

2016: The Voice of the Voters

Understanding Trump's Voters: How He Pulled It Off and What Lies Ahead

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In the upset of a political lifetime, Donald Trump was elected to be the 45th president of the United States. As we have after each presidential election this century, we want to know why people voted the way they did and, more important, what they expect from the new president's administration. This year, we conducted a focus group with a dozen Trump voters to understand how they feel about their candidate and what their expectations are for his presidency. We chose Cleveland because, while Barack Obama won Ohio in both 2008 and 2012, Trump prevailed there over Hillary Clinton by nearly nine percentage points. This conversation with Trump voters revealed both their high hopes for the next four years and their frustrations with the current political establishment (with Democratic and Republican leaders alike).

While some in this group are die-hard Republicans, seven voted for either Obama or Bill Clinton at least once, including three who voted for Obama in 2012. (In this respect, the findings are not entirely dissimilar to those from our group among Obama voters in Virginia just after the 2008 election, in which, despite several participants' having voted for George W. Bush, we observed a strong sense of optimism and bipartisan support for Obama's promised change.) Most of our Cleveland participants voted *for* Donald Trump, not simply against Hillary Clinton, believing that the time has come for a non-politician business leader such as Trump to finally get things done in Washington. And they are giving him a long leash, granting him plenty of latitude to embark on the agenda he pledged to the American people—at least, for now.

"I think that he has the business mentality that he can make the change that needs to happen, and I don't think he is afraid to do so."

But just like their counterparts across the partisan aisle, these voters are left with an acrid taste in their mouths after an exhausting campaign that many described as "embarrassing" or subsumed by negative personal attacks. Their bitterness derives from neither Trump, nor even necessarily Hillary Clinton, but from media that they perceive as "one-sided" and too focused on spectacle over substance. One woman, for example, accused the media of turning the campaign into a "reality TV show."

There is a palpable sense that Democrats were too arrogant in their belief that they would prevail in November, and that the media and punditry simply were not listening to the will of the people—by contrast with Trump, who vocalized many of their most pertinent worries and offered the requisite solutions.

"[The pundits were] not listening to the people. Not listening to the majority of the people in this country who were complaining about healthcare, who were complaining about different things. They didn't listen. They did their own agenda. They put their hand up. They didn't care."

"I think [the Democrats] need to listen more than they open their mouths. I think if they would listen to the people, I mean, what all of America has been saying for years and that we have pretty much demanded or we did demand change, and I think that they just kept running their mouths on their own agenda that didn't care."

Many of us may remember James Carville's famous phrase from Bill Clinton's winning '92 campaign: "the economy, stupid." But the two perhaps less-of-repeated parts of this mantra were "change vs. more of the same" and "don't forget healthcare." In retrospect, it is evident that Donald Trump followed all three of these edicts throughout his historic campaign. But what is even clearer from this focus group—and will be critical for the new administration to understand—is that Trump's voters are not about to let him forget these promises, and they fully expect the untraditional outsider to shake up a storm in Washington and make real, tangible improvements in the economy and in their day-to-day lives.

Below we review the principal findings that emerged from the session.

Personal Economics Rule the Day

An image that comes to mind when thinking about prototypical Trump supporters is a sea of American flags and red hats, accompanied by patriotic chants of "USA! USA!" But ultimately, for the 12 people in this room who cast their ballot for Donald Trump this year, the choice was less about the broad fate of the nation and more about their individual interests—unlike in November 2008, when post-election focus group participants seemed to look at and think about what the country had to accomplish to deal with the "crashing" economy and lack of affordable healthcare. Granted, times are different and there is less urgency than in 2008, but people were scared then, whereas today they are angry.

Trump's voters are begging for change—measurable, demonstrative improvements—of their own prospects and in their own pocketbooks. While many decry the current job situation in the United States and express a deep hope that Trump will fulfill his promise to protect and create American jobs, the primary lens through

which they view their own economic situation is healthcare, which, as one participant notes, “affects every person in the United States.” They believe that Obamacare was shoved down their throats to “take care of certain groups of people,” with the burden ultimately shouldered on them in the form of plans that are much too costly.

“[We] need to change [healthcare] so everybody’s pulling their own weight, not just a handful of people paying for everybody.”

“Housing bubble crushed us. We got stuck with a house in between building and then healthcare has also put tens of thousands of dollars on us too in the last couple of years.”

“I was out of a job for about almost 10 months... That was, started in 2007, and I didn’t get another job until 2008, and I’d say it’s probably been within the last maybe three or four years that we’ve finally gotten back to where we were before I lost my job.”

On the issue of immigration, concerns about personal safety and security overshadow idealized notions of America as symbolized by the Statue of Liberty. It is notable that immigration—while a ubiquitous, even galvanizing issue in Trump’s stump speech to the nation—was less salient to these participants than were economic issues, and less of a priority for them than jobs or healthcare. That said, once a discussion of the issue was prompted, several participants said they would be in favor of deporting all of the roughly 11 million undocumented immigrants in the country (though others pointed to the impracticality of this proposal or suggested that we should offer an eventual pathway to citizenship). However, while expressing a desire for the border to be more secure and for our immigration laws to be more strongly enforced, these Ohio voters were much less concerned about Trump’s proposed “border wall”—at least in a literal sense. In fact, only three participants expect him to follow through on this pledge.

[In reading this memo, timing is an important element by which to evaluate these voters' feelings about the "Russian hacking" in this election. This group was convened in December, before Trump's January debrief with intelligence agencies about Russian interference in the election process. We still present participants' reactions in order to underscore how they take their cues directly from Trump.]

The group showed little concern about what many have characterized as a significant threat to American democracy, specifically with respect to Russian interference in the November election. They expressed great skepticism about whether the Russians actually hacked our elections, and if so, whether these actions might have any profound implications going forward. Most knew little about the situation and seemed unconcerned, or felt that the "one-sided" media likely was overhyping the charges. In fact, some feel that what was uncovered about the Clinton campaign is more important than the fact that the hacking occurred, but five of the 12 feel that it will be important to launch an investigation to get to the bottom of it.

"Well, our wonderful friend Julian Assange, who gave us all these e-mails, came out and said that it wasn't the Russians, so that tells me that the media isn't being honest with us, and the politicians aren't being honest with us. I truly think, and I don't have too much of a basis to go on this, but I think that they wanted war with Russia for whatever reason I don't get... I remember seeing Hillary Clinton get on TV and blame the Russians automatically. Well, I don't really care who gave us these. I care about the content of what was in these e-mails."

"If they are exposing the truth by exposing e-mails of what people actually said and what they really think, then I think that peels back the covers and gives everybody who's an American citizen voting more information, whether it comes from Russia, China, India, Canada, or Mexico. If it's the truth, so be it."

Latitude Is Wide, Expectations Are High (Patience Is Questionable)

These Trump supporters are filled with optimism about what they see as an approaching tidal wave of change as the new administration moves into 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue. At least for now, they are not putting any real reins on the president-elect; they are placing an exceptionally high level of trust in him that he will fulfill his campaign pledges and honor those who put him in the White House. They give him a few gentle warnings and reminders—for example, to proceed cautiously with Vladimir Putin—but for now, they have faith in him to take the country in their desired direction. Moreover, when it comes to potential areas in which the new administration may fall short—such as failing to reduce partisan

gridlock—these voters are more predisposed to place the blame on entrenched politicians in Congress than on the outsider businessman they have put in the Oval Office.

At the same time, after a long campaign of hard-charging rhetoric and ambitious promises, Trump voters have sky-high expectations for his presidency. This starts, first and foremost, with the economy. As mentioned, putting America back to work is of utmost importance, as is “fixing” the healthcare system (which to these voters primarily means repealing Obamacare and reducing their premiums). If Trump can manage to turn these promises into positive accomplishments, he will remain in these voters’ good graces; if not, the stakes to deliver on other issues will grow steeper.

Unlike in 2009, when the economy was in a full-blown recession, this year is centered more on anger against the establishment than fear of what lies ahead. In 2009, there was more patience that the problems would not be solved immediately, but this year voters seem to believe in moving “full speed ahead” with the Trump agenda. These Ohioans voted for change, and they expect this change to be delivered quickly and demonstrably for them and their families.

“Try to turn things around from the way it’s been heading. It’s been the same old, same old for so long. It’s definitely time for a change... [if] he doesn’t make certain changes, you’re going to have a lot of upset people, or he’s not going to, you know, live up to his word.”

Finally, for all the positives these voters had to say about the president-elect, they offered some monitions. At the center of these concerns is his temperament and public persona. There is some sense that Trump’s behavior does not fully match his voters’ expectations for the president of the United States. Many told us that they would prefer he either stop using Twitter altogether, or at least appoint someone to help him manage his social media presence in a more responsible way. Many expressed that his tweets simply are a distraction—fodder for the media or the Democrats to take the focus away from the real issues. In a similar vein, majorities of the group are concerned about reports of the president-elect not participating in the traditional daily intelligence briefing, expressing fear that he might be missing out on crucial information that, as commander in chief, he simply must know to be able to make quick and informed decisions.

“It seems juvenile. Bring yourself above it. If you’re supposed to be the president, you don’t need to respond to every little nasty thing that comes your way. He’s going to have lots of that.”

“I think he needs a social media manager because the worst look, I think, is not so much what he says because what he said is right, whether it was

about the new Air Force One or the F-35. He was spot-on on both of those. But it's when he does it because when it comes out at 4:35 this morning, Donald Trump tweeted, that looks bad."

"I think him being an inexperienced government official, there's a lot more people that know certain things that he doesn't that he needs to know."

"I think the president needs to be proactive instead of reactive. You can't do that unless you know what's going on."

"Drain the Swamp" Is a Specific, Targeted Message About Corrupt Politicians

Pervasive throughout the group was a strong anti-establishment and anti-politician attitude. These Ohioans voted for Trump because he has made actual accomplishments in the business arena, by contrast with what they perceive as the inherent inability of anyone in Washington to actually get things done. When asked what it means to them when Trump says he will "drain the swamp," voters talk about getting rid of corrupt career politicians and shady, pay-to-play deals in Washington, as well as ending unnecessary, wasteful spending ("cut the pork"). Notably their ire is not aimed at millionaires or corporate interests. In fact, participants believe that Trump's wealth insulates him against corruption: he's already made his millions, and therefore cannot be bought. They believe Trump is not in this for the money, and thus will not be susceptible to the influence of special interests the way other politicians are. (For this reason, they are much less concerned about Trump's potential conflicts of interest than the mainstream media is.)

The flip side of this outsider-admiration was revealed when participants were asked their feelings toward a slew of more "establishment" politicians, including Republicans, which range from trepidation to outright antipathy. They view Speaker Paul Ryan with a great deal of suspicion, noting that he was wary of Donald Trump until that position no longer seemed politically tenable. Voters want congressional Republicans to conform to the president-elect's agenda—rather than the other way around—and they are ready to hold them accountable if they do not see results. When asked what they want the Republicans in Congress to know, one participant warned:

"They need to get on board, and I think that there's still a lot of animosity toward Trump because he's not one of them. He's an outsider, and he hates that. And they hate that their perfumed prince candidates like Jeb Bush or Kasich didn't get the nomination. And they're still sitting there scratching their heads. Wait a minute. How come our guy didn't get it? We can't

understand this. This doesn't make any sense. So, I think they need to accept it and get on board."

Closing Thoughts

Donald J. Trump's campaign has raised the bar with the high expectations of his supporters. His voters admire, support, and believe in his ambitions for the country—and they expect them to be achieved. This is not new or surprising, as this is what we found for both George W. Bush and Barack Obama after their victories. What we have learned over the course of these post-election focus groups is that the enthusiasm, as well as the benefit of the doubt, for an incoming president is very high when they are the president-elect. Yet the concerns and shortcomings that voters see in these euphoric times often become the most telling insights about the problems they will face in their first two years in office. Over the course of the past four presidential elections, we have measured voters' attitudes in these post-election focus groups, and in each case, there is hope and expectation that each president-elect will meet his voters' own hopes and expectations. For President-elect Trump, the support and expectations are greater, because his campaign was unique and his promises more robust—while skepticism is high among voters who did not support him.

This focus group did *not* cover those who did not support Donald Trump. His ability to unite the nation will be the ultimate test. Over the last two generations, both Ronald Reagan and Bill Clinton came from the opposite ends of the ideological spectrum and, through their personalities and political skills, they were able to knit a nation together behind their personal appeal and pragmatic leadership. The question is: will Donald J. Trump be able to do the same as the 45th president of the United States?