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# *The Opening of the American Voter's Mind*

Nearly one-third say their presidential vote will depend on the Democratic nominee.

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A voter in Glen Allen, Va., Nov. 6, 2018. PHOTO: MICHAEL REYNOLDS/EPA-EFE/REX/SHUTTERSTOCK

In an era of political polarization, most pundits believe persuadable voters are near extinction and base mobilization is the key to victory. The annual Public Religion Research Institute/Brookings Institution

American Values survey released on Monday suggests this view is wrong.

Among registered voters, 29% say that they will support Donald Trump no matter who the Democratic candidate turns out to be, and 40% say they will support the Democrat no matter what. But 29% say their vote will depend on which candidate the Democrats select. Among likely voters, the “it depends” group makes up 24% of the electorate, compared with 43% who are committed to the Democratic nominee and 31% who are committed to Mr. Trump.

Because Democrats have more “wasted” votes in solidly blue states than Republicans do in comparable red states, they need more than a plurality of the popular vote to prevail, as they learned in 2016. Barack Obama’s 51% majority and 4-point popular-vote edge gave him a comfortable Electoral College victory in 2012.

The 2020 Democratic nominee will likely need a majority of the popular vote to win. Simple math shows that to reach this majority, the Democrat will need to earn the support of at least 29% of “it depends” voters. Although this might seem to be a low bar, the PRRI/Brookings poll finds that only three contenders now cross it—Joe Biden comfortably, with 36%; Elizabeth Warren, less comfortably, with 32%; and Bernie Sanders just barely, with 29%. No one else even reaches 15%. Because “it depends” voters tend to be less informed, their preferences may change if another candidate attracts their attention by breaking through in Iowa or New Hampshire.

Who are these neglected but crucial voters? Fifty-four percent are independents, and 61% call themselves moderate. Only 25% have college degrees, compared with 45% among those committed to the Democratic nominee. More than half earn less than \$50,000 a year, and nearly half identify themselves as working-class or lower-class. Sixty-five percent are under 50, compared with 54% of all Americans, and 23% are Hispanic, vs. 7% for committed Trump supporters.

“It depends” voters are hardly bullish on America’s condition and leadership. Sixty-seven percent think the country has gotten seriously off on the wrong track. Just 27% have a favorable impression of Mr. Trump, and only 33% approve of the job he is doing. Seventy-two percent say Mr. Trump has damaged the dignity of the presidency, and 66% report his personal conduct makes them less likely to support him. (By contrast, 67% have a favorable impression of Mr. Obama, and 70% approve of the job he did as president.)

Nevertheless, these “it depends” voters were split down the middle on whether Mr. Trump should be impeached and removed from office. Among the likely voters in this group, only 42% favored impeachment and removal, while 57% were opposed. Weeks after the news about Ukraine broke and began spilling into public view, many “it depends” voters who disapprove of Mr. Trump as both a person and a president are yet to be persuaded that the facts warrant the most severe congressional response.

Those voters don’t espouse the harshly partisan views characteristic of the rest of the electorate. They believe that Democrats are trying to make capitalism work for average Americans, not turning to socialism, and that Republicans are trying to protect the American way of life against outside threats, not embracing racism.

For the most part, they steer a middle course between partisan extremes. On the one hand, they reject most Republican views on immigration, climate change, relations between the sexes, abortion and discrimination against white Americans. On the other hand, they believe that the Confederate flag symbolizes Southern pride rather than racism and overwhelmingly reject reparations for descendants of slaves. They favor neither sanctuary cities nor government-provided health benefits for immigrants illegally in the country.

Underlying the self-professed moderation of “it depends” voters is a complex blend of attitudes. Compared with most Democrats, they lean toward traditionalism on religious and cultural issues and toward conservatism on security issues. Compared with most Republicans, they lean toward progressivism on bread-and-butter issues such as jobs, health care and higher-education costs.

In short, these voters who may well decide the election don’t fit the profile of either Mr. Trump’s most ardent supporters or the Democrats’ most fervent progressives. They are closest to the New Deal liberals who dominated the Democratic Party when it enjoyed a governing majority.

It would be one of the ironies of American history if electoral reality forces the Democratic Party to endorse the brand of liberalism that so many of its members scorn as timid and obsolete. It would be a tragedy for the country and the world if Democrats ignore this reality by embracing cultural views that a majority of Americans cannot accept.

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