

Opinion | ‘American Values’ Portend Trump’s Defeat

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Democrats and Republicans are competing to define the agenda in the waning days of the 2020 campaign, but voters have reached their own conclusions. Americans rate the coronavirus pandemic as more critical than any other issue, and they aren’t pleased with how it has been handled. This is one of the principal findings of [the annual American Values Survey](#), released on Monday and conducted by the Public Religion Research Institute in partnership with the Brookings Institution, where I am a scholar.

Some 69% of Americans believe that the country could have dealt with Covid-19 more effectively, and 65% disapprove of how President Trump has handled the disease, including 61% of seniors, 65% of Americans in Sunbelt swing states and 66% in Rust Belt swing states. Mr. Trump’s attacks on governors and mayors who have adopted strong measures to contain the disease are unlikely to change many minds: 76% of Americans—including 56% of Republicans—believe that actions such as shutdowns and mask mandates by state and local officials are reasonable steps to protect public health and safety, not unreasonable restrictions on individual liberty.

Americans have come to favor policies that many would oppose in less-threatening circumstances. Nearly 80% agree with the statement that things are so off track that major policy changes are required to help everyday Americans. Solid majorities now support affordable child care, a guaranteed minimum income, free tuition at public universities, and some version of Medicare for All. All these measures enjoy majority support across racial and ethnic lines, and two—affordable child care and a guaranteed minimum income—across partisan divides as well. Support for these measures could wane as details and costs are debated. But for now, proponents of increased government action are playing offense while opponents are on defense.

Another matter—the protests this summer following killings of black Americans by police—is cutting against Mr. Trump. Sixty-four percent of Americans disapprove of the president’s response to these events, including 62% of seniors, 63% of Americans in Sunbelt swing states and 65% in Rust Belt swing states. Mr. Trump’s efforts to reframe this issue have not succeeded: 56% of Americans regard police killings of blacks as part of a broader pattern rather than as isolated incidents, and 58% of Americans support the goals of the Black Lives Matter movement.

Here as elsewhere, however, there are deep divides along racial and partisan lines. Roughly half of white Americans regard these killings as isolated incidents, compared with 36% of Hispanics and only 14% of blacks. Similarly, 79% of Republicans see the killings as isolated incidents, compared with 40% of independents and merely 17% of Democrats.

Then there's criminal justice. While 52% of Americans believe that slavery and discrimination have made it difficult for black people to work their way up, 79% of Republicans disagree. Indeed, 59% of Republicans believe that white people face "a lot of discrimination," compared with only 49% of Republicans who believe that black people do. Roughly 54% of Republicans believe that diversity efforts come at the expense of whites, compared with 34% of all Americans.

Mr. Trump's character and personal conduct are adding to his troubles. About half of Americans say that Mr. Biden has the right temperament and personality to be president, compared with 25% who say this of Mr. Trump. When asked who cares more about "people like you" and who is more "honest and trustworthy," the former vice president leads the president by similar margins. Thirty-six percent of Americans say that Joe Biden has strong religious beliefs, compared with 18% for Donald Trump. Nearly 40% say that Mr. Trump is mostly using religion for political purposes, while only 14% say this about Mr. Biden.

These criticisms go to the heart of the Trump presidency: 68% of Americans wish that Mr. Trump spoke and behaved more like previous presidents, while 63% believe that he has damaged the dignity of the presidency. Nearly 6 in 10 of Americans say that his personal conduct makes them less likely to support him for re-election.

Mr. Trump has worked hard to make the American people view his Democratic challenger as an unacceptable alternative. He has alleged that Mr. Biden lacks the requisite energy and mental acuity for the presidency, that he is either a socialist or a tool of socialists in his party, and that he and his son are corrupt. These charges fire up the president's base, but there is no evidence that they are winning many converts. With two weeks and one debate to go, President Trump is reduced to pleading with suburban women to like him. Unfortunately for him, most don't.

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