

Analysis

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Democrats target union workers who regret Trump vote

Inside Knicker's Saloon, a factory worker hangout here, Jesse Oberbroeckling has just finished his shift at the John Deere plant when he reveals his regret. Like many union workers, Oberbroeckling voted twice for former Democratic President Barack Obama before backing Donald Trump and other Republicans in 2016. Now he has buyer's remorse - and plans to support the Democratic challenger to Rod Blum, the Republican congressman in this blue-collar, eastern Iowa district. "Trump is for the rich," said Oberbroeckling, 37, sipping a rum-and-coke. "Blum's for big business. They said they were for the workers, but they're not."

That sentiment should encourage Democrats, who saw their once-reliable labor vote help send Trump to the White House after he vowed to revive Rust Belt factories with trade tariffs and ailing coal mines with environmental deregulation. Now - with coal still struggling and Trump stoking a trade war - many union workers have soured on the president ahead of November's midterm congressional elections, the Reuters/Ipsos opinion poll shows.

Between March 2017 and March 2018, union members' approval of Trump fell 15 points, to 47 percent. In more than two dozen interviews with union members, many blasted Trump's tax cut, arguing most of the benefits will flow to corporations and wealthy people. A loose coalition of union leaders, Democratic strategists and political action committees (PACs) aims to seize on that shift by directing money and campaign workers to about 30 competitive races in union-heavy districts. The party needs to gain 23 seats to retake the US House of Representatives.

But falling support for Trump is no guarantee Democrats can restore the party's historic dominance of the union vote. Nearly half of members polled still approve of the president, and their support for congressional Democrats has declined slightly from two years ago. Forty-seven percent of union members polled would support a Democratic candidate in November; 34 percent favored a Republican. That compares to 51 percent favoring Democrats and 29 percent supporting Republicans in March 2016.

The 2018 poll was conducted online, in English, and included more than 1,400 union workers nationwide. It has a credibility interval of 3 percentage points, meaning results could vary in either direction by that amount. Union membership has fallen by half since the early 1980s, to 10.7 percent of U.S. workers last year. But members can still sway close elections because they are concentrated in specific regions and vote at high rates. In the 2014 midterms, 52 percent of union workers voted, compared to 39 percent of others, according to a study by Demos, a liberal think tank. "If we don't win them back, we will never win here," said Abby Finkenauer, the leading Democrat challenging Blum in Iowa's 1st District. Blum's campaign did not respond to requests for comment.

Targeting farm, factory towns

Democratic strategists are targeting blue-collar enclaves of the Midwest, along with districts covering California farmlands, New York industry towns and Montana wilderness. They aim to trash the Republican tax cut, along with Trump's failure to back a minimum wage and his attempt to repeal Obamacare. In Iowa's 1st District, dotted with farms and factories, Finkenauer tells audiences at union halls that her father was a union pipefitter-welder and that only a Democrat can improve their wages, health care and pensions.

Blum's website says lower taxes and cutting business regulation will create jobs. Ford O'Connell - a Republican strategist who was among the first to highlight how voter anger could propel Trump's candidacy - said the party will appeal to union voters with his tariffs against China, anti-immigration efforts and the tax cut they argue helps all workers. Democrats counter they are already recapturing labor votes, citing the March special election victory in Pennsylvania by Conor Lamb, who beat an outspoken opponent of unions, Trump won the same district in 2016.

Following Lamb's victory, the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee (DCCC) convened focus groups of voters who had supported both Trump and Lamb. Participants wanted candidates who support unions, boost jobs and wages and protect Medicare and Social Security. In interviews with Reuters, union members criticized the tax cut, along with Republican moves in some states - including Iowa - to curtail collective bargaining by public employees. And while Trump's tough trade talk attracted many union workers to his campaign, some now worry his policies may protect some blue-collar jobs at the expense of others. Trump's steel tariffs, for instance, could raise prices for the raw material used in factories supporting union jobs.

Reuters/Ipsos polling data shows union workers now view Democrats more favorably on key issues such as healthcare, the economy and taxes. The percentage of union members who favored Democratic stances on health care, for instance, rose 7 points to 42 percent since March 2017, compared with 29 percent favoring Republicans. Democrats saw similar gains on taxes, jobs and the economy.

Ken Jones, a retired mechanic and Teamster union member, backed Trump because he believed Clinton was "crooked" - borrowing Trump's signature insult - and that Trump might curtail illegal immigration, create jobs and fix Obamacare. "Now I see he's not going to do anything," said Jones, of Oklahoma, who plans to vote Democratic this fall. "The working man don't get nothing out of it. I never voted Republican until Trump, and it was the worst mistake I ever made." Other union members, however, continued to praise Republicans. "The economy is doing better," said Otis Evans, 47, of the United Auto Workers in Michigan. "Trump's straightforward and candid." —Reuters



Iraq's displaced forgotten in elections

While the election campaign is in full swing elsewhere in Iraq, the country's displaced camps holding hundreds of thousands of people barely register on the radars of those running for office. In "Camp Seven" in the western Anbar province not a single campaign poster can be seen appealing to those who have the right to cast their ballot at the parliamentary vote on May 12. The rows of UN tents are part of nine sprawling encampments in the region housing thousands of people who fled the devastating fight against the Islamic State group.

Some five months after the Iraqi government declared victory over the jihadists they remain stuck in the desert camp - and apparently ignored by the country's politicians. For many of the residents the disinterest shown by the election candidates is mirrored by their own antipathy to those running. "I have no confidence in them," says Umm Maher, who fled her home in Qaim, a former IS stronghold.

Heightening her anger - and that of others here - is the destruction of their homes and the disappearance of male relatives they say were either killed or seized by security services during the battle against IS. "If they want our votes, they can give us back our children and our homes," adds the 50-year-old, who doesn't know the fate of her husband and son.

Going into the polls, Iraq is only just starting to recover from the years of IS dominance over swathes of the country and the punishing fight to end it. Out of a total displaced population of around two million people, some 285,000 are registered to vote, according to the electoral commission. 166 polling stations are being installed in 70 displaced camps, spread across eight of the country's 18 provinces.

'Nobody has come'

In a bid to encourage the displaced to vote, election officials say identification requirements have been eased for those in the camps. But despite that, Umm Maher is not the only female resident of Camp Seven who won't be voting, due to the scar left behind by the violence. "I will not vote until my eldest son returns," says 47-year-old Umm Ahmed, who hasn't seen her 20-year-old child since he was seized three years ago. "Besides, nobody has come to ask after us," adds the former resident of Saqlawiya, another ex-IS stronghold, a black veil partially covering her face.

Politicians admit that despite the potential votes

Putin to begin fourth term, but what happens in 2024?

Vladimir Putin will be inaugurated for a historic fourth term today, extending his almost two-decade rule by another six years after predictably winning Russia's March presidential election. But with no successor and no political competition, what are the possible scenarios when his term ends in 2024?

* Fight for influence -

Without constitutional reform, Putin will not be able to run for a fifth time - Russian law forbids serving more than two consecutive terms. Putin, who will turn 72 in 2024, could decide to leave the Kremlin after 24 years in power, making way for a successor. Russian politics is now dominated by infighting between rival clans of technocrats and the "siloviki" - representatives of the security services and the army. "There is already a fight for influence," said political analyst Nikolai Petrov. "Nobody will wait passively, each group will try to promote its interests," he added.

In a March interview to American TV channel NBC, Putin said he had been thinking of a potential successor since 2000. "There is no harm in thinking about it but at the end of the day it will be the Russian people who decide." But in making sure no one can compete with him, no politician is currently popular enough to succeed the Kremlin chief. Many analysts say Putin leaving power in six years is unlikely.



Displaced Iraqis stand at the entrance of a tent in a camp for internally displaced people near Al-Khalidiyah in Iraq's western Anbar province on April 24, 2018. —AFP

that could be won in the camps, few have ventured there. "The campaign is absent in the camps and no candidate goes there, even though the votes of the displaced are important," confirms Hikmat Zeydan, from the Rally for the Unity of Iraq, fielding five candidates in Anbar. Many "are afraid of finding themselves in a difficult situation, because they have done nothing to help the return of the displaced".

One candidate, running on a list for Prime Minister Haider Al-Abadi's Shiite-dominated Victory Alliance in Samarra, north of Baghdad is blunt in explaining why he has stayed away from two nearby camps. "We have not put up any posters and did not move (around there) because most families are Daesh," alleges

Jassem Al-Joubouri, using an Arabic term for IS.

Elsewhere in the country some have made an effort at trying to represent the interests of the displaced. Abdel Bari Abbas, fled his home west of the former IS bastion of Mosul, and is now standing as a candidate. As he runs his campaign from Baharka camp, in Arbil province in Kurdistan, he insists his experiences give him a unique insight into how to help. "My family and the majority of Mosul residents have had many struggles. It is necessary to have a candidate who will make their voices heard," says the 48-year-old Arabic teacher. "The problems will not be solved without us and I promised myself that even if I am elected, my family and I will stay in the camp." —AFP

Role swap

One way Putin could continue ruling Russia after 2024 is to stay in power in a different role. The Russian strongman could revisit his 2008 move, which saw him put forward Dmitry Medvedev as president while he himself became prime minister before returning to the Kremlin in 2012. "Putin may prepare the regime for a transfer of power. But not from Putin to another president but from Putin to Putin in some other role," said Petrov.

But memories of mass protests in Moscow when Putin and Medvedev swapped back and Putin returned to the Kremlin may put the Russian leader off this option. Putin's age also makes this scenario problematic. Putin will be 78 in 2030, when he is constitutionally allowed to run for another term. Konstantin Kalachev, head of the Political Expert Group think tank in Moscow, said Putin knows his successor will have to introduce unpopular economic reforms and wants to "go down in history as the man who did not lose at anything".

Needs protection

Putin could choose to follow China's Xi Jinping in abolishing presidential term limits, thus allowing him to remain president for life. "I don't think he will refuse power in 2024 even if he has had enough, he is (already) visibly tired," said independent political analyst Dmitry Oreshkin. "He can't leave because he does not believe that anyone will protect him," he added, saying that Putin has built a system in which everything depends on who is at the top.

So far, Putin has ruled out ruling Russia for life. "I never changed the constitution, especially for it to benefit me and I do not have this kind of intention today," he told NBC in March. Oreshkin said Putin does not want to be remembered for changing the constitution and that if he were to remain president for life, it would be done "more elegantly" than in China. —AFP

