted for change in six of the last seven elections.

To almost everyone, it's abundantly clear that the world is a vastly different place than it was just a few years ago. Like Austin Powers, Trump hasn't been able to fully grasp how much the world around him has changed. He still thinks that his path to victory in 2020 is to double down on the 2016 version of himself. By the time Trump launches his October surprise, the majority of the country will have already voted.