Democratic Candidates Face New Challenge in Impeachment Inquiry

RICHARD CHERWITZ Guest columnist

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Last week we learned a Trump administration whistleblower complained to the inspector general that the president made an allegedly dangerous and inappropriate “promise” to the leader of a foreign nation. Donald Trump’s response, as has been the case for previous reports of wrongdoing, was predictable: He first denied the accusation, then suggested there would be nothing wrong with such a conversation. He then asserted this was part of a
Democratic witch hunt. Thus far it appears Trump’s response has been successful, failing to arouse Republicans in Congress to object and push back.

Watching the news media’s ongoing discussion of all this, as well as the outrage expressed by Democratic leaders, should be cause for concern. It may be another reason for Democrats to worry about the outcome of the 2020 election. While it’s still unclear who the Democratic nominee will be, candidates’ rhetorical strategy must include the following cautionary notes:

- Avoid getting taken in by and becoming part of media distractions regarding additional congressional investigations and the possibility of impeachment, all of which fail to resonate with voters. According to many polls, such distractions tire and turn voters off.
- Concentrate on the handful of key battleground states, especially those won by Trump in 2016 by less than 80,000 votes, focusing on issues like wages and health care that matter most to voters.
- Remember that extreme ideological positions — like Medicare for all and taking away people’s guns — while potentially helpful in winning a nomination, frequently don’t work well in a general election campaign; these ideas play directly into President Trump’s hand. Recent ads already are a major element of his rhetorical strategy.
- Learn an important lesson from the 2018 midterm election, recalling what issues and voters resulted in the Democratic victory. Issues like health care were more instrumental than attacks on President Trump’s wrongdoing.
- Refrain from congressional actions that might hurt Democratic House members who won in Republican districts in 2018. Many of those seats could be vulnerable depending on what the Democratic-controlled House does.
- Be assured that Trump’s base is motivated and will vote. They are willing to stand behind him regardless of what he does. His rhetoric emboldens them, especially by suggesting what a Democratic president would do to run their lives.
- Keep in mind independents, women (especially in the suburbs) and blacks are an essential component of a 2020 Democratic victory. If these voters, many of whom voted for Obama in 2012 and then Trump in 2016, stay home, it’s hard to imagine a Democratic path to the presidency.
• Do not assume that groups who historically haven’t voted will suddenly show up. There have been too many times when Democrats took for granted young people would vote, yet in the end they did not.

Admittedly there may be a tradeoff between taking actions to stop a dangerous, unethical and possibly unlawful president and putting together a rhetorical strategy to win the election. It’s sad this seems to be the case — but in fact it is. Therefore, to remove this president from office ultimately may require political pragmatism be the order of the day. The ballot box might be the most effective way to preserve the rule of law.

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