

Trump's Biggest Obstacle to a Second Term

There's an old truism in politics that may not be true this time around. "Americans vote with their pocketbooks" is how it goes. And it's usually the case. But Donald Trump's divisive presidency is going to put that old saying to the test.

Let's start with a few numbers: The unemployment rate is at a 50-year low. Unemployment for blacks, Latinos and women are also at record lows. Consumer confidence is close to an all time high.

So how do we explain *these* numbers: A recent poll by Quinnipiac in Pennsylvania – a state Donald Trump won in 2016 which helped push him over the finish line – found that 77 percent of voters described their financial situation as "excellent" or good" – but concluded that the president would lose by 11 points to Joe Biden, the Democratic frontrunner.

As the New York Times explains it, "For Democrats, the clear evidence from the 2018 midterms that college-educated suburban voters are more inclined to vote against Mr. Trump's behavior than in favor of his economic stewardship is nudging them toward making the president's controversial conduct front and center for voters."

Which means that Democrats will do what they can to try to convince voters not to make the 2020 presidential election a referendum on the strong economy the president presides over, but a referendum on the president himself.

In other words – if other words are really needed – if the election next year is about the president's policies, he'd likely win. But if it's about the president himself, he could lose (and take other Republicans down with him).

Let's consider some other numbers. How many rock-solid Democrats who voted for Hillary Clinton in 2016 are likely to vote for Mr. Trump in 2020? Zero would be a good answer, but let's be generous and simply say, very, very few.

So the president would have to win just about all the votes he won last time around – and in all the right places, like Michigan, Wisconsin and the same Pennsylvania that has him losing to Joe Biden by 11 points.

In 2016, voters picked Mr. Trump over Mrs. Clinton for a variety of reasons. Some genuinely liked him. Some disliked him less than they disliked Hillary. But some figured ... why not give the guy a chance. He's different. He's a businessman. He's not a politician. What do we have to lose?

But after more than two years and counting of tweets and controversy and name-calling and everything else that makes Donald Trump who he is, some of those voters are going to conclude that the Trump Show has gotten old and they may be ready for something different, a president who is less dramatic, less exhausting.

So he'll need to win over enough independents who went for Hillary last time around to make up for 2016 Trump supporters who will abandon him this time around.

If he were less divisive, it wouldn't be this complicated. He'd just ride the economy into a second term.

A lot can and will happen, of course, between today and November 3, 2020. Let's start with Joe Biden. He's been staying clear of reporters and hasn't had to take positions on controversial issues. So far his only message has been that President Trump is divisive and that he, Biden, would bring the country together. True or not, it's a seductive message; especially to those college-educated swing voters in the suburbs.

And there's the possibility that once Biden opens his mouth and says something dopey, the door opens wider for Bernie Sanders or Elizabeth Warren or one of the other progressives.

And if that happens, voters may decide that even if they don't like Donald Trump, they just might not like left-wing radicalism even more.

I've told this story before, but let me briefly bring it up one more time: A long time ago, I think it was 2011, Donald Trump called me up to ask for advice. He was thinking of running for president and wanted my opinion. (He knew me from the O'Reilly Factor on TV and I had covered him in Scotland while he was engulfed in controversy regarding a golf course he was trying to build. He said he thought I was fair.) I told him that I'm a journalist and so I don't give advice to people thinking about running for president. He understood.

If he asked me now, I just might break my rule and give him this advice: Ignore your base because they'll be with you no matter what. Appeal to those moderates your base detests. Talk less about Iran, and tariffs, and immigration and more about the economy.

And I'd conclude with this: "One more thing Mr. President: Knock off the trash talk. Your base might love the name-calling but it makes most Americans cringe. If you don't cut it out, Biden's message about your divisiveness and his desire to bring Americans together will resonate – and you will lose the election. You, Mr. President, are the single biggest obstacle standing in the way of your reelection next year."