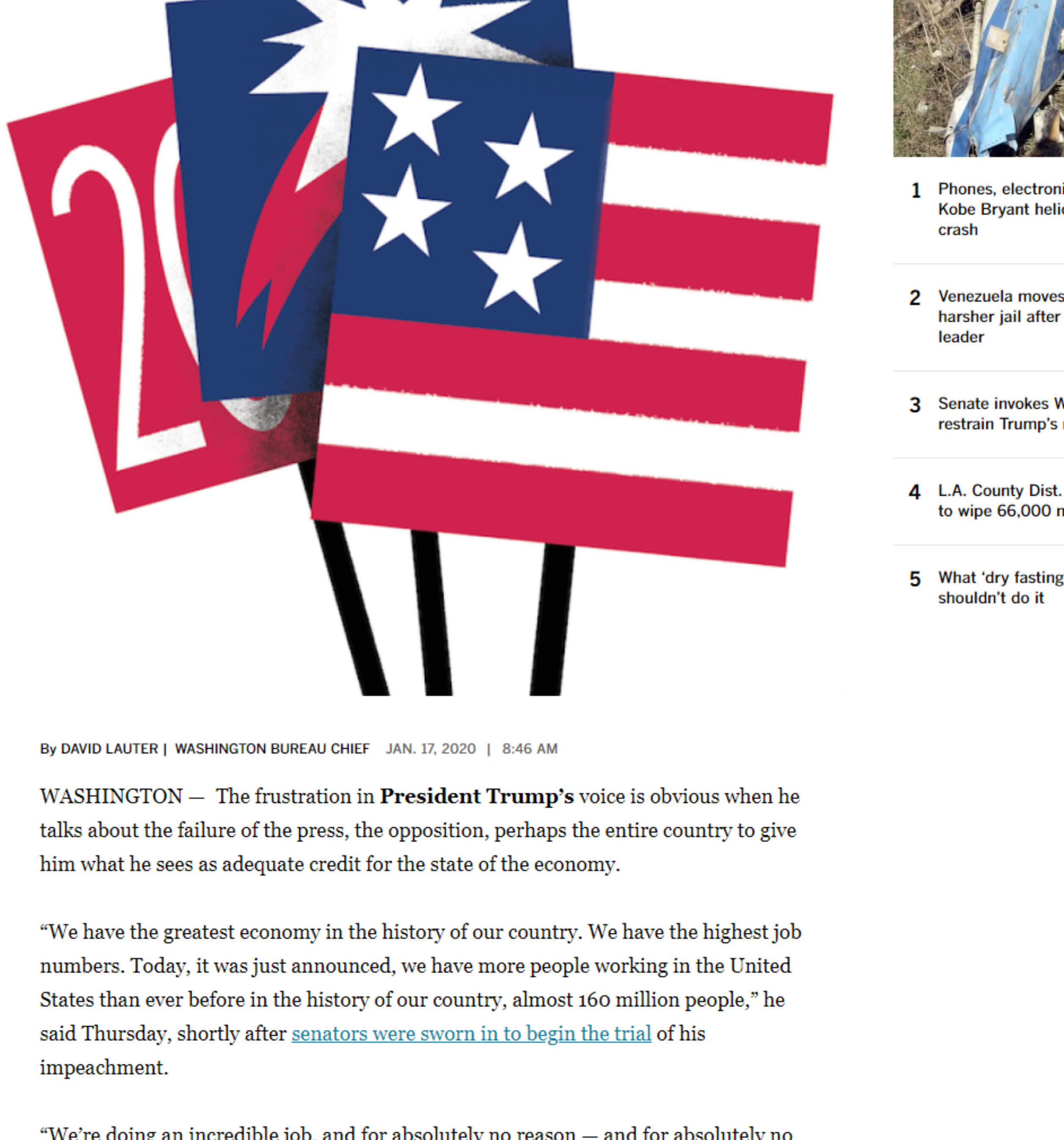




POLITICS

# Why Trump may never get much of a boost from the economy



By DAVID LAUTER | WASHINGTON BUREAU CHIEF JAN. 17, 2020 | 8:46 AM

WASHINGTON — The frustration in **President Trump's** voice is obvious when he talks about the failure of the press, the opposition, perhaps the entire country to give him what he sees as adequate credit for the state of the economy.

"We have the greatest economy in the history of our country. We have the highest job numbers. Today, it was just announced, we have more people working in the United States than ever before in the history of our country, almost 160 million people," he said Thursday, shortly after [senators were sworn in to begin the trial](#) of his impeachment.

"We're doing an incredible job, and for absolutely no reason — and for absolutely no reason — I got impeached. It's a disgrace and it's a hoax."

Leaving aside Trump's vainglory, something clearly has changed in the way economic numbers affect how voters feel about the president. That change could shape this year's election, thwarting Trump's hope that consistent economic growth will guarantee a victory, so let's take a deeper look.

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## It's not the economy, stupid

**James Carville**, the strategist for **President Clinton**, gets credit for coining the slogan "It's the economy, stupid" in the 1992 campaign, but the truism goes back decades further.

At least since **President Kennedy's** tenure — for most of Trump's adult life, in other words — political scientists have documented that when the economy goes up, so does presidential approval.

Today, that relationship has broken down.

Roughly 42% of Americans approve of Trump's work in office, recent polls indicate. By the standard that prevailed from the Kennedy era through **George W. Bush's** presidency, that's ["about 15 points lower than we'd predict"](#) based on how people feel about the economy, Vanderbilt University political scientist **John Sides** recently wrote.

Several factors have combined to deny Trump the economic adulation he craves.

To begin with, the economy is not quite "the greatest in history," as Trump proclaims. The unemployment rate is at a historic low, but judged by other measures, the economy is OK, not great.

The administration had forecast 3% economic growth for 2019; the real figure ended up around 2%, and 2020 likely will be slower, many economists predict. The economic boom of the late 1990s featured a growth rate twice that large.

Moreover, much of the benefit of the current growth has gone to people at the top of ladder, leaving many Americans feeling dissatisfied. A Monmouth University poll in April found that [only 12% of Americans said their families had "benefited a great deal"](#) from recent economic growth, and only 18% said that middle-class families had benefited a lot from Trump's economic policies.

Still, even with all that, economic numbers like this used to give incumbents more pop. What else is at play?

In part, voters have other issues more prominently on their minds — some of them promoted by Trump.

He does like to crow about economic gains periodically. He did so this week with the signing of a relatively [limited trade deal with China](#), and he'll likely do so again next week when he formally signs the [new trade agreement with Mexico and Canada](#), which the Senate approved on Thursday.

But Trump seldom sticks to a consistent economic message for long, and economic issues take a backseat for many of his voters. The same day as the Senate vote on trade, for example, Trump was touting a [new statement on school prayer](#) designed to appeal to evangelical voters, as Noah Bierman reported.

A [poll from Florida Atlantic University](#) released Thursday illustrates how much other issues overshadow the economy for both Trump's supporters and his opponents.

The poll showed Florida, a crucial state electorally, as a toss-up. In hypothetical matchups, Trump tied or narrowly trailed each of the major Democratic candidates.

That was somewhat worse than his standing in the university's poll during the fall, which showed the president narrowly leading each of the Democrats. In both surveys, all of the differences were within the poll's margin of error, indicating that Florida, once again, will be up for grabs.

The poll asked voters why they picked their preferred candidate. For Trump voters, the economy landed in third place. In the matchup with former Vice President **Joe Biden**, for example, only 13% of Trump's voters listed the economy as the main reason for their vote choice, ranking behind both immigration (20%) and foreign policy/terrorism (16%). The numbers were very similar when Trump was matched against other leading Democrats.

For Democratic voters, the economy ranked behind healthcare as a motivating issue, the Florida poll found.

In addition to other issues, Trump's own behavior plays a role. The tweets, the name-calling, the unremitting falsehoods — his core supporters love his style, but it takes a big toll on his standing with other voters. Even as a good economy pushes his approval upward, the rest of the package pushes him down.

But something else is at play that goes beyond Trump. As Sides noted, the relationship between the economy and presidential approval first broke down under President Obama. The economy steadily improved after Obama's first year as the nation pulled out of the deep recession that began under Bush. But Obama got no political boost from that.

The reason why an improving economy used to improve a president's standing is that it caused some voters to cross party lines and support a person from the other side. In today's deeply partisan era, nothing has that effect.

Trump didn't create hyper-partisanship, although he surely benefited from it. During Obama's tenure, he told Republicans to ignore or mistrust economic statistics that showed good news for the man in the White House. He helped cement the partisan wall that divides America; it's not likely to crumble any time soon.

None of that means Trump can't win — he definitely might — but it does mean he'll have a much harder time than incumbents with his sort of economic record used to expect.

## How the economy affects the race

So how do people's feelings about the economy affect their voting decisions?

Voters who disapprove of Trump's handling of the economy overwhelmingly say they want to cast ballots against him. The uncertainty for Trump, however that approve of how he's done on the economy aren't similarly unified: Most say they would vote to reelect him, but a significant share say they would not.

How big a group is it? In a [national poll taken by Quinnipiac University](#) in December, 11% of voters approved of Trump's handling of the economy but said they would vote for Biden over Trump, according to the university's poll director, **Doug Schwartz**.

Those voters mostly identified themselves as political moderates and were about evenly divided between Democrats and independents, Schwartz said.

Recent [polls by Marquette University in Wisconsin](#) showed a similar pattern in that state, which many strategists see as the most closely divided of the country's election battlegrounds.

Overall, a small majority of voters in the state approve of Trump's handling of the economy, but in head-to-head matchups with the leading Democrats, the state is a tossup, the poll has found.

When it asked about the economy, the poll gave voters four choices — strongly approve, somewhat approve, somewhat disapprove and don't plan to vote. The him mostly come from the "somewhat approve" category, noted the poll's director, political science professor **Charles Franklin**.

About a third of those who "somewhat approve" of Trump on the economy nevertheless disapprove of his job performance overall. And in head-to-head matchups, about 25%-30% of them sided with the Democratic candidates.

Those defectors are enough to keep the state a tossup. If you're looking for the swing voters in this year's election, those people — the ones who sort of approve of Trump on the economy, but disapprove of his performance overall — are a pretty good place to start.

## Democrats and the politics of gender

This week's [Democratic debate in Iowa](#) had only a few memorable moments, and the one that attracted the most attention came after closing statements ended. As Seema Mehta and Melanie Mason wrote, the clash between **Sens. Bernie Sanders** and **Elizabeth Warren** over whether Sanders had told her that a woman couldn't beat Trump provided the debate's main energy.

After the debate ended, Warren walked over to Sanders and [conspicuously did not shake his hand](#) before falling into a brief, animated conversation. For much of the next day, no one knew what they said until CNN, which sponsored the debate, [released a recording from an open microphone](#): "You called me a liar on national TV," Warren told Sanders, who shot back in kind.

As Janet Hook and Mark Barabak wrote, groups on the party's left, which had supported the two progressive senators, have [scrambled to try to tamp down the conflict](#). But the clash between the two, and the fact that it's centered on issues of gender — still a sore point for Democrats after **Hillary Clinton's** defeat in 2016 — introduces a new level of uncertainty to a race that was already very tight and hard to predict.

About six-in-10 Iowa voters tell pollsters that they [haven't yet firmly made up their minds](#), Mehta and Mason wrote. Many, feeling desperate to find a candidate who they feel will beat Trump, find the process deeply stressful. The fight between the party's two leading candidates on the left will surely affect many of their decisions.

As Hook wrote in her [debate analysis](#), many Democrats in Iowa recall that in 2004, the two leading candidates, **Dick Gephardt** and **Howard Dean**, quarreled in the closing days of the Iowa campaign. Gephardt and Dean turned on both of them, and **Sen. John Kerry** won the state's caucuses and the nomination.

## Hear ye, Hear ye

With a degree of pomp and solemnity that for a moment covered over the raw politics of the moment, the [Senate trial of Trump's impeachment](#) got under way on Thursday, as Jennifer Haberkorn and Sarah Wire reported. Here's what to expect next:

On Tuesday, the Senate is scheduled to reconvene its impeachment proceedings at 1 p.m. Eastern. At that point, **Sen. Mitch McConnell**, the majority leader, likely will introduce the package of rules for the trial that he has negotiated with the other 52 Republican senators.

Democrats likely will try to force votes on issues such as calling witnesses and issuing subpoenas for documents, but McConnell is confident the GOP majority will hold together to defer all such questions until after both sides have presented their cases.

Either late Tuesday or on Wednesday, the [seven House impeachment managers](#), led by **Rep. Adam Schiff** (D-Burbank), will begin presenting the case against Trump. If the trial follows the pattern of the impeachment case against **President Clinton**, as McConnell says he intends, that presentation will likely fall the week. If your memory of that previous case is hazy, here's a rundown of [how the Clinton trial unfolded](#).

Next, Trump's lawyers will present their case. As is typically the case with Trump, he held off until the last minute in [deciding who the members of his team will be](#). As Chris Megerian and Noah Bierman wrote, that's in part because of conflicting desires: On the one hand, Trump wants the trial to end quickly; on the other, he wants a big, splashy defense that will impugn the motives of his critics.

On Friday, the White House announced that **Alan Dershowitz** and **Ken Starr** would be [among Trump's lawyers for the trial](#), adding the sort of ready-for-television lawyers Trump loves but bringing additional controversy.

Some Republicans hope the trial can end before Feb. 4, when Trump is scheduled to deliver the State of the Union speech. But once the two sides have presented their cases, the Senate likely will vote on whether to hear fresh witnesses or demand more documents. At least four Republicans — enough for a majority — have indicated they would be open to that, which would likely extend the trial well into February.

## Schiff's turn in the sun

Wire and Jim Rainey have reported a [detailed profile of Schiff](#), who, in the current drama, plays the role of super-ego to Trump's id. He's a determined and tenacious politician who has clearly gotten deeply under Trump's skin. In the process, he's become a Democratic favorite and a possible successor to **Speaker Nancy Pelosi** if she decides to retire.

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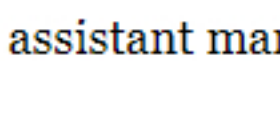
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