



**COQ**

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# **THE TRUMP CARD**

**HIS BASE IS SOLID ...  
AND COULD BE ALL  
HE NEEDS IN 2020**



# THE IMMOVABLE

By JOHN T. BENNETT

**C**ould a deeply unpopular president be re-elected? At the midpoint between Donald Trump's surprise election last year and the 2018 midterm elections, the president is mired in historically low approval ratings. A majority of Americans doubt both his fitness for office and his honesty, and Trump himself has done little to reach beyond his narrow political base.

The first week of November brought new signs of chinks in Trump's armor, most notably Democrat Ralph Northam's trouncing of Republican Ed Gillespie in Virginia's hotly contested gubernatorial race. Though Gillespie never fully embraced Trumpism, he aligned himself with the president on issues like immigration and leaving Confederate statues be.

But Virginia has been a more favorable battlefield for Democrats — Hillary Clinton won the commonwealth by 5 percentage points in her 2016 loss, the only Southern state she won — in recent cycles.

And the president's sector of loyal supporters — bolstered by traditional Republicans who backed Trump last time and may be unlikely to switch — could still be enough to keep Trump on track for re-election in 2020 even with his unprecedented unpopularity.

Compared to this point in the tenures of his predecessors going back to President Harry S. Truman, Trump's mid-30s approval rating is the worst of the lot — by a lot, according to Gallup's presidential approval tracking polls. Bill Clinton comes closest with 48 percent approval about a year into his first term.

In the wake of the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks, George W. Bush had the highest ratings with 87 percent. Even Jimmy Carter, who failed in his re-election bid, had the approval of a little over half of Americans.

Trump's numbers haven't swung as widely as past presidents, though, and therein lies the path to his electoral success. Despite a stalled legislative agenda and the ongoing Justice Department and congressional probes into Russia's election meddling, his base is showing few signs of dissolving.

Brad Bannon, a Democratic strategist, says poll data he has reviewed shows the president has a solid base of 35 to 40 percent of the electorate — a consistent level of support unmatched by any other national politician. That doesn't necessarily make Trump unstoppable, but it gives him a major advantage, he says.



# FORCE

**Trump backers rarely flinch, but loyalty is crucial to keep him in the running for 2020**



Alex Wong/Getty Images

“There is no evidence — as of now, at least — that they’re going anywhere,” Bannon says. “These people are Trump diehards that will follow him through hell and high water.”

Jerri Ann Henry, a Republican strategist with APCO Worldwide, a Washington-based strategic communications firm, predicts the president will be a serious political force in both the midterms and the presidential election.

“There’s no doubt about that — the mere topic of Trump’s base strikes fear in people. You can see it in their eyes,” she says. “He is a force to be reckoned with for years to come — and people still are trying to understand just how he got elected in the first place and who is his base.”

Political strategists of all stripes believe Trump’s base might be even larger, with several estimating it could be in the low 40s. Polls can fail to accurately measure support for many reasons, among them “perception bias,” meaning supporters might withhold their positive opinions of a candidate or issue for fear of criticism. Candidate Trump outperformed his 2016 poll numbers, and some experts pointed to this psychological force as a factor. The Democrats’ nominee for the 2020 election is another factor that could potentially boost Trump’s base.

## SO MANY QUESTIONS

But as always with this most unconventional and unprecedented of chief executives, there are question marks and caveats. Or, as former Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld once called them: “unknown unknowns.”

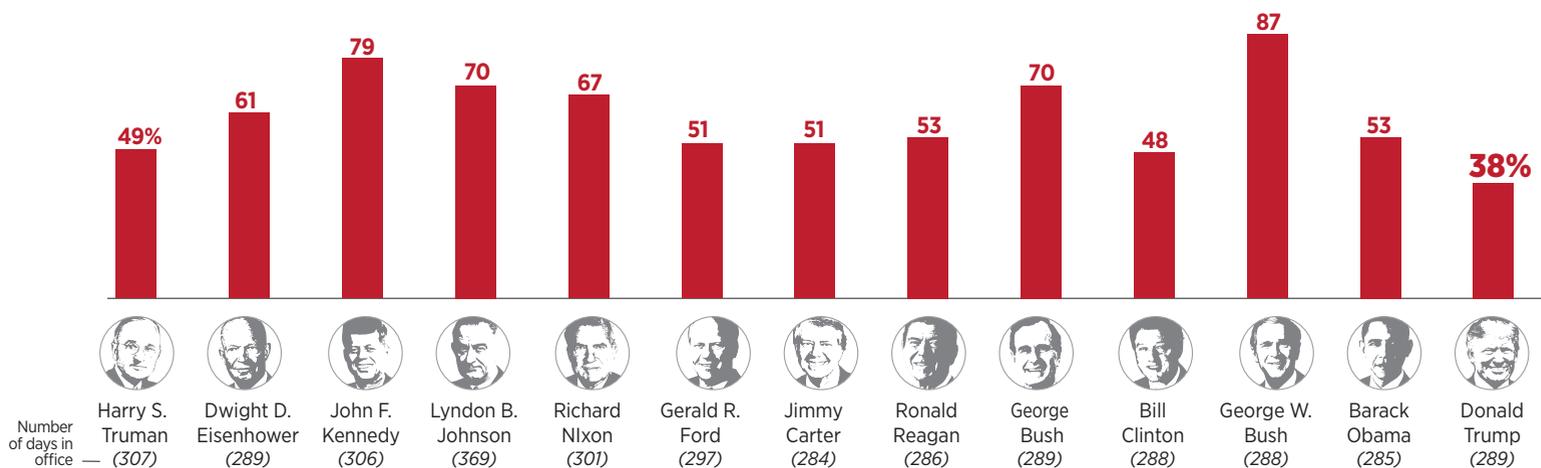
Will Trump even run for a second term? GOP Sen. Rand Paul of Kentucky, who sometimes golfs with Trump, recently suggested he might not, telling MSNBC that Republicans “need to know [if] President Trump [is] running for re-election.”

And New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie, a longtime Trump pal, described the prospect in heavily qualified terms late last month on NBC’s “Today,” saying: “If he runs again I would support him, yes, but I’m not so sure what will happen.”

If Trump is unable to achieve significant domestic successes, how much could that hurt him? Trump and Republicans have failed to at least partially repeal and replace the 2010 health law, a major campaign promise. An ongoing-but-tricky tax overhaul ef-

## Presidential Popularity

It's been nearly 10 months since Donald Trump became president. Compared to this point in the tenures of his predecessors going back to President Harry S. Truman, Trump's mid-30s approval rating is the worst of the lot.



Source: Gallup

fort is anything but a done deal. The president put Congress on the hook to pass a bipartisan immigration bill by the spring, but already there are major roadblocks to agreement. And a plan to invest in infrastructure, on which there is widespread agreement but little action, appears months, or longer, down the road.

As Thanksgiving approaches, the 45th president has yet to put his signature on a major piece of legislation.

The caveats and questions do not end there. How far will Special Counsel Robert S. Mueller go in his Russia investigation, when will it become public, and could it be enough to erode Trump's base or send other Republican voters clamoring for a different 2020 nominee? And then there's the possibility of impeachment if evidence is found that Trump or his campaign purposely helped Russia interfere in the election. House Republicans, who would have to start that process in the current Congress, are standing by their man so far. That's largely because he polls so well among Republicans — often above 80 percent or even 90 percent in many of their districts. Call it impeachment prevention, at least for now.

To be sure, the president is mindful of such things. Even after creating disruptions in his own party, he always aggressively tacks

back to his conservative followers. Note, for instance, what happened after Trump spent much of September attacking rank-and-file Republican lawmakers and GOP leaders.

On Sept. 6, photographers had captured a telling, and surprising, image inside the Oval Office: There was Trump — the GOP president who had spent so much time as a candidate and then as the country's top Republican, savaging Democratic leaders — with his hands on Charles E. Schumer's shoulder. Trump and the Senate Democratic leader were sharing a laugh. Standing nearby, Marc Short, the White House's top liaison to Congress and a longtime staunch Republican, was not laughing.

Schumer had come to the executive mansion along with House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif.; House Speaker Paul D. Ryan, R-Wis.; and Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, R-Ky. On the agenda was a trio of time-sensitive matters: the fast-approaching deadline to pass a government-funding bill, the debt ceiling and hurricane relief funding for Texas and Florida.

Surprising everyone in the room — including Short and other top aides — Trump sided with Schumer and Pelosi. It happened again eight days later, when Trump dined alone with the two se-

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GOP Rep. Mark Meadows, House Freedom Caucus chairman

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**PARTY SWITCH:** Schumer and Trump in the Oval Office as Short looks on Sept. 6.

Alex Wong/Getty Images

nior Democrats. The trio agreed to some starting points toward a sweeping immigration bill — and said they would keep talking. Trump meanwhile continued to express frustration over the Republicans’ inability to get their shared agenda off the ground, and to strike deals with Democrats. To his base of supporters, it was all a bit confusing.

Then on Friday, Sept. 21, the president boarded Air Force One and headed to Huntsville, Ala., for a political rally in a state where he easily won both the 2016 GOP presidential primary and the general election. He stepped onto the stage that night amid a deluge of recent headlines from conservative sites like Breitbart and conservative talk radio segments questioning whether he was selling out by working with Schumer and Pelosi — two of the Washington figures most despised by his base.

What happened next was vintage Trump.

Always mindful that his political base is, well, his trump card, the president that night did what he so often does to keep his base from feeling neglected: He threw his mostly white, blue-collar, rural supporters a bone.

He took aim at National Football League players for kneeling during the national anthem in protest of racial injustice and police

brutality.

“Wouldn’t you love to see one of these NFL owners, when somebody disrespects our flag, to say, ‘Get that son of a bitch off the field right now, out. He’s fired! He’s fired!’” Trump said. He went on, saying any team owner who did so would “be the most popular person in this country. Because that’s a total disrespect of our heritage. That’s a total disrespect for everything we stand for.”

The crowd roared its approval.

Over the next days he provided a steady diet of such comfort food for his supporters, saucing it with racial undertones, patriotism and the nativism that helped propel him to the presidency.

Trump had changed the subject and reminded his base — his biggest source of leverage over congressional Republicans and his built-in head start in a potential 2020 GOP primary — that despite his recent Washington maneuvering, he sees the country as they do and is one of them.

### UNPRACTICED POLITICIAN

That sort of disruption is actually part of his appeal, says Gary Abernathy, publisher and editor of the Hillsboro, Ohio, *Times-Gazette*, which endorsed Trump.

“I think people here in Ohio are kind of tired of the practiced politician, the person who follows the talking points and doesn’t say anything without a focus group telling them what to say,” Abernathy says.

Jim Worthington, the owner of an athletic club in the Philadelphia suburbs, founded People4Trump last year and was among a group of small business owners to meet with him in August. He says he’s had to defend the area’s freshman Republican Rep. Brian Fitzpatrick, a moderate who has not always backed the president, against fellow Trump supporters. “A lot of them are all or nothing with the president. They love him,” Worthington says.

When the president flew to Dallas on Oct. 25 for a hurricane recovery briefing and a major fundraiser, supporters greeted him at Love Field. Pool reporters there with Trump spoke to some of them, including Patty Tellez, 63, who described herself as a retired parole officer from Trophy Club, a Dallas suburb of about 12,000 residents.

“The country needed him. He’s what the American people

**SWEET HOME ALABAMA:**  
Trump at a Sept. 22 rally for  
Sen. Luther Strange, R-Ala.





Evan Vuocol/AP

wanted,” Tellez said as she waited for Air Force One to touch down. “We needed a change. No matter what party you’re in, you’re going to have people who don’t like him. But the American people have spoken.”

And, in some ways, criticism may actually help him, says Republican lobbyist Jeffrey Taylor, of U.S. Government Relations International in Arlington, Va.

“There’s a sense he’s been picked on unfairly and the response is loyalty, that they are going to stick with him through thick and thin,” says Taylor.

In recent versions of The Economist/YouGov survey, 1,500 respondents are asked weekly whether they approve or disapprove of the way Trump is handling his job. Trump routinely approaches the 40 percent mark when those responding “strongly approve” and “somewhat approve” are grouped together. (The Economist Group is the parent company of CQ.)

In the same survey, he generally scores a point or two higher than that among those who have a very favorable or somewhat favorable opinion of him generally. Trump’s numbers on those and other questions asked each week in the most recent version of the survey, conducted Nov. 5-7, are similar to several months’ worth of Economist/YouGov data reviewed for this article.

Major surveys including Gallup’s daily tracking poll and the Washington Post-ABC News poll have reported similar findings.

## CONSISTENCY MATTERS

The apparent stability of the Electoral College adds to the likelihood of Trump’s job security. Americans have preferred continuity, returning four of the last five presidents to office. Only George H.W. Bush was ousted after one term.

Still, Trump’s base does not automatically cancel out his blemishes. As Bannon, put it: “He has his problems.”

The harsh assessments from much, if not most, of the electorate in these polls can’t be ignored.

On key issues, such as how voters view his honesty, experience, sincerity and ability to inspire, Trump’s negatives are at or above 40 percent, according to multiple prominent polls. Only about a third of those surveyed view him as effective at this point in his presidency.

The Economist/YouGov poll recently found that 54 percent disapproved of how he’s doing his job, 53 percent considered him “not honest and trustworthy” and 56 percent doubted he has the right disposition for the job. Also, 56 percent were so put off by the commander in chief they want him to forego a second term.

Of course, candidate Trump was just as unpopular on such questions — and even on his overall approval rating. He won anyway. And he won easily, at least at the Electoral College level, even while

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Republican lobbyist **Jeffrey Taylor**, of U.S. Government Relations International, in Arlington, Va., talking about Trump’s base.

losing the popular vote to Clinton.

Trump has proved particularly adept at branding his foes as public villains, a tool he’d be expected to employ again to fend off Democrats in 2020 in the places that will matter most — such as the working-class areas of the Rust Belt or the upper Midwest. Yet none of his long list of GOP primary foes was ever that popular. And in the general election, a big part of his winning formula was that Clinton was intensely unpopular. Some of the two-time Barack Obama voters in key states that went for Trump could tire of his antics or get frustrated if his “America First” agenda stalls, and pick the Democrat next time.

### MIDTERM MIGHT?

Any built-in base advantage won’t merely come into play during Trump’s expected re-election bid. It could be key in next year’s midterm elections, which many voters typically sit out.

But Bannon, the Democratic strategist, sees something in the joint White House-Trump campaign organization strategy:

“Reading the tea leaves, it seems to me the White House and the Trump folks are saying about next fall, ‘We have this big, energized, diehard following. We can turn them out. Can the Democrats say the same thing about their turnout?’”

A partial answer may have come from the Nov. 7 off-year elections, where Democrats did very well not just at the gubernatorial level, but gained numerous seats in places like the Virginia House of Delegates.

In the meantime, though, nearly every day, in messages that can be subtle or blatant, the president finds ways to nourish his ties to that base through policy decisions, prepared speeches, ad-libbed remarks or his infamous tweets.

And the occasion doesn’t even have to be relevant. For instance, as he introduced John Kelly as his new chief of staff in the Oval Office on July 31, Trump commented that he felt Kelly would do well. Then, apropos of nothing and unprompted by reporters, he tossed in a simple comment: “We have a tremendous base.”

At an Oct. 19 rally in Richmond, Va., for Northam, Obama cautioned against politicians who succeed through division, and spoke of the difficulties that typically follow in trying to reunite citizens



Tom Williams/CQ Roll Call

and govern the nation.

“We’ve got folks who are deliberately trying to make folks angry, to demonize people who have different ideas, to get the base all riled up because it provides a short-term tactical advantage,” Obama told the crowd of 8,000. The 44th president didn’t name names. He knew he didn’t have to.

Some D.C. veterans think Trump’s base could continue to grow in regions suffering from steep business decline and job losses unless the economic trends and fears he tapped into as a candidate are reversed.

“Until we find a policy to meet this need, Americans will elect Trumps forever,” Gordon Adams, a former Clinton administration official, wrote in a recent Facebook post. “We live, today, in a world of tribalism [and] manipulated fear.”

Even if candidates resist the temptation to go “full Trump” by echoing his policies and copying his style, Bannon predicts a poor GOP performance in the 2018 cycle likely would not hurt the president’s odds for re-election.

“I’ve always thought Trump would survive his mistakes but the GOP might not. Trump’s a survivor but the GOP might not survive the carnage,” he says. The issue is more than academic, as Trump and his allies didn’t even wait until Election Day was over to criticize Gillespie for not fully embracing the president.

**“If anyone thinks Donald Trump is irrelevant today ... they’re just crazy. That’s dangerous. He’s too good. He is the master of modern American politics.”**

Brad Bannon, Democratic strategist

**‘STRONG, STRONG CANDIDATE’**

Veteran GOP lawmakers agree their standard-bearer’s style is unprecedented, but many deny he’s a drag on their agenda and, despite the troubling poll numbers at this early stage, they expect him to be a formidable candidate in 2020.

Some even blame themselves.

“It’s Congress’ inaction that adversely affects his poll numbers,” says GOP Rep. Mark Meadows of North Carolina, the House Freedom Caucus chairman. If lawmakers don’t start delivering on their promises, he says, it will surely haunt them come 2020.

“I can tell you that if we don’t get things done, we will hope and pray for the president’s poll numbers to be ours because ours will be a whole lot less.”

Congress has a much deeper hole to dig itself out of in restoring its credibility.

An Economist/YouGov survey taken Oct. 29-31 found that only 2 percent strongly approved and 8 percent somewhat approved of how lawmakers are doing their job.

That’s stacked up against 59 percent who either strongly disapproved or somewhat disapproved of how Congress conducts itself professionally.

The loyalty of Trump’s base has largely protected him from any exodus of GOP support that might have bedeviled another president polling so poorly nationally.

Says Meadows with a chuckle: “You ought to check out the last

poll that came out in my state. They want him to run again.”

GOP Rep. Peter T. King of New York seems similarly unconcerned that the president’s overall ratings on character and job performance may portend re-election troubles, at least among his constituents.

“Nah,” he says with a dismissive wave. “I saw a poll in my district ... where his unfavorables had gone up considerably,” King says of his Long Island-based 2nd District. “I live in a Democratic district that Obama carried twice — but the president would still beat Hillary Clinton head-to-head in the district.” (Trump carried King’s district by 9 points.)

Where such local support for Trump holds steady, Republicans like King are likely to stand by Trump.

“He probably has a larger base than anyone in the country,” King says. “People seemed inclined to say, ‘He talks too much or he tweets too much.’ But when he’s up against someone else [in poll questions], they still go with him. ... He’s going to be a strong, strong candidate in 2020.”

Still, plenty of Republican lawmakers are hedging. Some, like Rep. Bill Flores of Texas, refused any comment one way or another about polls reflecting the president’s popularity problems. Others are playing it coy.

“The public’s sentiment is the public’s sentiment,” says Rep. Mark Sanford of South Carolina. “People decide what they decide at an individual level. I’ll leave it to you all to interpret the tea leaves as to what that means.”

Asked whether Trump’s low poll ratings erode his sway on Capitol Hill and ability to wrangle support among the Republican caucus, he demurred with a slight grin in his Palmetto State drawl: “Y’all will decide that one.”

Across the Capitol, the only Republicans expressing their independence from the president are two retiring senators — Bob Corker of Tennessee and Jeff Flake of Arizona — and the chamber’s longtime “maverick,” Arizona Sen. John McCain.

That distinction was perhaps never more apparent than on Oct. 24, when Trump came to the Capitol for lunch with Republicans hours after harshly attacking Corker on Twitter. Republican senators emerged all smiles and heaped praise on the often-bombastic president, stressing that their shared legislative agenda had not changed, and describing his lunchtime message as “upbeat” and



**NOT HIS FAULT:** Meadows blames Congress for his party’s woes.

Bill Clark/CO Roll Call



**YES, VIRGINIA:**  
Northam's win  
was a big boost  
for Democrats.

Win McNamee/Getty Images

“positive.” They largely side-stepped the president’s internecine Twitter attack.

Asked about the Corker-Trump rift, Senate Majority Leader McConnell said, “I don’t have any observation about that.”

Minutes later, Flake went to the floor of the Senate to announce he would retire, his re-election made virtually impossible amid a Trump movement that he said had transformed the Republican Party. In a blistering speech, he accused his party of complicity in enabling a president with a “flagrant disregard for truth or decency,” and described Trump as dangerous for democracy. Some Republicans gave him a standing ovation.

In the tumultuous 24 hours after the lunch and Flake’s announcement, McConnell and other GOP senators told just about any journalist they could find that the party and president are working together toward the same policy goals, and they lectured reporters to focus on that common agenda, not Trump’s verbal broadsides at members of his own party.

“We’re here to try to accomplish things for the American people,” McConnell said. “We’re all on the same page on the issues that I’ve mentioned, and, of course, front and center is comprehensive tax reform.”

Republican senators busily pushed the same line, chalking up Trump’s recent lashes against his own party as simply the mark of a different kind of president.

Among most GOP lawmakers who intend to stick around Wash-

ington, there is little evidence they are preparing to resist Trump in 2020.

“It should be obvious to everyone by now that we have a president who has a very unique personality, very different than what we’ve ever seen in a president before,” GOP Sen. Jim Risch of Idaho told CNN the day after the lunch. “He communicates differently. He handles issues differently, and it causes some grief with some people.”

Risch is angling to take over the Foreign Relations Committee when Corker leaves office in January 2019, assuming Republicans still control the Senate, which would put him in charge of the panel’s oversight of Trump’s global affairs policies. He called the Trump feuds with his fellow Republicans mere “personality clashes.”

Then came the Virginia returns.

## **OLD DOMINION BEATDOWN**

Northam’s 9-point win over Gillespie, at first glance, appears a major loss for Trump that might cast doubts on whether wooing his base in any one state will be enough for House, Senate and gubernatorial candidates. Lawmakers and experts responded to the sizable Democratic victory the following day with caution.

First, Virginia has been trending Democratic for a handful of cycles. To that end, several GOP lawmakers interviewed after the

election referred to Virginia as a “blue state,” saying their party appears, for now, to have lost the battle for what long was a major swing state.

Second, lawmakers and experts said elections in places like Wisconsin, Michigan and much of the Rust Belt — swing states in 2016 that went for Trump, some quite narrowly — will be better indicators of whether Trump’s base can propel candidates who mimic The Donald’s brash style and hard-line policies.

“It’s way too early to write Trump’s obituary. Hillary Clinton won Virginia by 5 percent, so it’s not exactly Trump turf,” says Bannon, the Democratic strategist. “State races in Ohio or Michigan would have been a better test. A Democratic presidential candidate already has Virginia. He or she will need to win the industrial Midwest back to win in 2020.”

Rep. Mike D. Rogers of Alabama was one GOP lawmaker who described Virginia as a blue commonwealth and says he was not surprised by the election results.

“I think the president helped make it as close as it was,” he says. Asked if the results give him pause that Trump, with the stalled agenda and looming Russia probe, could become a drag on GOP candidates, Rogers responds: “Not because of anything that happened in Virginia. ... I knew Ed [Gillespie] was swimming upstream from the start.”

Sen. David Perdue, a Georgia Republican, was an early backer of candidate Trump, and has had several private meetings with the president about the policy agenda. The Virginia results had nothing to do with the president, he says.

“What I hear running around the country like I’ve been doing is that people are upset with the United States Senate because the Republican side is not getting behind the president’s agenda.”

Following the Virginia outcome, King still views the president’s

base as a political force to be reckoned with. But he is a bit more pessimistic about the state of the Trump political movement.

“I think the base is still strong. It seems like in my district, some of the people who voted for him last year feel disenchanting by ... things like the tax plan,” King says. (He opposes the emerging Republican tax bill, arguing it will raise rates on his constituents by ending the state and local tax deduction.)

But even King’s post-Virginia assessment is measured: “It’s just a little bit less of a sure thing,” he says of the power of Trump’s base.

## DEMOCRATIC DOUBTS

If Democrats on Capitol Hill are worried that Trump will propel his party to gains in the midterm elections, or that he is well-positioned for re-election, they’re not showing it just yet.

Some, like Sen. Amy Klobuchar of Minnesota, a potential 2020 presidential candidate, won’t discuss Trump’s re-election prospects.

Sen. Chris Coons of Delaware declines to even acknowledge that Trump could be a formidable candidate come November 2020. He pushes back on the notion that Trump has a built-in general election advantage, saying: “The worst Democrat on the worst day has 30 percent in blue states.”

But simply ignoring a problem doesn’t make it go away.

Coons’ take does not address the question of how Democrats at least blunt a repeat of Trump’s 2016 path by taking back states like Wisconsin and Michigan, while also winning key battleground states like Florida, North Carolina, Ohio and Pennsylvania that Hillary Clinton lost.

And his comments reflect a problem for Democrats: They likely will dominate both coasts, urban areas and the Northeast, and Trump, should he win the GOP nomination, would be a virtual lock to secure the South, much of the Mountain West and the Big Sky states. That leaves the Rust Belt and that handful of swing states.

Bannon, the Democratic strategist, has a warning for his own party: Do not underestimate Trump again. He admits he did just that during the 2016 campaign, and believes most Democrats saw candidate Trump as just a reality television host who lacked the political chops to become president. They were wrong. And that attitude still exists in some Democratic circles, he says.

“If anyone thinks Donald Trump is irrelevant today, in two months from now, in six months from now, or in two years from now, they’re just crazy,” Bannon says. “That’s dangerous. He’s too good. He is the master of modern American politics.”

*Jason Dick, Rema Rahman and Shawn Zeller contributed to this report.*



**BLUE BROTHERS:** Coons, left, with fellow Democrat Tim Kaine of Va.

Bill Clark/CQ Roll Call