Donald Trump and the 2018 Midterm Elections

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Abstract

Long-term political trends and the public's reaction to Donald Trump's surreal presidency are converging to make the 2018 midterm elections the most sweeping and divisive national referendum on any administration at least since the Great Depression. These same factors leave the ultimate outcome—party control of the House and Senate— very much in doubt. In this paper, I review the major trends that have gradually transformed midterm elections in to highly nationalized, president-centered events, present data locating the Trump presidency in these currents, document Trump's dominance of the Republican Party base, review the present state of electoral play, and consider some implications of alternative outcomes for the future of American politics and the Republican and Democratic parties.

Long-term political trends and the public's reaction to Donald Trump's surreal presidency are converging to make the 2018 midterm elections the most sweeping and divisive national referendum on any administration at least since the Great Depression. These same factors leave the ultimate outcome—party control of the House and Senate—very much in doubt. Like each new midterm, 2018 will provide an out-of-sample test of standard theories of midterm voting. It will also tell us whether Trump can disrupt midterm electoral politics as he has so many other aspects of American political life. In this paper, I review the major trends that have gradually transformed midterm elections in to highly nationalized, president-centered events, present data locating the Trump presidency in these currents, document Trump's dominance of the Republican Party base, review the present state of electoral play, and consider some implications of alternative outcomes for the future of American politics and the Republican and Democratic parties.

I. Trends Shaping Electoral Politics in 2018

1. A Deeply Divided Electorate

It is no secret that partisan divisions in the U.S. have been widening for decades, most notably within the political class (McCarty, Poole and Rosenthal 2006; Theriault 2008) but also, albeit to a lesser extent, among ordinary citizens. As partisan identities, ideological leanings, and issues preferences have moved into closer alignment, individuals' political attitudes have become more internally consistent and more distinct from those of partisans on the other side (Abramowitz 2010; Fiorina and Adams 2009; Levendusky 2009; Fiorina, Adams, and Pope 2006; Abrams and Fiorina 2015; Campbell 2016; Jacobson 2000, 2012; Bartels 2002; Pew 2017.). Affective reactions to parties and candidates have diverged, largely because of partisans' growing antipathy toward the other party's adherents and leaders (Abramowitz and Webster 2016, Pew 2014, 2016; Iyengar and Westwood 2015). Widening demographic differences between the parties' identifiers—differences of race, age, sex, religiosity, education, and marital status—have also contributed to partisan "tribalism" (Shea 2013, Jacobson 2017a), as has the increasing partisan homogeneity of the states and districts (Bishop 2008; Stonecash, Brewer, and Mariani 2003).

Presidential job performance ratings provide one familiar gauge of the widening party divide (Jacobson 2019, Figure 9.1). Table 1 displays the partisan trends in Gallup's presidential approval series, focused apropos this paper on midterm election years. The partisan gap has varied over time, but the long-term trend is clearly upward. It reached a then-record level of around 70 percentage points in the 2006-2010-2014 midterm years but is up another eight points in 2018. The gap derives from opinions offered by both the president's and rival partisans, but the latter have contributed more to its recent growth. Opposition partisans have rated the president much lower since 2006, with Trump's ratings among Democrats so far in 2018 the lowest ever for a president in a midterm year. Republicans, in stark contrast, approve of Trump's performance at a very high rate, exceeded among a president's partisans only by Eisenhower (1954), Reagan (1986), Clinton (1998), and Bush (2002). By this measure, the 2018 midterm will feature the most polarized electorate on record.

**Table 1. Presidential Approval in Midterm Election Years, 1946-2018**

	President's Partisans	*Rival Partisans*	*Difference*	*Number of Polls*
1946	46.7	24.1	22.6	3
1950	57.7	17.6	40.1	13
1954	88.1	55.7	32.4	16
1958	82.1	36.7	45.4	16
1962	86.0	48.7	37.3	13
1966	66.5	32.2	34.3	17
1970	82.1	41.3	40.8	18
1974	70.5	46.0	24.5	8
1978	57.1	28.3	28.8	25
1982	79.2	23.3	55.9	19
1986	86.8	41.6	45.2	13
1990	85.4	54.2	31.2	29
1994	74.3	19.5	54.8	37
1998	87.8	36.3	51.5	41
2002	94.9	53.1	41.8	45
2006	79.9	9.4	70.5	30
2010	81.7	12.4	69.3	50
2014	79.0	9.1	69.9	38
2018	86.4	8.1	78.3	32

Note: The data for 1974 include only Ford's presidency.
Source: Gallup Polls

2. Increasing Party Loyalty

The growing influence of partisanship observed in the presidential approval data also shows up in data on party loyalty in congressional elections. Since bottoming out in the mid-70 percent range in the 1970s and 1980s, party loyalty in House, Senate, and presidential elections has grown steadily, reaching post-war record highs of about 90 percent during the past decade according to ANES data (Jacobson and Carson 2016, Figure 5.3; Jacobson 2019, Figures 8.5 and 8.6). Pre-election polls show a parallel decline and then steady rise in party loyalty in responses to the generic preference question asking which party's candidate the respondent would vote for or would prefer to win if the election were held today (Figure 1).[1] Generic polls naturally elicit high levels of expressed party loyalty; without reference to actual candidates and campaigns, the

Figure 1 Party Loyalty in Midterm Generic House Election Polls, 1946-2018

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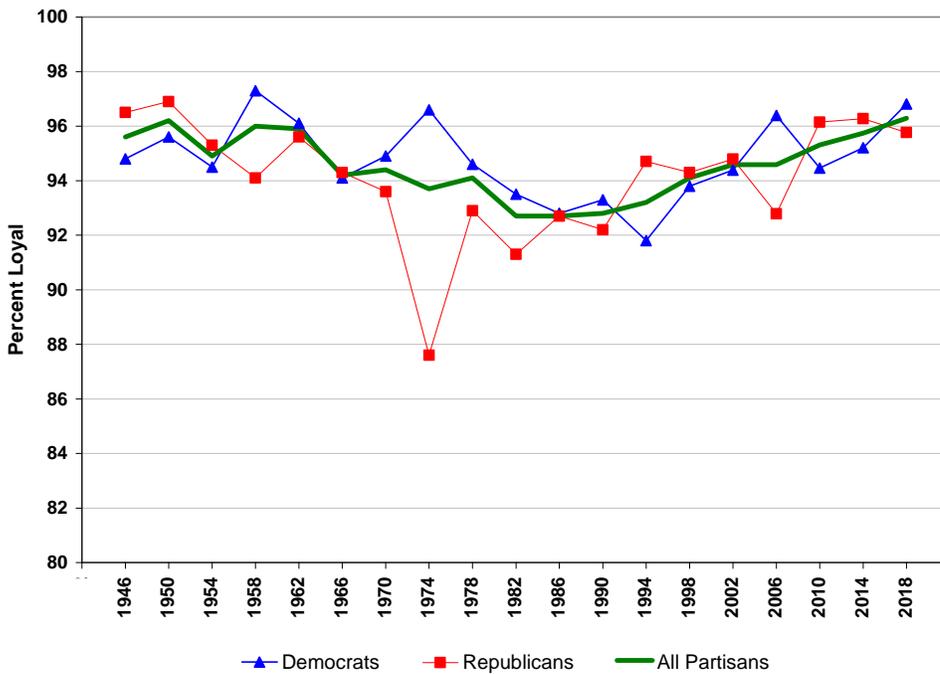
[1] Data are from Gallup, CBS News/*New York Times*, ABC News/*Washington Post*, NBC News/*Wall Street Journal*, CNN, Marist, Quinnipiac, Newsweek, Pew, Fox News, GW Battleground, Monmouth, *Time*, *Los Angeles Times*, and *Economist*/YouGov polls, acquired from the Roper Center, Pollingreport.com, and the sponsors' websites. The question wording of these surveys varies (some ask about the vote, some about which party the respondent wants to win in the congressional election in the district or state, some about which party they want to control Congress); for this figure, I combine them all. The number of available surveys ranges from 24 (Truman) to 195 (Obama).

default option is one's own declared side.[2] Generic polls therefore always report higher rates of party loyalty than the ANES studies, but they show the same pattern of a decline and then revival of party loyalty over the postwar period.

The differing rates of loyalty among partisans in the generic polls anticipate party fortunes in November quite accurately. Democrats enjoyed a substantial loyalty advantage in their best post-war midterms—1958, 1974, and 2006 (when they gained 48, 48, and 30 seats, respectively), while Republicans held the advantage in 1946, 1950, 1994, and 2010 (gaining 55, 28, 54, and 63 seats, respectively).[3] The numbers for 2018 so far show only a small Democratic advantage, with more than 96 percent of all partisans who state a choice favoring their own party's candidate. This average exceeds (by a tiny margin) the high levels of party loyalty expressed in the 1950s and early 1960s, but the earlier levels are almost certainly inflated by the survey instrument; all of the data from this period are from Gallup Polls, which at the time routinely asked the party identification and congressional preference questions in very close proximity, maximizing the influence of one response on the other.[4] In any case, the level of party loyalty exhibited in generic polls in 2018 is by historical standards extraordinarily high, reflecting the reluctance of voters to consider crossing party lines at a time of deep partisan division. Democrats display the very high level of party loyalty we would expect in a Democratic "wave" year, but Republicans are nearly as loyal in generic polls as there were in 2010 and 2014, much more so than in earlier Democratic "wave" years.

3. The Growing Congruence of Presidential Approval with the Vote Choice

In conjunction with widening partisan differences in both presidential approval and generic House vote, the congruence between evaluations of the president and the generic vote—for the president's party's candidate if approving, for the other party's if disapproving—has also been growing (Figure 2). Congruence in pre-election polls averaged about 70 percent from the '40s through the 1970s, 74 percent in the 1980s and

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[2] The data in Figure 1 are for respondents who express a choice; omitting the undecideds provides a cleaner comparison because of the substantial house effects in their treatment and proportions in the samples.
[3] The only midterm with a large partisan swing not anticipated by the generic polls was 1966, when Republicans were recovering from their disastrous 1964 performance.
[4] The order of the two questions varied; during this period, Gallup also usually asked who the respondent wanted to win in their state or district rather than who they planned to support; the pattern of responses indicates that variations in question wording made no significant difference.

1990s, and 82 percent in the first four midterms of this century (86 percent of the anomalous 2002 case is omitted).   So far in 2018, the average stands at an all-time high of 93 percent.

Figure 2 Congruence between Presidential Approval and the House Vote Preference in Generic Midterm Election Polls, 1946-2018

● Pre-Election Polls   □ Post-Election Polls
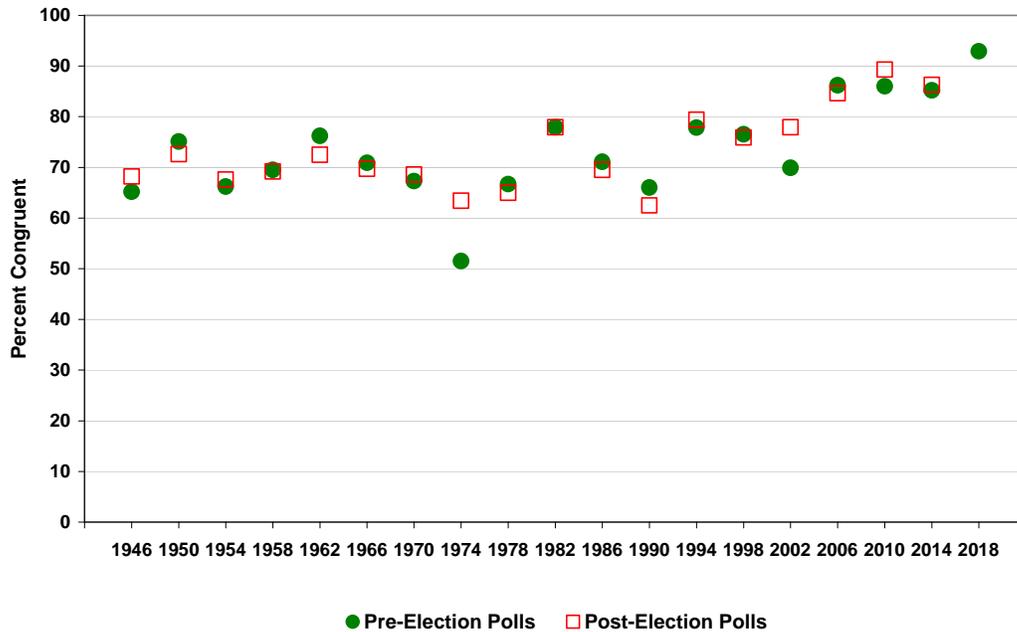
The level of congruence in the pre-election generic polls usually predicts the level of congruence reported by voters in post election surveys very accurately. The two obvious exceptions, 1974 and 2002, also have obvious explanations. In 1974, Gerald Ford enjoyed very high approval ratings among Democrats (and everyone else) after becoming president following Richard Nixon's August resignation, but most Democrats who approved of Ford had no intention of forgetting Nixon and Watergate on election day (see the entry for 1974 in Figure 1). By November Ford, having pardoned Nixon, was down more than 30 points from his early peak among Democrats, so congruity in post-election polls was considerably higher than in pre-election polls. In the first half of 2002, George W. Bush continued to enjoy the huge rally in popular approval that followed 9/11 and his forceful response the crisis, with Democrats giving him very high marks early in the year without necessarily transferring that affection to other Republicans; as Democrats' approval of Bush fell from about 71 percent in January to

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about 40 percent in November, congruence increased. Omitting these two exceptions, the relationship between pre- and post-election congruence has been very strong (r=.96). A regression equation estimating the latter from the former predicts a record level of congruence—93.1 percent—among voters in 2018.[5]

As might be expected from the data in Figure 2, aggregate House vote intentions as measured by generic polls vary systematically with aggregate opinions of the president's job performance. Table 2 reports estimates from regressing the net generic House preferences (president's party's share minus the rival party's share, using all available measures) on presidential approval in polls taken during postwar administrations (for Trump, the first 20 months). According to the regression coefficients, presidential approval always exerts a significant influence on the generic

Table 2   Net Generic Preference for the President's Party or Candidate as a Function of Presidential Approval

	Constant	S.E.	Coefficient	S.E.	Adjusted R^2	N
Truman	-13.8*	5.2	.46**	.14	.24	32
Eisenhower	-54.4***	6.1	.62***	.09	.30	97
Kennedy	-7.8	8.7	.42**	.13	.33	21
Johnson	-7.4	4.4	.48***	.08	.52	35
Nixon[a]	-42.1***	2.3	.48***	.05	.85	21
Carter	11.8*	4.7	.22*	.11	.38	31
Reagan	-42.3***	3.2	.56***	.06	.70	51
GHW Bush	-18.4***	2.3	.21**	.04	.48	46
Clinton	-11.6***	2.4	.27***	.04	.29	209
GW Bush	-21.1***	1.0	.29***	.02	.56	222
Obama	-23.0***	2.9	.50***	.06	.29	302
Trump	-42.0***	5.0	.81***	.13	.35	93

[a] There are too few surveys for 1974 after Ford became president for analysis (N=5).
Note: The dependent variable is the percentage of respondents with a preference who would vote for the president's party's candidate or wants the party to win either nationally or in the respondent's state or district minus the percentage favoring the rival party; the independent variable is the proportion of approving of the president's job performance; estimated with survey sponsor fixed effects for elections after 1974.
Source: Gallup Polls through 1974; there after Gallup, ABC News/*Washington Post*, CBS News/*New York Times,* NBC News/*Wall Street Journal*, CNN, Fox News, Marist, Quinnipiac, Monmouth University, Battleground, *Time* and Democracy Corps polls; data are from the Roper Center, pollingreport.com, and the poll sponsors websites.

[†]p<.10; *p<.05, **p<.01, ***p<.001.

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[5] The equation is -2.9 (s.e. 5.7) + 1.03 (s.e. 0.08), adjusted R^2 = .92, N=16.

vote, but variations in Trump's ratings have so far had a stronger influence than those of any predecessor, with Eisenhower as a rather surprising runner-up. More precise comparisons with Trump's three most recent predecessors, focusing exclusively on the vote choice question and incorporating data from the weekly *Economist*/YouGov polls appear, with partisan breakdowns, in Table 3.[6] Trump's ratings have had the largest impact on the candidate preference of each partisan subgroup as well as on the electorate as a whole. The much steeper slopes for Trump in Tables 2 and 3 may be partly an artifact of his comparatively narrow approval range, so we cannot be sure it would not

Table 3. Net Generic Vote for President's Party's Candidate as a Function of Presidential Approval

	Constant	S.E.	Coefficient	S.E.	Adjusted R^2	N
Clinton	-6.4	3.3	.20***	.06	.18	91
Democrats	45.1***	5.6	.39***	.07	.38	89
Independents	0.1	4.7	.01	.09	.02	89
Republicans	-80.5***	1.7	.04	.06	.10	89
G.W. Bush	-19.7***	1.0	.26***	.02	.52	230
Democrats	-86.2***	0.4	.14***	.01	.56	183
Independents	-22.0***	1.4	.25***	.03	.33	183
Republicans	68.8***	2.9	.12***	.04	.30	183
Obama	-23.6***	3.0	.52***	.06	.29	297
Democrats	.68.7***	5.5	.17*	.07	.39	169
Independents	-18.8***	2.9	.30***	.07	.19	169
Republicans	-88.9***	0.8	.30***	.06	.29	169
Trump	-41.0***	4.2	.68***	.11	.43	125
Democrats	-93.1***	1.3	.62***	.13	.57	122
Independents	-34.1***	4.3	.89***	.12	.64	121
Republicans	44.8***	7.4	.48***	.09	.49	122

Note: The dependent variable is the percentage of respondents with a preference who would vote for the president's party's candidate minus the percentage who would vote for the rival party's candidates; the independent variable is the proportion of approving of the president's job performance; estimated with survey sponsor fixed effects.
Source: Fox News, Marist, CNN, ABC News/*Washington Post*, Monmouth University, *Economist/*YouGov, and Battleground polls (Trump) and Jacobson 2019, Table 8.2 (other administrations).

p<.10; *p<.05, **p<.01, ***p<.001.

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[6] I am obliged to Doug Rivers for making these surveys available to me.

flatten out were that range to broaden.[7] Still, the results suggest that reactions to Trump will have a stronger effect on the midterm House vote than have reactions to previous presidents.

The generic Senate preference is asked much less frequently than the generic House preference, but when it is, partisan responses are virtually identical to those regarding House elections, and Senate data match the House data in Figure 2 quite closely (Jacobson 2019, Figure 8.10).   During the current midterm cycle, the Quinnipiac Poll has asked voters about their preferences for party control of the House and Senate separately in 21 of their surveys. The mean net Republican preference (percent Republican minus percent Democrat) is -10.7 points for the Senate, -10.8 points for the House. The two are correlated across the surveys at .98, and the coefficients from regressing them on Trump approval are similar, 1.04 (s.e., .21, p<.001) for the House and 1.15 (s.e., .23, p<.001) for the Senate.

4. Nationalized Elections

As midterm elections have become more cohesively partisan and president-centered, the balance of local and national influences on voting has naturally shifted toward the national. One way to gauge electoral nationalization is to compute the standard deviation of the major-party vote swing from the previous election across stable, contested districts; the smaller the standard deviation, the more uniform the swing across districts, and thus the more nationalized the election. The 2014 midterm swing was the most uniform for the entire postwar period, with at standard deviation (4.3 points) less than half the size of its average for the 1970s and 1980s (Jacobson 2015, 10). The swing's standard deviation was also at a postwar low for a presidential election year in 2016 (4.5 points).   A second indicator of increasing nationalization, which also points to the growing centrality of the president to this trend, is the correlation between the state or district presidential vote two years prior and the midterm vote. This correlation has increased steeply since the 1970s, reaching record levels of .94 and .88, respectively, in the 2014 House and Senate elections (Jacobson and Carson 2016, 217).

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[7] Trump's approval rating has so far varied over a range of only 14 points, with a standard deviation of 2.6 points; the comparable numbers for Clinton were 26 and 6.2, for Bush 67 and 16.3, and for Obama, 30 and 4.8.

II. The Trump Effect

The data presented so far suggest that 2018 will see a further extension of polarized, nationalized, and president-centered midterm electoral politics. The prime reason is of course Donald Trump, whose command of the national stage, combined with the public's sharply divergent responses to his words and actions, has reinforced all of these trends. As documented in Table 1, Trump is easily the most polarizing president yet observed in a midterm year, maintaining the pattern of responses to his performance that has prevailed since he took office. Trump began his presidency with a record partisan gap in approval ratings, a product of record lows among rival partisans; he also received the lowest initial ratings from independents and from all respondents combined of any newly elected president (Jacobson 2018). Opinions of his performance since then have remained unusually stable, with modest declines in approval and then equally modest increases among partisans of all stripes (Figure 3). As of August 2018, Trump's popular standing was about where it was during his first few months in the White House, comparatively low and extremely polarized.

Figure 3 Approval of Trump's Job Performance, January 2017- August 2018
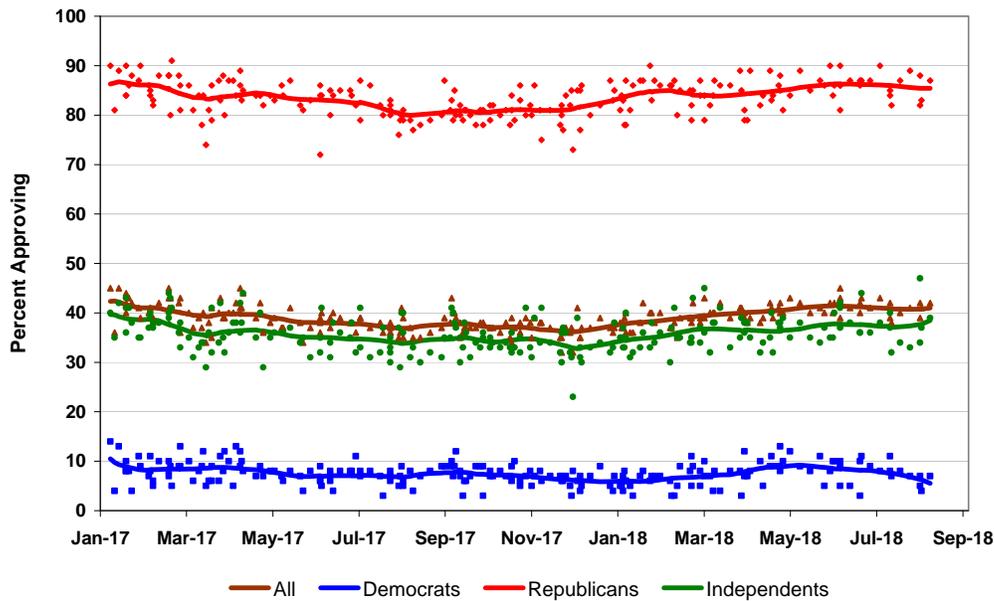
The stability in popular opinions of Trump is no mystery, for his conduct as president has given most people no reason to revise what they thought of him as a candidate. Democrats and others appalled by his character and objectives before the election have seen their worst expectations confirmed. Trump has mounted a root and branch assault on Obama's entire legacy (on health care, environmental protection, financial regulation, taxes, fiscal policy, immigration, and foreign trade). The trafficking in white identity politics, xenophobia, racism, and misogyny that characterized Trump's campaign has continued unabated. He continues to launch crude tirades against his opponents and critics in politics and the media and to target Hillary Clinton as if the election were not history (Bump 2017, Schallhorn 2018). Trolling Democrats by blaming them for his own policy disasters (e.g, splitting young children from immigrant parents at the border) is standard practice. Any institution that declines to do Trump's bidding—the judiciary, the FBI, the Department of Justice, the intelligence services, at times the congressional Republican Party, and always the news media—finds its legitimacy under attack. Crowning it all is Trump's unending stream of transparent, self-serving lies.[8] It is no mystery, then, why Democrats not only disapprove of Trump's job performance in overwhelming numbers, but do so "strongly" when given the option. For example, in the 13 Quinnipiac Polls of registered voters taken so far in 2018, an average of 93 percent of Democrats say they disapprove of Trump's performance, 86 percent strongly.[9]

Trump has also generally met the expectations of the Republicans who voted for him, and they, like Democrats, also regard him pretty much as they did before he was elected. Almost everything has said or done as president has catered exclusively to the coalition that elected him, its white populist component in particular but also to small government and religious conservatives, (Jacobson 2017a, 2017b, 2018). Most of his supporters evidently share his opinions and sensibilities, enjoy his in-your-face responses to critics and disdain for "political correctness," and cheer his anti-Muslim and anti-immigrant projects and "America First" rhetoric and policy initiatives. Conservative Christians celebrate his Supreme Court nominations and defense of "religious freedom"

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[8] By August 1, 2018, the count of Trump's false or misleading statements compiled by the *Washington Post* had risen above 4,200, an average of 7.6 per day (Kessler, Rizzo, and Kelley 2018)

[9] The Quinnipiac data may be found at https://poll.qu.edu/; data are through mid August poll.

as well as the transfer of the American embassy in Israel to Jerusalem. Conventional small-government and corporate Republicans, if less comfortable with Trump's rhetoric and style than his blue-collar enthusiasts and more doubtful about his protectionist moves, nonetheless appreciate his assaults on Obama's regulatory legacy and success in cutting taxes on corporations and the wealthy. Just as doubts about Trump's suitability for the office did not prevent them from voting for him in 2016 (Jacobson 2017b), many ordinary Republicans, like most of their elected leaders, have so far accepted Trump's sometimes cringe-worthy behavior as a tolerable price for his support of their policy goals. Republicans are not quite as unanimous as Democrats in their opinions of Trump (an average of 84 percent in the Quinnipiac polls approve of his performance), but large majorities of them approve strongly (an average of 69 percent), contributing to an unprecedented level of polarization on this dimension, with more than three quarters of respondents expressing strong opinions, pro or con, of the president.

In short, Trump's conduct of his presidency so far has entrenched and deepened the political fault lines exposed by the 2016 election (Sides, Tesler, and Vavreck 2018) while changing remarkably few minds. The weekly *Economist*/YouGov surveys ask respondents how they voted in 2016; self-professed Trump and Hillary Clinton voters remain almost as divided in their opinions of Trump as the were on election day. In the 31 surveys taken in the first eight months of 2018, 91 percent of Trump's voters approved of his performance (62 percent strongly), while 7 percent disapproved; 4 percent of Clinton's voters approved, while 93 disapproved (84 percent strongly).[10]   The extreme data points for 2018 in Table 1 and Figures 1 and 2 thus reflect Trump's singular flair for provoking unusually intense and sustained reactions from both opponents and supporters.

The Republican Party Becomes Trump's Party

Trump's words and deeds easily explain why ordinary Democrats condemn his job performance, although their attitudes also echo the overwhelmingly anti-Trump consensus expressed by Democratic leaders and the mainstream or left-leaning commentariat. Ordinary Republicans, in contrast, have stuck with Trump despite earnest criticism from prominent figures in their own camp who have variously denounced him

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[10] YouGov data are at https://today.yougov.com/topics/overview/survey-results.

for dishonesty, incompetence, instability, ignorance, bigotry, scorn for allies, and affinity for dictators.[11] Just as the denunciations of Trump by Republican leaders and conservative pundits before the 2016 election did nothing to deter Republicans from voting for him, post-election criticism from the same quarters has done nothing to dampen Trump's popularity among ordinary Republicans—who in any case can readily find reassurance, if needed, in the unfailing support for Trump delivered by his admirers on their preferred media outlet, Fox News. If asked to chose, most Republicans put Trump ahead of his party. They invariably rate his favorability higher than that of the Republican Party generally or of its congressional wing and its leaders in particular, and a solid majority side with Trump when conflicts with other Republican politicians arise (Jacobson 2018). Asked in the July, 2018, NBC News/*Wall Street Journal* survey, "Do you consider yourself to be more of a supporter of Donald Trump or more of a supporter of the Republican Party?" 55 percent of Republicans chose Trump, 35 percent, the party; these results are typical.[12]

Insofar as Trump has been vying with more conventional Republicans and conservatives for the hearts and minds of Republican voters, he is the hands-down winner. Congressional Republicans have implicitly acknowledged that victory by their reluctance to criticize even his most flagrant assaults on American institutions, norms, and allies. The handful of exceptions is telling. Senators John McCain, Bob Corker, and Jeff Flake, expressing sentiments thought to be fairly widespread among congressional Republicans (Mascaro 2017), have on occasion loudly and sometimes eloquently denounced Trump's character, behavior, and governance. But they could be candid only because they were not seeking reelection. McCain's health precluded any future run, but Corker and Flake chose to end their careers rather than face almost certain defeat in primaries as the price of speaking out against Trump. They read their party accurately.

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[11] His detractors have included such conservative luminaries as Erick Erickson, George Will, Jonah Goldberg, the late Charles Krauthammer, Jennifer Rubin, Ross Douthat, David Brooks, John Podhoretz, Peggy Noonan, William Kristol, and Max Boot.

[12] This survey had asked the question seven times previously, with an average of 55 percent choosing Trump, 40 percent the Republican Party; see https://www.wsj.com/public/resources/documents/NBCWSJJulyPoll.pdf?mod=article_inline, accessed July 23, 2018.

Among Republicans the October 29-31, 2017 *Economist*/YouGov survey, Trump's net favorability rating was +65, while McCain's was -36, Corker's, -32, and Flake's, -37.[13]

The danger of breaking with Trump while facing a Republican primary electorate was underlined by the defeat of incumbent Republican representative Mark Sanford (SC 1), who had opposed Trump's tariffs on steel and aluminum, wanted to see his tax returns, and accused him of "fanning the flames of intolerance" (Hohmann 2018). Sanford lost to enthusiastic Trump supporter Katie Arrington, who received the last-minute endorsement from Trump in district he had carried with 57 percent of the vote. "We are the party of President Donald J. Trump," Arrington declared in her victory speech (Hohmann 2018). Indeed. A striking sign of Trump's ability to shape ordinary Republicans' thinking was their responses to questions about his administration's callous policy, since rescinded if not yet fully rectified, of separating even very young children from parents arrested at the border for crossing illegally. In precisely the same time frame (June 14-17, 2018), the CBS News and CNN polls asked opinions about the policy. The CBS question did not mention Trump, and only 36 percent of Republicans said such a policy was acceptable, 39 percent said it was not. The CNN question specified it as Trump's policy, and 58 percent of Republicans said they approved of it, 38 percent did not.[14] Later, in the June 27-July 1 Quinnipiac poll, 71 percent of Republicans said they did not consider separating young children from their parents at the border a violation of

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[13] Net favorability is the proportion expressing a favorable opinion minus the proportion expressing an unfavorable opinion; Democrats, in contrast, expressed net favorable opinions of all three; see https://today.yougov.com/news/2017/11/01/flake-corker-mccain-losing-ground-republicans/, accessed November 1, 2017. Eight months later, McCain and Flake were even more unpopular among Republicans in their home state of Arizona; in the June, 2018, CBS News tracking poll of the state, McCain's net favorability among Republicans stood at -48, Flake's, -55. In the same survey, 86 percent of Republicans said approved of Trump's performance, And again, McCain and Flake were viewed much more favorably by Democrats than Republicans; see https://www.cbsnews.com/news/cbs-news-battleground-tracker-arizona-florida-texas-immigration-and-key-senate-races/, accessed June 29, 2018.
[14] The CBS wording was, "As you may know, when some families trying to enter the U.S. illegally at the southern border have been caught and detained, U.S. officials have separated parents from their children. Do you think this separation of parents and children is acceptable, or unacceptable, or haven't you heard enough about it to say?" The CNN wording was, "As you may know, the Trump administration has changed its policy toward immigrants who are detained at the U.S. border for coming into the country illegally. More of them are being criminally charged and sent to jail even if their children are with them and, as a result, there has been a significant increase in the number of young children who have been separated from their parents at the border and placed in government facilities. In general, do you approve or disapprove of this?" See http://www.pollingreport.com/immigration.htm.

human rights. On all of these questions 90 percent or more of Democrats took the opposite position, as did 60 to 68 percent of independents.

In this and in other matters, Trump's command of the Republican base is truly impressive. Not only do majorities of Republicans agree with him on most issues, but they also take his side on virtually every major question about his performance and character, accepting even the most dubious propositions. To a considerable extent this reflects Trump's success in destroying the credibility and legitimacy of standard news sources in the eyes of ordinary Republicans, for it enables them to reject or ignore any negative information that may be reported. Republican beliefs regarding Trump, his performance, and the news media are detailed in four tables in the Appendix that report results from various Quinnipiac Polls taken in 2018.[15] They are worth a look because they underline how impervious Trump's support has been to negative information and therefore how difficult it will be for Democrats to attract crossover votes in the midterm. To summarize the findings:

1. *Character.* Substantial Republican majorities say Trump is a good role model for children (63 percent), provides moral leadership (80 percent), is more honest (57 percent) and works harder (57 percent) than previous presidents (Table A1). This for a president who lies incessantly and shamelessly, who vacations far more frequently than his predecessors (Goeres 2018) and reportedly spends hours daily watching TV (Haberman, Thrush and Baker 2017), and who revels in taunting critics and bullying subordinates and allies (e.g. Atkins 2018). By large margins, Republicans also accept Trump's denial of racism (86 percent), say he respects people of color (83 percent), and approve of his handling of race relations (74 percent)—this despite his long history of racial animus, continuing indulgence in race-baiting rhetoric, and an upsurge in hate crimes under his watch.[16] Most (67 percent) also say that he respects women, again

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[15] Survey results in these tables are posted at https://poll.qu.edu/national/.

[16] The "highlights" include his dealing with minority tenants in New York, his propagation of the birther lie regarding Obama origins, his attack on an American judge of Mexican heritage, his defense of white supremacist marchers as including "very fine people," his denigration Haitian and Central America immigrants as people from "shithole countries," his demand that black athletes kneeling during the national anthem to protest police killings be fired, and his dehumanizing illegal immigrants as "animals" "infesting" the country; for other examples, see also Rubin (2018) and O'Brien (2018). For hate crimes, see Hauslohner (2018).

despite abundant evidence to the contrary.[17] What almost everyone else sees as an autocratic bent, Republicans see as normal for a president (76 percent).

2. *The Media and other institutions*. The capacity of so many ordinary Republicans to deny, ignore or rationalize what other Americans perceive in Trump's character and behavior reflects (highly) motivated reasoning, to be sure (Kunda 1990; Taber and Lodge 2013), but it also reflects Trump's success in raising skepticism about the mainstream news media, fairly widespread to begin with, to unprecedented heights among Republican partisans (Table A2). His depiction of any negative stories about him as "fake news" has found a ready audience in the Republican base.[18] A large majority of Republicans trust Trump more than the news media (75 percent), believe mainstream news organizations make up negative stories about him (80 percent), dislike their coverage of Trump (87 percent), and back his attacks on them (67 percent). Most Republicans (51 percent) even accept his menacing characterization of the news media as "the enemy of the people" rather than an important part of democracy (36 percent).[19] Beyond the news media, Republicans also say they trust Trump more than U.S. intelligence agencies (60 percent to 27 percent), and they largely buy his claim that the FBI is biased against him and is performing poorly. They take his word over former FBI director James Comey's by a 63 point margin.

3. *The Russia Investigation*. Trump's sustained effort to delegitimize the news media and the FBI is aimed, among other things, at insulating him from the threat posed by Robert Mueller's investigation into Russian interference in the 2016 election that U.S. intelligence agencies uniformly concluded was aimed at helping him win. Again, the survey evidence indicates that he is succeeding with the Republican base (Table A3). A large majority of Republicans now accept Trump's characterization of the investigation as a 'witch hunt" (80 percent) and most consider it unfair (61 percent). A plurality does

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[17] The evidence includes the notorious tape of Trump bragging about grabbing women by their private parts, but also a pattern of particular nastiness to women who dare to criticize him, including Carly Fioriana during the primaries, Hillary Clinton, female reporters, Elizabeth Warren (a two-fer with the racist "Pochohontas" label), and African-American U.S, Representative Maxine Waters. He also seems especially critical of national leaders who are women—Angela Merkel and Theresa May (Jaffe, Jordan, and Dawsey 2018).

[18] One survey found that 40 percent of Republicans think that even *accurate* but negative stories qualify as "fake news" (Knight Foundation, 2018).

[19] In three earlier Quinnipiac polls asking this question in 2018, the Republicans split 51-37 (April 14-17 poll), 42-35 (June 20-24 poll), and 45-44 (July 18-23) in favor of "enemy of the people."

accept that Russia tried to interfere, but few think it affected the outcome. Despite Trump's firing of Comey, attacks on Mueller, and repeated demands that the investigation be ended, few Republicans think he is trying to "derail or obstruct" the investigation (12 percent). Most accept his denial of collusion by him or his campaign (89 percent and 87 percent, respectively) and don't believe the Russian government has compromising information on him (70 percent).

     4. *Effects*. Finally, an astonishing three quarters of Republicans say Trump is doing more to unite than divide the country (Table A4), while all the evidence, survey and otherwise, attests to the opposite.[20] Eighty percent think that Trump "has strengthened the United States' position as leader of the free world," while his alienation of NATO allies, praise of authoritarian leaders (not least Vladimir Putin), initiation of trade wars, and indifference to human rights has actually made foreign nations sharply more skeptical of U.S. leadership.[21] And two-thirds agree with Trump that "a trade war would be good for the United States, and could be easily won," a position backed by no reputable economist[22] and currently undergoing a reality test, with unpromising results so far.

     The Republican respondents' consistently pro-Trump opinions on almost all of the questions in these tables are starkly at odds with the strong anti-Trump consensus on the same questions among respondents who are not Republicans. Such attitudes illustrate a reality that is profoundly consequential for the 2018 election and beyond: a large majority of ordinary Republicans have cast their lot with Trump and remain deaf to any information that might undermine their faith. It is not necessary to believe that most Republicans really want their kids modeling their behavior on Trump's or to take their responses to other questions as expressions of sincerely held views rather than reflexive support for a leader who, whatever his faults, they believe is on their side, for these data

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[20] This is a question answered by its own results, with 96 percent of Democrats saying "divide" compared to the 75 percent of Republicans saying "unite"; the average partisan difference on the questions listed in the Appendix is 66 points; see also, for examples, Table 1 and Figure 3 in this paper and Pew (2017) and Newport and Dugan (2017).

[21] For example, among NATO allies, the average proportion approving of U.S. leadership across all members dropped from 47 percent to 28 percent between 2016 and 2017; among the four most important members—United Kingdom, Germany, France, and Canada—it fell even further, from 54 percent to 25 percent (Ray 2018). Across all countries, average approval of U.S. leadership was down about 30 percentage points, with the largest drops among the best educated citizens of these countries (Ritter 2018).

[22] Even the Heritage Foundation deserts Trump on this one (Roberts 2018).

to be meaningful. The very fact that this is how they choose to present themselves to strangers probing their political opinions over the phone shows just how committed most rank-and-file Republicans are to Trump—if only out of hostility to his detractors.

III. The Referendum

The extraordinarily polarized reactions to his presidency have put Trump at the center of electoral politics in 2018 (where he will no doubt contrive, successfully, to stay). Both Trump's opponents and supporters have come to believe, not always without trepidation, that the election will be a sweeping national referendum on the president and his agenda. All indications are that they are right. The proportion of voters saying that their vote would be a signal of support or opposition to the president so far in 2018 slightly exceeds that of the recent "wave" years of 2006 and 2010 (Figure 4).   A Pew survey taken in August 2018 found a record high proportion of respondents saying control of Congress would be a factor in their vote, including 78 percent who planned to support the Democratic candidate and 75 percent who would support the Republican. Both figures were the highest since Pew began asking this question in 1998 (Pew 2018a, 2018b).

Figure 11 Is Your Vote For Congress a Vote For or Against the President?
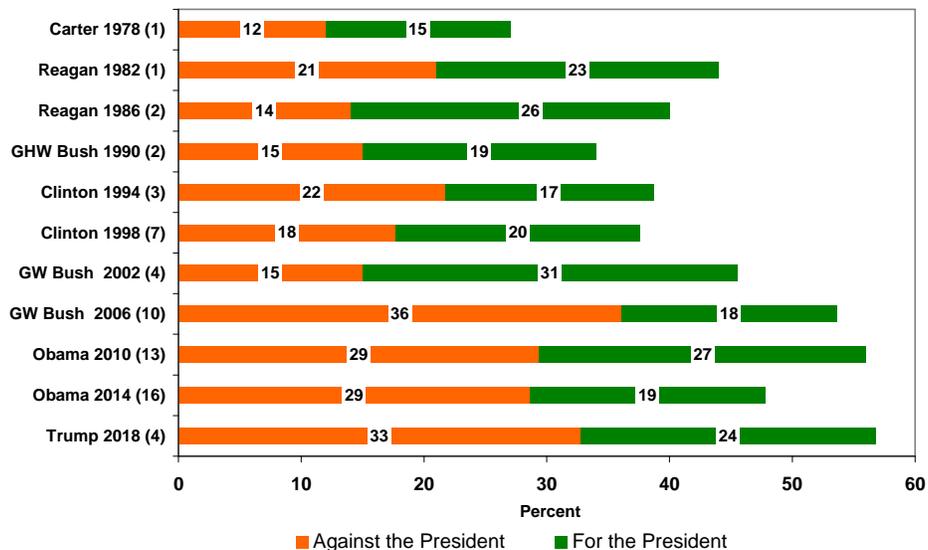
Note: the number of surveys averaged is in parentheses.

Source: Pew, Gallup, CBS News/*New York Times*, NBC News/*Wall Street Journal*, AP-GfK, and ABC News/*Washington Post* Polls.

Democrats, energized by and united against Trump since his inauguration, are looking to the midterm as their first chance to mitigate the catastrophe they experienced in 2016. Regarding Trump as someone who disrespects women and threatens their rights,[23] Democratic women have led the way. Both his rhetoric and actions on health care, immigration, reproductive rights, and the environment have provoked not only a steady stream of protests, frequently organized and led by women (Putnam and Skocpol 2018), but also a remarkable upsurge in their electoral involvement. Of the 226 nonincumbent Democrats nominated as House candidates through August 14, 108 (48 percent) have been women; counting incumbent Democrats, 151 of the party's 373 nominees to date (40 percent) are women. Similarly, it is likely that 15 of the 35 Democratic Senate candidates (43 percent) will be women. These are historically very high numbers; the comparable figures for Republican House nominees are 13 percent and 11 percent, respectively, for Republican Senate nominees, 23 percent. Democratic men are not as uniformly hostile to Trump as are Democratic women, but they are nearly as united in planning to vote for Democratic candidates in 2018.[24]

Trump unites Republicans as well as Democrats, but an election shaping up as a referendum on him and his administration poses problems for a pivotal subset of Republican candidates. His overwhelming popularity among core Republican voters is more than offset by his wider unpopularity elsewhere, decisively among Democrats but also generally among independents (Figure 3). Moreover, his policies on health care, taxes, immigration, and deregulation get majority support only among Republicans and are opposed by majorities of the overall public.[25] In the states and districts where the competitive balance is relatively even, Republican candidates have to go easy on Trump to avoid turning off their base while also appealing to voters they will need to win who are not at all Trump fans. Trump himself has made this balancing act more difficult by reverting to full campaign mode, most notably in his mendacious scapegoating of illegal immigrants, reiterating the thinly veiled appeals to white nationalism featured in his 2016

[23] In the June 2018 Pew survey, only 16 percent of Democratic women said that Trump respected women; 79 percent of Republicans said he did, as did 43 percent of all respondents; in the 24YouGov surveys taken during the first half of 2018, 81 percent of Democratic women disapproved of how Trump was handling "women's rights," 9 percent approved; 70 percent disapproved "strongly."

[24] In the 31 YouGov polls taken in 2018 through mid-August, 97.6 percent of Democratic women planned to vote for their party's House candidate, as did 96.4 percent of the Democratic men.

[25] See the data on such questions at pollingreport.com.

campaign (Griffiths 2018, Oppenheimer 2018). Republican candidates in states and districts where association with Trump is not an asset will naturally try to carve out independent political identities, but even without Trump dominating the news cycle and resurrecting his most divisive campaign themes, separating themselves from their party's leader will be close to impossible in the current polarized environment.

Standard Midterm Referendum Theories

All of the data available to date suggest that 2018 will produce a classic midterm referendum on the administration's performance, but given Trump's capacity for disruption, it remains to be seen how closely it will conform to the patterns of past referendums. Since Tufte's (1975) pioneering work, the idea that voters in aggregate treat the midterm election as a referendum, rewarding or punishing the administration's party's congressional candidates for its perceived successes or failures, has been well documented and widely accepted in the literature.[26] In standard models from this literature, the president's current approval ratings and economic conditions are the prime movers, although of size the president's party's congressional contingent also matters (all else equal, the more seats the president's party holds, the more it has to lose). If the 2018 election follows suit, Trump's current low public standing threatens Republican control of one or both houses of Congress, while the solid economic growth occurring in 2018 will serve as a counterforce. Table 4 presents a typical model based on midterms from 1946 through 2014 in which the independent variables predicting the midterm losses are percent approving of the presidents performance in the Gallup Poll closest to election day, the change in real disposable income per capita over the election year, and the deficit or surplus of House seats currently held by the president's party compared to its eight-election moving average (its "exposure"; for details, see Jacobson and Carson 2016 and Jacobson 2019, chapter 8). The table also displays the Democratic House seat gains (Republican losses) predicted by various combinations of approval and income change. Democrats would have to win 24 more seats than they won in 2016 to win control of the House, hence the numbers in blue indicate a Democratic majority, in red italics a Republican majority after the 2018 election.

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[26] For a discussion and citations for this extensive literature, see Jacobson and Carson (2016, 184-189).

Table 4 House Seat Swing to Democrats Predicted by Presidential Approval and Real Income Change in 2018

	Constant	Presidential Approval	Real Income Change	Exposure	Adjusted R^2	N
Coefficient	-100.23***	1.52**	3.32*	-.51**	.65	18
Standard Error	15.40	.32	1.53	.17		

*p<.05; **p<.01; ***p<.001

Presidential Approval	Change in Real Disposable Income per Capita							
	-0.5	0.0	0.5	1.0	1.5	2.0	2.5	3.0
30	56	55	53	51	50	48	46	45
32	53	52	50	48	47	45	43	42
34	50	49	47	45	44	42	40	39
36	47	46	44	42	41	39	37	36
38	44	42	41	39	37	36	34	33
40	41	39	38	36	34	33	31	29
42	38	36	35	33	31	30	28	26
44	35	33	32	30	28	27	25	23
46	32	30	29	27	25	24	22	20
48	29	27	26	24	22	21	19	17
50	26	24	23	21	19	18	16	14
52	23	21	20	18	16	15	13	11
54	20	18	16	15	13	12	10	8
56	17	15	13	12	10	8	7	5
58	14	12	10	9	7	5	4	2
60	11	9	7	6	4	2	1	-1

According to these estimates, if Trump's approval rating in the Gallup Polls stays at his April-August 2018 average, 41.2 percent, Republicans are predicted to lose their House majority at any plausible level of real income growth. Over the year prior to June, 2018, real income grew by about 2 percent.[27] At this rate Trump's approval ratings would have to rise above the mid 40s—higher than in any Gallup Poll to date—for Republicans to be favored to keep their majority. These are point predictions from an equation with a large standard error of the estimate (about 13 seats), so they are more

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[27] Data are from the U.S. Bureau of Economic Affairs at https://www.bea.gov/iTable/iTable.cfm?reqid=19&step=2#reqid=19&step=3&isuri=1&1921=survey&1903=76, accessed July 20, 2018.

illustrative than precise. But the do suggest that present conditions favor a Democratic House majority if 2018 turns out to be a typical midterm referendum and the conditions obtaining in the summer persist through election day.

A peculiarity in the data for 2018 is the disjunction between the approval and economy figures. Ordinarily, we would expect a president enjoying very good economic numbers (solid economic growth, very low unemployment, low inflation, a strong stock market, and the rosiest public views of the economy in more than a decade[28]) to have much higher overall approval ratings than Trump has enjoyed so far (Saad 2018).   His low approval ratings are thus eloquent testimony to how off-putting the rest of his performance has been to people outside his base. They also underline how essential a strong economy is to the Republicans' chances of retaining full control of Congress.

Strategic Politicians in 2018

In addition to directly influencing the vote choice (Jacobson and Carson 2016; Jacobson 2019), presidents also affect midterm elections by helping to shape the strategic environment, which affects the relative quality and resources of the congressional candidates that take the field and thereby the share of votes and seats won by each side, because the party with superior candidates and more resources tends to win more votes and seats.   Potential candidates and contributors in the opposing party regard an unpopular president as an opportunity to take seats from the president's party, and the enhanced recruitment, finances, and motivation that results helps shift the competitive balance in the out-party's favor. So, too, does the strategic exit of incumbents in the president's party who, sensing an incipient wave against their side, retire preemptively, thereby forfeiting the local incumbency advantage (Jacobson and Kernell 1983; Jacobson 1989; Jacobson and Carson 2016).

On all of these counts, the action suggests widespread anticipation of a pro-Democratic wave in 2018. In late 2017, Democrats held a huge advantage in fundraising and candidate recruitment (Schneider 2017; Malbin 2018), and their candidates continued to out raise their Republican opponents in competitive races during the first half of 2018

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[28] In the July 2018 CBS News poll, 67 percent of respondents rated the economy as "very" or "fairly" good, near the highest proportion since 2001.

(Wright 2018; Wasserman 2018a). By June 2018, 42 House Republicans had said they would not seek reelection, 28 of whom were not pursuing higher office. Seven of the 42 represented districts won by Clinton in 2016, and several more were from districts Trump won only narrowly. Overall, House Republicans were twice as likely to retire from one of their 25 districts won by Clinton[29] than from one of the 215 districts won by Trump (32 percent compared to 15 percent, p=.036), clear evidence of strategic exit in the face of a difficult reelection environment. At the same juncture, only 19 Democrats had announced retirements, nine of them to pursue higher office. By the end of July, after retirements, three incumbent defeats in primaries, one death, and a redrawing of district lines in Pennsylvania, Republicans were defending 43 open seats, Democrats, 22. In mid-August, with about 85 percent of the nominations decided, Democrats also held a wide lead in the proportion of experienced and well-financed challengers fielded against incumbents. Insofar as strategic politicians contribute to the creation of a national tide, both Democrats and Republicans seem to be doing their assigned parts in 2018.

Balancing

A variation on the standard referendum model, inspired by the fact that the president's party almost always loses House seats in midterm elections no matter how favorable national conditions, proposes that the electorate in aggregate uses the midterm to elect a Congress that "balances" the president ideologically. The logic here is that voters near the ideological median prefer more centrist policies than either party pursues. The presidential winner tends to push policy too far in one ideological direction, so the centrist voters respond at the midterm by switching their support to candidates of the rival congressional party to strengthen its numbers and thereby induce policy compromises closer to the center (Alesina and Rosenthal 1995; Fiorina 2003; Bafumi, Erikson, and Wlezien 2010; Mebane 2000; Scheve and Tomz 1999). Some versions of this argument have implied that balancing is the sole explanation for midterm swings (Erikson 1990; Alesina and Rosenthal 1989).

The 2018 midterm will provide a clean test the balancing model. Trump and his allies in Congress have certainly sought to move policy sharply to the right, with

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[29] The presidential vote has been recomputed for the new Pennsylvania districts drawn in early 2018; this boosted the number of Republican-held seats where Clinton won the plurality from 23 to 25.

considerable success in many if not all policy domains. Very few of these initiatives have commanded anything like majority support among the public. More Americans have consistently opposed than favored Trump's proposals and policies regarding health care, taxes, immigration (including building a wall, cutting legal immigration, and banning Muslims), the environment (withdrawing from the Paris Accords, expanding coal production, building the Keystone pipeline), and banning transgendered people from the military.[30] Only on trade issues has support and opposition been relative balanced, although opinion has evidently shifted against protectionism as the consequences have become clearer.[31] Even the Republicans' greatest legislative success, the major tax cut legislation enacted in December 2017, wins approval from less than 40 percent of the public.[32]

If ever an administration has invited balancing, then, it would seem to be Trump's. And when the June 27-July 1 Quinnipiac poll asked voters if they would "like to see Congress be a check on President Trump," a surprising 51 percent of Republican identifiers said yes (as did 88 percent of Democrats, 74 percent of independents, and 71 percent overall).[33] Yet this sentiment did not appear to motivate a balancing vote; in the same survey, 93 percent of the Republicans reported they would vote for the Republican House candidate, only 3 percent for the Democrat, if the election were being held that day. Proponents of the balancing hypothesis acknowledge that "only a small subset of voters decide by strategic balancing based on policy considerations" but argue that this subset is large enough to account for the national swings that constitute the referendum (Bufumi, Erikson, and Wliezen 2010, 707). Polarized partisanship has probably rendered the subset even smaller than when they envisioned it, however. A balancing referendum would surely produce a Democratic takeover of at least the House, so the theory is about to undergo an incisive test.

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[30] For public opinion data on these issues, see pollingreport.com.

[31] Majorities support tariffs on China but no on American allies in Canada and Europe; most oppose the tariffs on steel and think they will hurt American industries; for public opinion data on these issues, see pollingreport.com.

[32] In the fourteen surveys taken during the first half of 2018 that asked about it, an average of 39 percent approved of the legislation, 47 percent disapproved; see www.pollingreport.com/budget.htm.

[33] See https://poll.qu.edu/national/release-detail?ReleaseID=2553, accessed July 2, 2018.

Demographics and Turnout

Both the strategic balancing and standard referendum models depend in part on systematic shifts in voting behavior between elections, but the declining proportion voters willing to cross party lines may dampen referendum effects no matter how they are conceived. As defections become rarer, turnout differentials become more important. This will certainly be true of 2018. With so few voters willing to contemplate crossing party lines (Figure 1), and with the proportion of swing voters declining (Schmidt 2015), the outcomes will depend heavily on the capacity of each side to motivate and mobilize its supporters. The evidence so far suggests that Democrats are more eager than Republicans to vote, but whether this translates into a genuine turnout advantage remains to be seen. Turnout in primaries held through June 30 is higher compared to the same period in 2014 for both parties, but much more so for Democrats (up 84 percent) than for Republicans (up 24 percent) (DeSilver 2018). In nine surveys taken so far in 2018 asking about the respondent's degree of enthusiasm or motivation to vote, the Democrats have held an advantage ranging from 4 to 21 points; on average, 55 percent of Democrats and 42 percent of Republicans say they are more motivated or enthusiastic than usual about voting in 2018.[34] The Democrats' advantage is, however, offset by the composition of the party's coalition, which includes a relatively larger share of young and minority citizens who have historically been less likely to vote than the older whites who populate the Republican coalition.

The Democrats' dependence on young, female, and minority voters is clear from the first section of Table 5, which displays the net Democratic advantage (percent supporting the Democrat minus the percent supporting the Republican) in generic polls taken by *Economist*/YouGov during the first half of 2018. The strong age gradient is entirely a product of white voters, especially white men; among non-whites, differences across age groups are non-monotonic and much smaller. A gender gap appears in every age and race category, and it grows wider across age cohorts. Not surprisingly, the net

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[34] The data are from CNN (very or somewhat enthusiastic, N=5) Fox News (more or less enthusiastic, N=2), and Quinnipiac (more or less motivated, N=3) polls taken during 2018.

voting intentions among the 16 combinations of age, race, and gender map almost perfectly onto net opinions of Trump' performance.[35]

Table 5 Midterm Generic Vote 2018, by Age, Race and Gender (Percent)

_____

	Under 30	*30-44*	*45-64*	*65+*	*All*
A. Democratic Margin					
All	27	21	2	-12	5.5
Men	22	17	-8	-24	-2.4
Women	31	24	11	-2	12.6
White	18	8	-13	-21	-8.0
Men	15	6	-23	-33	-15.6
Women	22	10	-3	-11	-1.0
Non White	38	45	42	38	41.6
Men	33	39	35	26	34.3
Women	43	51	49	47	47.8
B. Registered, with a Vote Choice					
White	36	47	62	76	58.0
Non White	27	38	56	77	43.8

_____

Source: 24 *Economist*/YouGov polls, January-August 2018 (N=46,500, including 39,627 registered voters)

Democrats have an overall lead in these polls of about 5.5 percentage points, but the lead would be much larger were it not for the much lower projected participation—defined here as reporting to be registered and expressing a vote preference for one of the major party candidates—among Democratic-leaning demographic groups (Section B of Table 5). Young and non-white voters have much lower projected participation rates than older and white voters. The Democrats' capacity to turn out voters from demographic groups with historically low participation rates will be crucial to their prospects of taking over one or both chambers, and doing so will require countering stepped-up voter suppression efforts targeting these groups in many Republican states (Michaelson 2017).

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[35] Net disapproval of Trump in the 16 cells correlates with net Democratic vote preference at .97.

The Republican's Structural Advantage

In all generic polls combined for 2018 through mid August, Democrats had an average lead of 7.3 percentage points. This puts them in much better shape than they had been in previous midterms in this century other than 2006, as is evident in Figure 5, which shows smoothed trends in the Democrats' share of major party preferences in generic polls over the two years leading up to each midterm election. The patterns from previous elections show that the generic vote can change during the final three months of the campaign, so nothing is cut in stone at this point. But based on past patterns,

Figure 5 Generic Midterm Ballots, 2002-2018
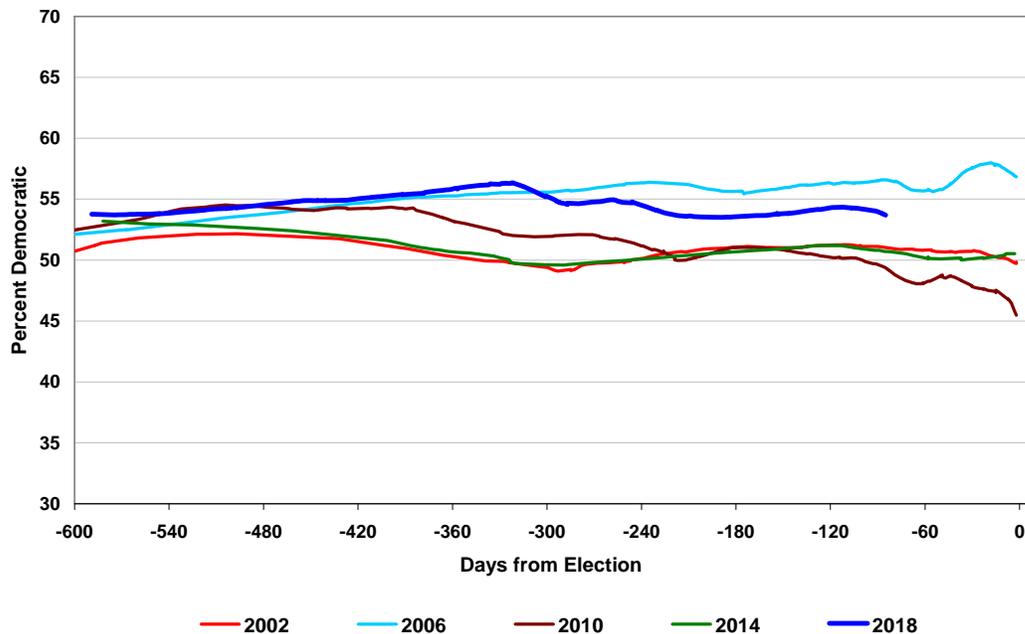
Democrats will need a national vote margin at least as large as they have at this point to overcome their severe structural disadvantage, which stems from the concentration of their regular voters in urban areas, which "wastes" a disproportionate share their votes in very safe districts (Jacobson and Carson 2016). Their problem is illustrated by the distribution of 2016 presidential vote across House districts. Hillary Clinton won 2.86 million more votes than Trump, but Trump won the most votes in 228 districts, Clinton, in 207 districts. There are currently 219 districts where Trump ran at least 2 percentage points ahead of his national share, only 186 where Clinton ran more than 2 points ahead of her national share; the 30 remaining districts fall in between. This means that if

Democrats won all of the Democratic leaning districts and all of the balanced districts (by this measure), they would still fall two seats short of a majority (218). They have to make inroads into Republican turf, and winning seats against the partisan grain has been exceedingly difficult in recent years, as Figure 6 shows. In 2014, only five Democrats and seven Republicans managed to win districts where their party's presidential candidate in the prior general election ran more than 2 points behind his national average. The 2006 data hold out some hope for Democrats, however; that year, they took 44 seats in Republican-leaning districts in winning majority control. Their task is not impossible, then, but it may be harder than in 2006, because the Republicans' augmented their structural advantage by about 11 seats in post-2010 gerrymanders (Jacobson and Carson 2016, 14). Given the distribution of partisans, Republicans benefit more than Democrats from high levels of party-line voting and therefore from highly polarized national politics; Democrats need crossover votes or a large turnout advantage to win a majority of House seats.

Figure 6 House Candidates Winning Against the Partisan Grain, 1952-2016
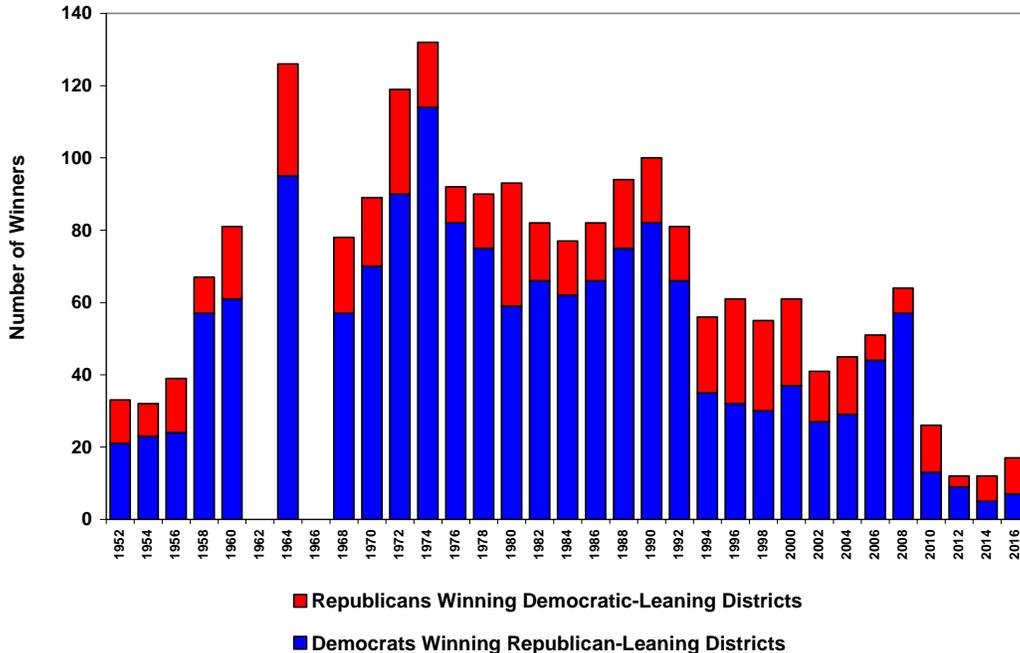
Cook's Handicapping

The analysts at the *Cook Political Report*, with a record of highly accurate handicapping (Campbell 2010, 2018), currently make the Democrats "narrow favorites"

to win a House majority based largely on the "intensity gap" (Wasserman 2018b), but the Cook data make it clear that Democrats will have to win the lion's share of the most competitive districts to succeed. If Democrats win all of the districts where Cook deems their party favored (202), they have to win 16 of the 29 seats listed as tossup (or, failing that, additional "leaning Republican" districts) to reach a majority (Table 6). This is certainly possible, and the number of Republican seats rated in play (lean Republican or greater risk) has been growing over the election year, from 39 in January to 63 in August, while the number of Democratic seats in play dropped from 11 to five. According to James Cambell's (2018) "seats in trouble" model, based on Cook data going back to 1984, the net difference in the parties' seats rated toss up or worse in August of the election year predicts a 34 seat gain for the Democrats.[36] The Democrats' chances of winning two net seats they would need for a Senate majority are much bleaker. Of the 35 Senate seats contested in 2018, Democrats hold 26, 10 of them in states won by Trump in 2016, five with more than 59 percent of the major party vote.[37] Republicans are defending only nine seats and only one in a state won by Clinton (Nevada). With the greater number of seats at risk, Democrats would do well to avoid net losses, and only a

Table 6. Cook Political Report Ratings, August 2018

	Solid D	Likely D	Lean D	Tossup	Lean R	Likely R	Solid R
House:							
Total	181	12	9	29	25	26	153
Current Party:							
Republican		3	7	27	26	24	153
Democrat	181	9	2	2		1	
Senate:							
Total	14	6	1	8	1	2	3
Current Party:							
Republican				3	1	2	3
Democrat	14	6	1	5			

Source: Cook Political Report, August 17, at https://www.cookpolitical.com/.

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[36] Using the party difference in seats rated leaning or worse, Campbell's estimate is a 58-seat Democratic gain.
[37] Included with the Democrats are the two independents who vote to organize with them, Bernie Sanders (VT) and Angus King (ME), both considered safe.

blue wave considerably larger than the one currently in prospect could give them control of the Senate.[38]

IV. Implications

The forces shaping the 2018 midterm elections are largely in place, although events between now and the election will continue to tweak them and bear the potential for more dramatic changes. The hearings over Trump's nomination of Brett Kavanaugh, an expected vote to overturn *Roe* v. *Wade*, to replace the retiring justice Arthur Kennedy on the Supreme Court, will put the abortion issue will be front and center, mobilizing important factions of both parties. Donald Trump's penchant for inciting controversy, exemplified by his widely-condemned deference to Putin and implicit denigration of U.S. intelligence agencies during the press conference following their private meeting in Helsinki in July, is another wild card. Ordinary Republicans backed Trump's handling of the Helsinki summit, but with a bit less unity than usual.[39] It would be no surprise if Trumps words or actions provoked fresh controversies that, while not necessarily shaking his core supporters, eroded his standing among other Republicans and independents. And of course looming over all is Mueller's dogged and meticulous investigation of Trump's and his campaign's possible collusion with Russia during the 2016 campaign. The biggest surprise between now (mid August) and the election might be no surprise.

Although both the current state of play and possible shocks leave the outcome of the 2018 midterm election very much in doubt, its potential consequences are not. However it goes, the election will have profound effects on both the short- and long-term evolution of American politics. If the Democrats win control of the House, it will be read, accurately, as a clear repudiation of Trump's presidency, for they can only do by winning large enough majority of votes cast nationwide to overcome the Republican's formidable structural advantage.[40] It will put Democrats in a position to challenge,

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[38] Wasserman (2018c) provides a cogent geographical analysis of why the party prospects differ so much between chambers.

[39] In the July 17-18 CBS News poll, 68 percent of Republicans approved of his handling of the summit, while 21 percent disapproved (among Democrats, 8 percent approved, 83 percent disapproved; the comparable figures for independents were 29 percent and 53 percent).

[40] If, against expectations, they win the Senate as well, the repudiation will be overwhelming.

check, and investigate the Trump administration for at least the next two years, precipitating disputes between Congress and the White House at least as fierce as during the Obama presidency after 2010. It will also shake the grip Trump has on the (public) loyalties of those Republicans who remain in Congress by pegging him as a liability, a leader so offensive to most Americans that even the best economy in at least a decade could not preserve their majority. And it will encourage those Republican leaders and conservative intellectuals who have resisted Trump's takeover of their party to persevere.

If, on the other hand, Republicans retain their majorities (even if, as is most likely in the case, they lose the national vote), it will confirm once and for all that the Republican Party is now Trump's party. Congressional Republicans will read it as confirmation of their strategy of tolerating Trump's outré behavior in furtherance of their party's conservative agenda and, out of respect for the power of his supporters, they will continue to ignore, downplay, or excuse behavior that by a Democratic president would provoke torrents of outrage and demands for impeachment. Insofar as this outcome is attributable to Trump's success in whipping up xenophobic fears about immigrants, appealing to white nationalist sentiments, and rallying Christian conservatives behind a Supreme Court nominee expected to overturn *Roe*, it will advance the party makeover sought by Trump's erstwhile advisor Steve Bannon, who envisions a white populist Republican Party devoted to cultural conservatism, patriarchy, economic nationalism, anti-Muslim and anti-immigrant xenophobia, and dismantling the regulatory state (Thorsson 2017).

To the degree that Trump and his allies adopt and promote this vision, it seems a sure recipe for splitting and shrinking the Republican Party in the long run. Even a partial adoption bears risks, because the elements of Trump's agenda in accord with it are almost uniformly unpopular outside the Republican core of older white voters. This includes reducing legal immigration, restricting family reunification, and building a wall on the Mexican border[41]; exiting NAFTA and disengaging from the global economy[42];

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[41] See the polling results reported at http://www.pollingreport.com/immigration.htm; large majorities reject Trump's rationales for these policies; in the February 2-5, 2018 Quinnipiac Poll, only 17 percent agreed that undocumented immigrants committed more crimes than natives, while 72 percent disagreed; in the September 15-18, 2017 Monmouth University Poll, 23 percent said they took jobs from citizens, 56 percent said they did not.

[42] See the polling results reported at http://www.pollingreport.com/trade.htm.

scrapping regulations designed to protect consumers and the environment[43]; "America First" isolationism[44]; and adopting the conservative Christian wish list (overturning *Roe* v. *Wade*, curbing LBGTQ rights, and defunding Planned Parenthood).[45] The long-term danger to a Republican Party defined by this set of broadly unpopular objectives and commitments is aggravated by the fact that they are least popular among younger Americans.[46] Some of these policies and goals are also unpopular among prominent Republican leaders and conservative pundits, a few of whom have already formally abandoned the party and called for a Democratic victory in 2018, among them George Will, Max Boot, Joe Scarborough, and Peter Wehner. Their numbers will probably grow if that effort fails and the party is seen as irretrievably Trump's. Boot posed the question to Republican conservatives this way: "You used to belong to a conservative party with a white-nationalist fringe. Now it's a white-nationalist party with a conservative fringe. If you're part of that fringe, what should you do?" (Boot 2018). His advice: bail. Trump loyalists would no doubt cheer the departures of his establishment critics, but building a political coalition by subtraction is usually ill-advised. Among other things, then, the future of the Republican Party is at stake in 2018.

So is the future of the Democratic Party. A victory would show the potency of an anti-Trump coalition, but putting that coalition to work in Congress will be a daunting task. United against Trump, the party is divided on how it should address the voters who supported him, what policies it should pursue or emphasize, and who should lead it. A failure to retake the House would only intensify these divisions. In the long run, though, Democrats will be favored by demographics as Trump's older, white supporters shrink as a share of the population and his extreme unpopularity among young and minority voters

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[43] Trump's withdrawal from the Paris climate accords was supported by no more than a third of the public in any of the five major polls that posed the question, and the idea of removing "specific regulations intended to combat climate change" was even less popular (28 percent vs. 65 percent in the May,9, 2017 Quinnipiac Poll); see http://www.pollingreport.com/enviro.htm.
[44] See http://news.gallup.com/poll/116350/Position-World.aspx.
[45] See the polling results for 2017-2018 reported at http://www.pollingreport.com/lgbt.htm and http://www.pollingreport.com/abortion.htm.
[46]For example, only 36 percent of the public wants to encourage the use of coal despite its environmental costs, but among people under 30, the share falls to 23 percent (Quinnipiac Poll, March 30-April 3, 2017, at https://poll.qu.edu/national/release-detail?ReleaseID=2449); the comparable numbers for defunding Planned Parenthood are 35 percent and 23 percent, respectively (Quinnipiac Poll, June 20-27, 2017 at https://poll.qu.edu/national/release-detail?ReleaseID=2470); Only 33 percent say NAFTA has been bad for the United States; among the under 30s, its 15 percent (Tyson 2017).

leaves the Democrats as their only real option (Jacobson 2018).   Although imaginable with Republicans in control of all three branches of government, a reactionary project to undo advances in civil rights of racial and sexual minorities, women's rights, environmental protection, labor rights, and health care, carried out against the preferences of majorities of citizens, is unlikely to succeed in the long run, but it will certainly make for some ferocious political battles in the mean time.

Whatever the 2018 election achieves, it will not diminish Trump's polarizing effect on the citizenry. Partisan Democrats who see Trump as an incompetent, mean-spirited, lying, ignorant, racist, misogynist, authoritarian narcissist pursuing policies threatening national and global health and welfare find it hard to resist feeling contempt for Trump supporters simply for being such: How could any sentient being not be appalled by what they see? Trump's Republican supporters, in return, view his detractors as elitist liberal snobs, sore losers who disdain as "deplorables" hard-working, God-fearing, patriotic Americans like them, people who appreciate a pugnacious president who promises to put America first and who will at least try to reverse the economic and social trends that have frayed their communities and made them feel like losers. As long as Trump is on the scene the nation is bound to remain deeply divided, and to the extent that he reshapes the Republican Party in his white nationalist image, these divisions will deepen further and every election, like the 2018 midterm, will be fought with both sides convinced that nothing less than the future of American democracy is at stake.

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Appendix

Table A1. Opinions of Trump's Character and Attitudes

	All	Rep.	Ind.	Dem.
1. Do you think that President Trump is a good role model for children, or not? (6/5/18)				
Yes	27	63	21	4
No	69	30	74	95
2. Do you think that President Trump provides the United States with moral leadership, or not? (1/23/18)				
Yes	33	80	30	3
No	63	16	67	96
3. Do you believe that Donald Trump is more honest than most of the previous presidents, less honest than most previous presidents, or that Donald Trump is just about as honest as most previous presidents? 93/16/18)				
More honest	27	57	23	5
Less honest	44	7	42	82
Just about as honest	26	34	33	11
4. Do you think that President Trump works harder than most of the previous presidents, works less hard than most previous presidents, or do you think he works about as hard as most previous presidents? (1/16/18)				
Works harder	25	57	22	4
Works less hard	50	10	49	84
About as hard	21	30	26	8
5. Do you think President Trump is racist, or don't you think so? (7/1/18)				
Yes	49	11	50	86
No	47	86	44	10
6. Do you think that President Trump treats people of color with the same amount of respect as he treats white people, or don't you think so? (8/13/18)				
Yes	39	83	33	7
No	54	11	56	89
7. Do you approve or disapprove of the way Donald Trump is handling race relations? (6/5/18)				
Approve	33	74	27	4
Disapprove	61	16	68	93
8. Do you think that President Trump treats women with the same amount of respect as he treats men, or don't you think so? (4/9/18)				
Yes	32	67	29	3
No	60	22	60	95
9. As you may know, the definition of an autocrat is a ruler with absolute power. Do you think that President Trump behaves more like an autocrat or do you think President Trump behaves more like a typical U.S. president? (2/19/18)				
Autocrat	56	9	58	88
Typical president	36	76	35	7

Source: Quinnipiac Polls (last day of survey is in parentheses)

Table A2.   News Media and Other Institutions

	All	*Rep.*	*Ind.*	*Dem.*
1. Who do you trust more to tell you the truth about important issues: President Trump or the news media? (7/23/18)				
Trump	34	75	29	5
News media	54	16	58	86
2. Do you think that journalists at major news organizations - such as CNN, NBC, ABC, and CBS - make up negative stories about President Trump, or do you think that they report stories about President Trump to the best of their knowledge? (4/9/18)				
Make up stories	41	80	43	6
Best of knowledge	49	12	46	89
3. Do you approve or disapprove of the way the news media has covered President Trump? (7/23/18)				
Approve	36	10	36	64
Disapprove	56	87	54	29
4. Do you approve or disapprove of the way President Trump talks about the media? (7/23/18)				
Approve	32	67	28	6
Disapprove	65	29	68	92
5. Which comes closer to your point of view: the news media is the enemy of the people, or the news media is an important part of democracy? (8/13/18)				
Enemy of the people	26	51	24	5
Part of Democracy	65	36	65	92
6. Who do you trust more to tell you the truth about important issues: President Trump or the U.S. intelligence agencies? (7/23/18)				
Trump	25	60	21	1
U.S. Intelligence Agencies	63	27	66	93
7. Do you think that the FBI is biased against President Trump, or not? (7/23/18)				
Yes	34	66	32	10
No	53	24	55	79
8. Do you approve or disapprove of the way the FBI is handling its job? (2/15/18)				
Yes	48	28	49	67
No	36	53	34	22
9. Who do you trust more to tell you the truth about important issues: President Trump or former FBI Director James Comey? (4/24/18)				
Trump	35	76	27	6
Comey	54	13	59	90

Source: Quinnipiac Polls (last day of survey is in parentheses)

Table A3. Russia Investigation

	All	*Rep.*	*Ind.*	*Dem.*
1. Do you think that the investigation into any links or coordination between President Trump's 2016 election campaign and the Russian government is a legitimate investigation, or do you think it is a political witch hunt? (7/23/18)				
Legitimate	54	16	55	85
Witch hunt	40	80	39	7
2. As you may know, Special Counsel Robert Mueller was appointed to oversee the criminal investigation into any links or coordination between President Trump's campaign and the Russian government. Do you think that he is conducting a fair investigation into this matter, or not? (7/23//18)				
Yes	55	23	59	80
No	31	61	28	10
3. Do you believe that the Russian government has compromising information about President Trump, or don't you believe that the Russian government has that kind of information about President Trump? (7/23/18)				
Yes	51	18	55	74
No	36	70	29	11
4. Do you think that the Russian government tried to influence the 2016 presidential election, or not? Do you think the Russian interference changed the outcome of the 2016 presidential election, or not? (3/5/18)				
Try/changed outcome	36	6	33	69
Try/didn't change outcome	28	43	31	13
Didn't try	22	37	22	5
5. Do you believe that President Trump has attempted to derail or obstruct the investigation into the Russian interference in the 2016 election, or not? (2/5/18)				
Yes	53	12	56	86
No	41	83	37	11
6. Do you believe that the Trump campaign colluded with the Russian government to influence the 2016 presidential election, or not? (7/23/18)				
Yes	46	6	49	75
No	44	87	40	13
7. Do you believe that President Trump colluded with the Russian government to influence the 2016 presidential election, or not? (7/23/18)				
Yes	39	6	42	65
No	48	89	45	16

Source: Quinnipiac Polls (last day of survey is in parentheses)

Table A4. Effects

	All	Rep.	Ind.	Dem.
Do you feel that Donald Trump is doing more to unite the country as president, or doing more to divide the country as president? (7/1/18)				
Unite	36	75	33	3
Divide	58	18	61	96
Do you think that President Trump has strengthened the United States' position as the leader of the free world, weakened the United States' position, or do you think that President Trump has had no impact on the United States' position as the leader of the free world? (7/1/18)				
Strengthened	40	80	37	8
Weakened	47	8	48	83
No Impact	11	10	14	7
Do you think that President Trump has improved the United States' reputation around the world or damaged the United States' reputation around the world? (3/16/18)				
Improved	34	75	30	1
Damaged	57	15	57	96
Neither	4	3	8	1
As you may know, President Trump has said that a trade war would be good for the United States, and could be easily won. Do you agree or disagree with this statement? (3/5/18)				
Agree	28	67	19	7
Disagree	64	23	71	90

Source: Quinnipiac Polls (last day of survey is in parentheses)