

What Suburban Swing Voters Want Post-Coronavirus



Third Way



David Binder Research

2020 will be a leadership election. And for most voters, their standard is clear: They want a leader who understands them, who can get things done, and who does what's right.

That was the biggest takeaway from a multi-day conversation with suburban swing voters in battleground states in an online qualitative board (qual board) that Third Way conducted with David Binder Research (DBR) from April 28 to May 1.

But there is also another force shaping these voters' decision-making: a fierce sense of urgency brought on by the coronavirus and economic breakdown. Suburban swing voters, like all Americans, have been deeply affected by these dual crises. They need to know that they are going to be alright and that we will get out of this mess. Candidates' vision for the post-pandemic future may be just as important as leadership style in this time of crisis.

This exploration was the first round of research in a major public opinion project focused on suburban voters that we will conduct through the election. The goal of this round was to identify key themes rather than find definitive answers. What follows are observations and implications from this research, which are our first building blocks for understanding suburban voters and what it will take to win them over in this new political moment.

Methodology

Third Way and DBR conducted a qual board with suburban swing voters in Arizona, Michigan, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin from April 28 to May 1. Most of the 24 participants supported Donald Trump in 2016 but came into the discussion undecided. Ultimately, a quarter ended up leaning toward Joe Biden, and an equal number remained undecided. None moved to solid Trump by the end. The group was mixed gender, ethnicity, and education, and ranged in age from 30 to 74.



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This research focused on a specific but crucial group of voters: those in the decisive suburbs of key battleground states whose votes are still up for grabs. While we expect many of these insights apply to voters beyond this subset, the intensity and specifics of sentiments may differ with other voting groups.

Observations and Implications

The Presidential Leadership Balance

Observation

Voters say a balance of strength and empathy is the presidential leadership they want at this moment, but neither candidate has mastered this yet. Qual board participants were clear that Biden is an empathetic leader, while Trump is decidedly not. Even beyond empathy, they felt Biden could *relate* to their hardships on a personal level because he has experienced so many in his own life. But participants associated Trump with strength. Trump's strength was a positive, particularly when voters thought about it in the context of decisiveness. Biden's long career in politics cut against his perceived strength at times; some wondered if he had the resolve to get hard things done. Biden's age was also referenced in connection to whether he has the strength to push through his policies.

“Compassion/Empathy but be strong at the same time.” – AZ female

“I believe Trump is strong, but I think he is compassionate for the big business interests.” – MI male

“I feel bad for [Biden’s] personal tragedies but this in no way prepares him to lead us out of this crisis.” – AZ male

Implication

The candidate who strikes a balance between strength and empathy is on track to seize the leadership mantle. It appeared unlikely that Trump could remedy his empathy problem with these voters; only five of 24 said he “[had] been comforting and reassuring about the crisis.” And there may also be opportunities to recast Trump’s strength and decisiveness as recklessness. Participants cited with dismay that Trump spurned the advice of experts in favor of his instincts during the current crisis. By challenging Trump’s questionable decisions and providing clear and bold alternatives, we may have an opportunity to use Trump’s recklessness to undercut rather than bolster his perceived strength. But this opportunity may be limited if Biden is unsuccessful in highlighting his strength to voters.

“I don’t know if [Biden’s] as strong as a political leader. He has good ideas and beliefs, but does he have the strength to get it done. He needs to strengthen his backbone.” – PA female

“The president has not been helpful because his information is always inconsistent, devoid of facts, and goes against science and the health experts.” – AZ female

Uncertainty From The Coronavirus Crisis

Observation

Voters’ personal and economic traumas from the coronavirus crisis are producing intense uncertainty about the future. Participants did not know when the crisis will be under control, when their lives will get back to normal, and what their new normal might look like. This led to specific fears and intense anxieties about their own jobs, income, and retirement savings, as well as the health of themselves and their families. In the political realm, participants felt that partisan divisions are only getting worse, which magnified their anxieties and left them feeling we are rudderless as a country. And while they acknowledged federal actions like

stimulus checks and small business aid helped to a degree, they perceived these steps as “not nearly enough” and too slow to meet their urgent needs, and so they did little to stem their anxieties.

“Can I go back to work and be fine and not catch again? Will I be able to make the money I need?” – MI male

“I don't know where we are headed. It's very confusing.” – MI female

“Save [stimulus money] as long as possible! No it doesn't match the scale of the need or problem. Not even close.” – NC male

Implication

The coronavirus crisis has created an urgent leadership void, and the right person can fill it. Participants' uncertainty led them to long for a calm, competent, and compassionate leader, one who can provide clear and consistent direction. But in this steady hand, they also wanted a sense of urgency. Participants recognized Trump's eagerness to reopen the economy. But they worried he might do so in a reckless way, and most had no faith in his commitment to other people's best interests. By contrast, there was a sense that if Democrats and Biden were in control, they would focus on what's best for people and act with urgency. Directly making this case could help fill voters' coronavirus leadership void.

“We need someone who is honest, listens to the best people, makes decisions in a careful methodical way, and doesn't shoot from the hip.” – AZ male

“I could just hope a Democrat would have more of a sense of urgency for the people.” – PA female

Vision in This Time of Crisis

Observation

Perceptions of Trump's handling of this crisis range from lukewarm to highly critical among these voters, and the public health and economic peril has left them wanting for presidential vision. Most participants said that Trump's response during this crisis has not reassured them, and this has made them eager for a new vision for the country. However, they had a difficult time articulating the full consequences of Trump's missteps. Some said that a

Democrat would have relied more on experts and acted sooner, but others believed any president would have been left with similar choices as Trump. Ultimately, few were confident that Democrats' response to the crisis would be better, and even fewer were clear about what Democrats' alternative might look like.

“The country, in general, was unprepared for an event like this. I don't think another president would do much better.” – WI male

“I don't necessarily think anyone would have done a better job, given the info that was given.” – AZ female

Implication

It will be vital to make the real-world consequences of Trump's poor decisions clear, and in doing so, articulate a vision for moving the country forward together again. We must focus on the alternative paths that could have been taken, and a vision for how things would be better for the country under a competent administration. Participants cited a desire for leaders who listen to experts, are transparent from day 1, and work with allies to tackle global threats. Beyond restoring competency to the White House, there was a hope that this vision could lead us to a place of consensus as a country for the first time in a long time. And an important corollary to emphasize is that this won't be the last crisis in the next four years, and there is no indication that Trump has learned any lessons from this one. If voters believe he flubbed this, why should they entrust him to handle the next crisis more competently?

“I think Biden has better leadership qualities to guide the country through COVID-19. In a press conference I saw President Trump refuse to be accountable for missteps that were made by the administration.” – MI male

“I can see Biden accepting the help of many to brainstorm the next best plan of action.” – PA female

Vision as a Contrast to Trump

Observation

As voters long for presidential leadership and vision, some are unenthusiastic about both Trump and Biden and view this choice as between the “lesser of two evils.” Participants

regarded Biden as a likable and sympathetic figure. So, it is important to caution against comparing to 2016 when this “lesser of two evils” narrative was (unfairly) dominant. But they also felt that Biden carries a lot of baggage, and some were concerned about his age. Most importantly, they did not have a clear sense of what a Biden presidency would mean for the country, openly worrying that he lacks vision. Some of these same participants expressed displeasure and frustration with Trump’s coronavirus response and viewed Biden as both more compassionate and more competent, but they were nonetheless uninspired by their options.

“Not too happy with our choices, I would prefer not to vote again for Trump but Biden comes with a lot of problems... so it’s truly a best of two evils election.” – AZ male

“[Biden] seems okay but I need to see what he is saying in regards to his future plans for America over the next four years.” – NC male

Implication

Clearly articulating a vision for the future of American life could solidify a sharp contrast with Trump. Democrats are asking voters to change horses midstream, and that stream is an historic global public health crisis and recession. Participants were clear that they need a vision of what an alternative would look like before making this leap. Biden has an opportunity to stress the positives voters already see in him: his focus on helping middle- and working-class Americans, and compassionate, competent leadership of which Trump is incapable. But it will also be important to share a vision for what the future holds for individuals and the country in this time of anxiety and change.

“I like how Biden supports the working class. I respect him for that.” – PA female

“The current president has not been all bad and the Democratic president would be a change.” – NC female

“What concerns me about Joe Biden is that I don’t think he has a vision of the country, per se, or at least, whatever vision he takes with him on the campaign trail will not be his; it will be the vision demanded of him by those that scream the loudest in his party.” – NC female

The Debate Over How to Define Biden

Observation

Voters are torn between perceiving Biden's experience in a positive light (by his unique record) or negatively (as the status quo). Participants were asked to describe Biden in a word or two; the most commonly referenced word was "experienced." There was a shared sense that Biden's record is proof that he knows what it takes to be president. In the coronavirus context, many felt his experience would have led him to act sooner and listen to experts. But some characterized Biden's experience as evidence that he is a career politician or likely to return us to the status quo, even those who at other times described him favorably as experienced. These conversations also veered into questions about Biden's age.

"[Biden's] been in government a long time so he knows how to get things done." – WI male

"The negatives about a Joe Biden presidency would be a return to status quo." – MI male

Implication

The frequency and intensity of this debate over Biden's experience suggests it may be pivotal in how he is ultimately defined. Participants grappled with how to describe Biden, with some alternating between highlighting his experience as a positive and worrying that he is a product of Washington who will offer more of the same. Many looked back fondly on the Obama administration, they credited Biden for his role in it, and they believed he would strike a similar course as president. But those who worried that Biden would be a return to the status quo cited the need for substantial change, especially in the face of the coronavirus crisis. Given the weight that participants placed on this debate, favorably defining Biden by his unique experience rather than as a status quo politician may be essential to winning over many undecided voters.

"Joe is a typical politician, he has been around a long time and knows how to play the game. Give and take. That can be a good thing and a bad thing." – PA female

"I like his experience as the Vice President under President Obama for two terms but he is borderline too old for the office." – AZ male

Anxieties About Giving Democrats the Wheel

Observation

Voters perceive that there are two different wings of the Democratic Party, and they are concerned and confused about which would drive a future Democratic administration.

Participants raised some specific concerns about Democrats taking power, including around immigration, increased taxes and spending, the country moving too far to the left generally, and that Democrats may be too friendly toward China. A broader worry from some was that Democrats seem to care about distinct groups of people rather than the country as a whole. These concerns were even transposed onto Biden, who some characterized as actively moving left to consolidate his base.

“[I’d be concerned] that they will take the country too far left. I think we need borders. I think the idea of the Green New Deal is crazy.” – PA female

“Some aspects of Trump would be better, closing off access from China, I know Biden wouldn’t have done that as fast as Trump, Biden loves China.” – PA male

“While I don’t agree with most of [Biden’s] policy ideas, especially since he has moved left, I cannot deny that he is a likable person.” – PA male

Implication

It is not possible to assuage all of swing voters’ concerns about the Democratic Party, but there is an opportunity in this time of crisis to pivot toward emphasizing that the party is for working people. Participants were negative about some aspects of what they perceived to be the Democratic Party platform, but they consistently cited Democrats’ commitment to working people as a positive of giving the party control. This perception also fits with voters’ opinion of Biden as supportive and empathetic toward the struggles of the little guy (participants referenced “Amtrak Joe”). It is particularly salient during this current crisis when voters need to know that leaders are working in their best interests. And it also escapes the trap of sounding like the party that cares primarily about a laundry list of specific demographic groups (a list whose contents may not include some of the swing voters we need to win).

“I think a decisive victory, perhaps both legislative and presidential, will embolden Democrats to push through some huge changes, especially if one assumes the coronavirus to still be raging. Everything under the sun would get funding, much of it irrelevant to our current crisis, and of course, our taxes would eventually reflect this. The class divide and partisan divide would get over worse than it is now. I thought

we were headed inevitably to a civil war before the coronavirus; a Democratic victory would make this even more likely, in my opinion.” – NC female

“I feel [Democrats] have been more compassionate and just visually I have seen more help at the level of everyday people from Democrats vs the Republican party . . . I feel that the health care workers I know are all on board Democrat.” – WI female

Challenges and Opportunities of a Recovery

Observation

Voters have positive memories of the pre-coronavirus economy, and some hang onto the notion that Trump may be the one to get us back to it. Participants associated the pre-coronavirus economy with low unemployment and general prosperity. Only a few mentioned that economic conditions before the pandemic were marked by rising debt and inequality. Right now, they see the pre-coronavirus economy through deeply rose-colored glasses—and it looks like paradise compared to our current circumstances. In this context, most said that they hope we can return to the economic conditions we had at the start of 2020; this is their standard for a recovery. This gives Trump an edge, as he can claim he stewarded the economy well until forces beyond all of our control intervened. And it continues to play into Trump’s businessman credentials, which some cited as a reason for why he may be able to lead this recovery.

“Just three months ago we were thriving, companies were flourishing and doing well. Money was to be made. Small and big businesses were doing great.” – NC female

“I think I have more confidence in Trump and his big business buddies to get things on track.” – MI male

Implication

Voters’ yearning for a return to a pre-coronavirus economy presents Trump with an immediate challenge, but it also gives him a real opportunity. Repairing the economy amid a rolling public health crisis will be incredibly difficult. But if there are early signs of economic progress this summer and fall, participants appeared ready to credit Trump (while blaming the downturn on factors beyond the control of any leader). Instead of trying to convince voters that their memories of the pre-coronavirus economy are not reality and that things were worse for them than they recall, Democrats may be better served with a message that

proactively makes the case that our economic needs coming out of the pandemic will be fundamentally different. The country will need new strategies and ideas for getting people back to work and ensuring economic security—and the party that helps working people is better equipped to design and execute them.

“I think that as a businessman, [Trump’s] knowledge of finance can help with the fallout of the virus. He will look out for the economy.” – PA female

“The COVID-19 pandemic is one of my top concerns and how my new normal will look once I return to work.” – NC female

Conclusion

This initial round of research suggests that the coronavirus crisis is shaping suburban swing voters’ criteria for 2020: they want a leader with vision and a sense of urgency. Biden is capable of making real gains with these voters. He embodies many of the qualities they are looking for in a leader, and they trust that he would bring a steady hand to the presidency. But there are outstanding questions about his strength, vision for the country, ability to offer the ideas needed to meet this new and changing world, and some worry about where he will orient himself within the ideological spectrum of the Democratic Party. And while it is vital to be responsive to the crisis we face now, it is also essential to be prepared for how to frame early signs of an economic recovery before the election. We hope to further explore these themes in our next round of research into suburban voters and the election in 2020.