



# Winning Where it Matters: A Survey of Three 2020 Battleground States

BY WILL MARSHALL | REPORT ON A POLL COMMISSIONED BY  
THE PROGRESSIVE POLICY INSTITUTE

 @ppi  @progressivepolicyinstitute  /progressive-policy-institute

In the 2016 presidential election, Donald Trump lost the popular vote to Hillary Clinton by nearly three million votes. He won in the Electoral College by flipping states Barack Obama carried in 2012: Michigan, Wisconsin, Ohio, Iowa, Pennsylvania and Florida.

But while Florida and Ohio are bellwether states that swing back and forth, the bigger shock for Democrats was losing three states long considered part of their “blue wall” in presidential elections: Michigan, Wisconsin and Pennsylvania. These states put Trump over the top and could again play the decisive role in this November’s elections.

The battle for the Democratic nomination has revolved around the question of which candidate has the best chance of beating Trump. The more pertinent question is, which candidate can beat him in these critical battleground states – and thereby deny Trump the opportunity to steal another win in the Electoral College.

Because of their pivotal status, the Progressive Policy Institute commissioned a leading Democratic pollster and strategist, Pete Brodnitz, to conduct a [poll of these three key states](#). His Expedition Strategies poll also focuses on swing voters (14 percent of all voters) in these states. These include those (8 percent of the electorate) who voted for Obama in 2012 and Trump in 2016, as well as those who voted for Mitt Romney in 2012 but voted for Clinton in 2016 or Democrat Congressional candidates in 2018.

This deep dive into three frontline states suggests that Democrats have an edge in Michigan and Pennsylvania, while Trump has an edge in Wisconsin. This conclusion is not based solely on looking at current matchups.

It is based on looking at the political dynamics that will shape the race, depending on whom Democrats nominate.

**Up to this point, Trump has had the wind of a strong economy at his back, while a distracting debate over Medicare for All has blunted the sharp edge of the Democrats’ strongest issue – health care.**

Among all voters in the battleground states, Trump scores positively on the economy and jobs and keeping America safe from foreign threats, and negatively on trade, his conduct as President and handling relations with U.S. allies.

The poll was conducted Feb. 6-18, before the dramatic stock market plunge triggered by fears of the Coronavirus pandemic. A bare majority of 53 percent then expressed confidence that the United States was prepared to deal with the virus. Obviously, public anxiety has intensified since then, as have worries about the economy.

Our poll finds that Democrats have yet to persuade 2016 swing voters to swing back in their direction. [In matchups against Trump](#), three current candidates – Vice President Joe Biden, Sen. Bernie Sanders, and former Mayor Mike Bloomberg – have slender leads among all voters. Swing voters, however, generally favor Trump, with two exceptions: Bloomberg narrowly leads among swing voters in Michigan (42/40) and is tied in Pennsylvania (43/43). Trump strongly leads Bloomberg among swing voters in Wisconsin (32-47 Trump).

And while Trump's job approval numbers among all voters are 12 points underwater (44-56 percent), [swing voters split](#) 50-50, and by 55-45 say that on the economy they trust Trump more than a generic Democratic nominee.

Who are the swing voters in these states?

According to our survey, they are overwhelmingly white (83 percent); skew older (60 percent are 50 or above); and, are substantially more Republican and independent than Democrat-leaning. About half have college degrees and 53 percent identify as moderate, compared to 31 percent conservative and 16 percent liberal.

Like all voters, they say America is [on the wrong track](#), rather than moving in the right direction (54-46), and by a substantial margin they identify health care as their most important issue. Our poll suggests there is room for Democrats to make inroads among these voters – with a pragmatic nominee who understands their outlook and interests.

What follows are key insights and takeaways for Democrats and progressives that emerge from this intensive battleground survey.

### IT'S HEALTH CARE, STUPID

The poll's findings on health care are particularly striking, and instructive for presidential and Congressional candidates.

**Health care remains the [top concern of all voters and swing voters](#). But the Democratic advantage on health care – so critical to the party's gains in the 2018 elections – has been dissipated by the push for Medicare for All.**

While all voters in these frontline states still credit Democrats with having a [better approach](#)

(54-46), swing and undecided voters (11 percent of the electorate) pick Republicans by equal or larger margins. This suggests that the Democratic nominee faces an uphill climb here, especially if he or she is pushing single payer or Medicare for All.

**By better than [2-1 \(69-31%\)](#), [battleground voters favor changes that build on the current, public-private health insurance system to a single, government-run health plan](#).**

That's true too of Democrats, who favor the former by a solid, 18-point margin.

**Voters are clearly [troubled \(78-22\)](#) by a switch to a government-run health care system that eliminates all private insurance plans, and they grow even more concerned when they learn it would require new taxes.**

Most believe that having the government provide everyone's health care would mean [long waiting lists](#) for medical treatment, a reduction in health care quality, and a rise in health care costs.

In 2018, Democrats campaigned successfully on protecting Obamacare from a Trump Republican campaign of sabotage. Remarkably, however, our poll finds that [voters fear Democratic efforts to switch to a government-run plan](#) more than (52-48) Republican attempts to kill Obamacare. In other words, months of argument among Democratic presidential candidates over Medicare for All has been turning [what had been](#) the party's greatest strength into a political liability.

This fear is driven by voters' assumptions about how their health care will be affected by Medicare for All. [When asked](#) if they expect the quality of care to get better, worse or not change under a federal health care plan, just 17% expect the quality of care to get better, 56% expect it to get worse and 27% expect no change. Senator Sanders tells voters that taxes will rise on some, but health care costs will go down.

But when we asked if “the cost of the healthcare you receive” would get better, worse or not change under a Federal plan, 29% believe it will get better, 51% expect it to get worse and 20% do not expect a change. Even among Democrats, 35% expect costs to get worse and 24% expect no change (42% expect costs to get better).

All voters express a [strong preference](#) (74-26) for giving everyone the choice between government coverage or private insurance over Medicare for All. By similar margins, voters also prefer [an idea PPI has proposed](#) – capping the prices that doctors and hospitals can charge for medical services – to Medicare for All.

In short, what stands out in this poll is a public leery of banning private coverage and lacking confidence in the government's ability to manage a universal Medicare program effectively and efficiently. This poses a special challenge to Sen. Sanders, the idea's most fervent proponent. His supporters point to exit polls in small turnout caucus states like Iowa and Nevada that showed Democrats favoring Medicare for All. But those electorates were small and dominated by left-leaning activists.

**Our poll shows that Medicare for All is more likely to run into a wall of voter skepticism in the battleground states.**

## ECONOMIC REFORM BEATS REVOLUTION

Voters strongly approve Trump's [handling of the economy](#), 58-35. Swing voters are even more upbeat, approving by a 38 point-margin. Just 6% of Democrats approve of the job Trump is doing but 25% approve of his handling of the economy.

Asked how they feel about the [U.S. economy's future](#), or their own, only 9 and 8 percent of voters respectively say they are “angry.” While slightly more say they are anxious than optimistic, it's hard to find evidence in this poll that voters are interested in the socialist “revolution” promised by Sen. Sanders or even the “bold, structural change” Sen. Elizabeth Warren calls for.

Nonetheless, the poll does reveal a strain of economic populism in the battleground states. Asked to name the biggest economic risk if Trump wins re-election, [most voters choose](#) “the wealthy will get richer and the rest left out” over concern about slowing economic growth or the impact of Trump's trade wars. Here Republicans are outliers, with only 12 percent expressing concern about the rich getting richer.

When it comes to tax reform, these voters by a [wide margin](#) say “making sure the wealthy and companies pay their fair share” should be a higher priority than even cutting taxes on working people. The poll also finds majority support for substantial tax increases on billionaires, and for requiring large U.S. companies to pay their workers enough that they do not qualify for food stamps.

By 53-47, [voters choose](#) “reducing the power of corporations and the wealthy” over expanding opportunity to people and places left behind. A higher percentage of swing voters take that view, as does a whopping 69 percent of Democrats.

**There's definitely an appetite in these states for policies that constrain powerful economic actors, invest more in better jobs for average working people, and reduce inequality.**

### BUSINESS-BASHING IS A LOSER

But while voters want corporations and the wealthy to pay more in taxes, they don't share Sen. Sanders' visceral hostility toward the private sector.

It's not surprising that voters in these Rust Belt states strongly favor (73-27) a federal strategy for promoting manufacturing jobs. But they also take a positive view of digital technology and e-commerce, which they rank just below manufacturing as the best example of an industry that provides good jobs. By 86-14, voters say the tech sector does well at creating well-paying jobs for Americans. Democrats' views are almost identical.

**Although the Twittersverse may be afflicted with “teclash,” there's little sign of it in the battleground states.**

By 70-30, voters see tech companies as “examples of America's great strengths in innovation and entrepreneurship” rather than as corporate leviathans that have “grown too big and powerful and need to be broken up.” By even larger margins, voters say it's more important to make sure U.S. tech companies are treated fairly in Europe and China than they be “reined in” and made less dominant.

“Breaking up” Big Tech, the left's latest cause celebre, also finds little support here. Voters strongly prefer [tougher regulation](#) to dismantling successful companies. They worry that breaking

up tech companies would do more harm to U.S. workers and consumers than failing to break them up.

None of this is to say that voters have no serious qualms about the power of big technology companies. However, they are chiefly concerned about [protecting their privacy](#) (89 percent concerned, 11 percent not) and data security (90/10), followed by fears that the United States could forfeit innovation leadership to China. There's also [much concern](#) (71/29) about the ability of small technology companies to compete with giant tech platforms. But company size by itself isn't seen as a big problem.

### DEFICITS MATTER – BUT TAXES MATTER MORE

Against a backdrop of record-low unemployment and the longest U.S. expansion ever, it's not surprising that public concerns about jobs and the economy have taken a backseat in 2020 election debates.

**Asked to rank their top economic concerns, voters in our poll picked the price of healthcare (28 percent); “being able to afford retirement,” (16 percent); and, the federal budget deficit and national debt.**

Excepting Republicans, all voters in our poll blame the Trump tax cuts for increasing the federal deficit. However, they are against raising taxes to reduce the deficit. Their [aversion to tax hikes](#) applies nearly equally to taxing inherited wealth (only 15 percent in favor) and taxing earned income (13 percent). Nonetheless, they are open to a carbon tax, especially if the revenues are invested in clean energy research and infrastructure.

And voters seem very open to cutting taxes on average working people. For example, they strongly approved (68-32) [a PPI proposal to](#) cut or eliminate the payroll tax, which is a regressive tax on labor, and to replace it with a value added tax (64-36).

Voters also favored (69-31) another innovative [PPI idea](#) – a change in Social Security that would award benefits based on how many years a person worked rather than how much they earned throughout their career. This would make the system more progressive while also improving its long-term financial health.

### “FREE COLLEGE” SMACKS OF ELITISM

Progressive demands for “free” college – duly embraced by Sanders and Warren – also fall flat with voters in the battleground states. To many of them, free college, and calls for government to pay off all student debt are elite preoccupations that compound the advantages of the already privileged college-going cohort at their expense.

The majority of their children don’t earn college degrees, but they do need to acquire the higher skills required to land good, middle-class jobs. Yet there’s an enormous disparity between what Washington spends to aid college students and what it invests in the 70 percent of young Americans who don’t get college degrees.

**Voters are aware of this inequity. By a wide margin (69-31), they prefer to “spend more to help Americans who don’t go to college get higher skills and better jobs” to spending more to make all colleges tuition-free.**

And while they are concerned about student debt burdens, [most voters](#) – and especially

swing voters – say the bigger problem is “the lack of public job and skills training opportunities for non-college youth.”

### GET ENERGY AND CLIMATE RIGHT

**For all the talk about climate change as an “existential challenge” and the greatest threat facing the country, only [eight percent of voters in the three battleground states](#) consider it the most important issue.**

This is yet another reminder that the issue terrain on which the 2020 presidential election will be decided is very different than that of the Democrats’ deep blue bastions in coastal states and large cities.

Voters in Michigan, Wisconsin and Pennsylvania likewise take a pragmatic approach to energy policy. In particular, they are skeptical of the green left’s fossil prohibitionism. Given three choices on natural gas and fracking, [46 percent would](#) “allow fracking to continue and invest more in capturing and storing carbon emissions from burning oil and gas.” Twenty-four percent chose “phase out natural gas gradually,” and only 30 percent support an immediate ban on fracking. Democrats and younger voters are the notable outliers here, with 43 and 36 percent respectively backing a ban.

In another sign of energy realism, [solid majorities](#) of the voters we polled also prefer “using more modern nuclear energy since it produces no carbon emissions” to “phasing out the use of nuclear energy since it produces radioactive waste.”



**Although they are averse to paying higher income taxes, battleground voters seem open to a new federal tax on carbon emissions – so long as the revenue goes to combat climate change directly.**

Presented with a [list of options](#), a plurality of voters (38 percent) chose investing in green infrastructure and science, “fully paid for by a tax on carbon emissions.” Only 12 percent support using carbon tax revenues to cut the national debt, and just 11 percent were for using them to give every American a tax rebate. In a sign of incipient worry about the nation’s mounting public debts, voters gave least support to financing new green investments through government borrowing.

### STAND WITH ALLIES VS. AMERICA FIRST

Although the conventional wisdom holds that trade and globalization are deeply unpopular in the Rust Belt, that’s not what we found. In fact, voters are [strikingly positive](#) about the benefits of international trade.

**By 84-14, battleground voters believe the United States is better off when we encourage trade, and by more than 2-1 they say the same about trade agreements.**

China, however, is a special case. These voters overwhelmingly believe China violates world trade agreements. [By 54-46](#), all voters think Democrats are more likely to get better trade agreements from China. Swing voters, however, go the other way, picking Trump by 53-47. So do white men and women without college

degrees – Trump’s blue collar base. Whatever qualms voters have about the economic impact of Trump’s many tariffs, including retaliatory duties slapped on U.S. goods, they seem willing to give him credit for changing an essentially exploitative relationship with China.

What troubles them, however, is the effect of Trump’s tariffs on U.S. allies in Europe and Asia. [Most voters \(45-26\) and swing voters agree](#) that the way he’s managing relations with these allies hurts “his effort to change the terms of trade with China.”

On national security, voters see the United States as reasonably [well-prepared](#) to deal with threats from Iran, North Korea and terrorism (though Democrats are less sure). But they believe the nation is unprepared to deal with floods or fires from climate change, cyber-attacks and an economic recession.

Our poll reveals a strong desire to repair diplomatic and military relationships with traditional U.S. allies. Voters believe [closer ties with militarily capable allies](#) will make us more secure than modernizing our own defenses or increasing the U.S. military budget.

**This enduring support for U.S. international leadership and collective security suggests Trump has not won the country over to his “America First” stance of belligerent unilateralism.**

It creates potential openings for Democrats – so long as they can convince voters they will protect Americans from terrorism, cyber-attacks and rogue states like North Korea and Iran.

## CONCLUSION

PPI's survey of battleground states and swing voters is both sobering and encouraging. It shows that winning Michigan, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin again is within Donald Trump's reach. If he can keep Florida and Ohio in his column, he could triumph in the Electoral College even if he were to suffer an even bigger loss in the popular vote.

On the other hand, these voters are very much in play for Democrats – especially if they pick a non-polarizing nominee who doesn't scare of voters across the pragmatic center, and if they can refocus the campaign debate on the Trump Republicans' perverse crusade to kill Obamacare and thus deprive millions of Americans of health care coverage.

The rhetoric of the progressive left gets some traction here, especially when it centers on keeping powerful economic actors in check and requiring them to pay their fair share of taxes.

But if Democrats veer into strident class warfare themes, including opposition to trade and attacks on America's most innovative and competitive companies, they are likely to repel voters who have no interest in toppling a "capitalist" economy that finally seems to be generating higher incomes for everyone.

All in all, this poll offers little support for the proposition that Rust Belt voters are clamoring for democratic socialism. On the contrary, a centralizing and statist agenda that centers on a colossally expensive federal takeover of health care, a Green New Deal that shuts down America's shale boom and seeks to re-engineer the U.S. economy from the top down, and a costly new array of "free" benefits and federal entitlements is more likely to repel than attract moderates, independents and swing voters in the battleground states Democrats need to win to send Donald Trump packing in November.

---

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Will Marshall is president and founder of the Progressive Policy Institute (PPI), established in 1989 as a center for political innovation in Washington, D.C. In this capacity, he has been one of the chief intellectual architects of the movement to modernize progressive politics for the global age.





---

The Progressive Policy Institute is a catalyst for policy innovation and political reform based in Washington, D.C. Its mission is to create radically pragmatic ideas for moving America beyond ideological and partisan deadlock.

Founded in 1989, PPI started as the intellectual home of the New Democrats and earned a reputation as President Bill Clinton's "idea mill." Many of its mold-breaking ideas have been translated into public policy and law and have influenced international efforts to modernize progressive politics.

Today, PPI is developing fresh proposals for stimulating U.S. economic innovation and growth; equipping all Americans with the skills and assets that social mobility in the knowledge economy requires; modernizing an overly bureaucratic and centralized public sector; and defending liberal democracy in a dangerous world.

---

© 2020  
**PROGRESSIVE POLICY INSTITUTE**  
**ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.**

---

**PROGRESSIVE POLICY INSTITUTE**  
1200 New Hampshire Ave NW,  
Suite 575  
Washington, DC 20036

---

**Tel 202.525.3926**  
**Fax 202.525.3941**

---

**[info@ppionline.org](mailto:info@ppionline.org)**  
**[progressivepolicy.org](http://progressivepolicy.org)**