Donald Trump’s first year as President of the United States has been, to put it mildly, tempestuous. After a bitterly divisive campaign and a razor-thin victory (he won in the Electoral College with only 46.4% of the national popular vote), Trump took office with the lowest initial approval rating of any president in the modern polling era, and has remained historically unpopular for a first-year president. At the same time, however, it is somewhat difficult to assess just how much political trouble Trump – and, more significantly, the Republican Party – faces as the nation looks ahead to the 2018 midterm elections. In part, this uncertainty stems from the vagaries of polling (about which more below); more fundamentally, however, it is rooted in a sharp divide between the substance of what Trump has accomplished thus far as president and the style with which he has conducted himself in office.

While the winning coalition for any successful candidate in a nation as large and diverse as the United States is necessarily complex and multi-faceted, Trump was able to capture the presidency essentially by rallying three key groups: evangelical Christians, traditional economic conservatives (i.e., the Republican “establishment”), and working-class whites. It is important to note, however, that not all of those who voted for Trump were enthusiastic supporters; at the same time that he was winning over 46% of the national vote, Trump’s personal approval rating was well under 40% (rivaled only by the similarly abysmal personal favorability of his opponent, Hillary Clinton). This discrepancy serves as an important reminder that, in an era of voter disaffection and widespread skepticism about both major parties, the president’s political standing might actually be a bit stronger than his approval/favorability numbers suggest.

So what do those numbers currently look like? Recent credible polls paint different pictures. At the high end, polling from Rasmussen Reports has Trump’s approval rating at 46% – almost exactly what he polled in the 2016 election¹. At the low end, an Investor’s Business Daily poll shows Trump with approval from just over a

third of the electorate. Similarly, recent polls show Democrats with an advantage of anywhere between 5 and 17 percentage points on the generic congressional ballot. The more optimistic of these polls suggest an environment in which Trump is holding his own politically and where Republicans, given the nature of the 2018 electoral map, are likely to retain control of Congress; the more pessimistic ones indicate that Trump and the Republicans are headed for a repudiation of epic proportions this fall.

Underlying this confusing picture of the current political landscape is the tension between generally positive objective sociopolitical conditions and generally negative assessments of Trump’s personal style, demeanor, and day-to-day conduct in office. American economic growth is as robust as it has been in years, with very low unemployment and a soaring stock market. Trump and the Republicans recently passed major tax reform that will deliver savings (at least in the short term) to the vast majority of American households, and that repealed the individual insurance mandate of “Obamacare” – the bill’s least popular feature. ISIS has been routed in the Middle East, and illegal immigration flows into the United States are down significantly since Trump took office. At the same time, however, Trump has often seemed less interested in trumpeting these accomplishments than in feuding with the media, insulting foreign leaders, and launching volleys of incendiary tweets. Thus, significant numbers of Americans who might be generally satisfied with the state of the nation and supportive of many of Trump’s specific policy initiatives are at the same time seriously put off by the president’s obnoxious tweeting, his personal pettiness, and the generally crude and crass tenor that he has brought to the nation’s political discourse.

Trump has, to this point, generally managed to sustain enthusiastic support from the core elements of his base. To the evangelicals, he has offered appealing judicial appointments, a series of conservative executive actions on abortion and sexuality issues, and much more public rhetorical acknowledgements of the nation’s religious values and roots. For the economic conservatives, he has delivered major tax cuts, a rollback of hundreds of Obama-era regulations on business, and some initial steps toward unraveling the “Obamacare” health insurance legislation. For blue-collar whites, the specific policy victories are harder to identify; despite all the rhetorical bluster, there have as yet been no major changes to American trade policy, and the benefits of the tax bill are generally much greater for businesses and for upper-income Americans than for them. Stylistically, however, Trump continues to resonate with much of the nation’s white working class, who feel that he speaks their language and shares their values.

The very nature of this connection with his white, working-class base, however, makes it difficult for Trump to expand his coalition into a reliable electoral majority. When Trump speaks with crude bravado, flirts with racism, or uses profanity, it registers with much of his base as familiar and authentic; they revel in his rejection of the polished euphemisms and politesse typical of more schooled politicians. These same traits, however, are very off-putting to many of the swing constituencies (like, for example, affluent suburban women) that Republicans need to win natural elections. His party’s great fear is that, in courting the enthusiastic support of 30% of the electorate, he is making it very difficult for them to reach 50%.

So what does this mean for the upcoming mid-terms? Republicans have serious reasons for concern. Mid-term elections typically bring trouble for the party in power; the last three (2006, 2010, and 2014) have witnessed major congressional losses for the party controlling the presidency. Trump’s assiduous courting of “his people” may or may not pay dividends if he decides to seek re-election in 2020, but it could create serious problems for Republicans in upscale, suburban districts. Out-partisans in mid-terms are typically more motivated than supporters of the incumbent party in any case, and Trump’s actions and style so outrage “the resistance” that this is likely to be especially true in 2018. Mid-term elections are, to a significant degree, a straight up-or-down referendum on the president; in that sense, Trump will not be able to count, as he did in 2016, on an equally unpopular opponent to mitigate his own low personal favorability. Ironically, Democrats may well find – as Republicans did in 2010 and 2014 – that the best recipe for congressional gains is to have lost the presidency.