

**2016: The Voice of the Voters**  
**A Look at Swing Voters:**  
**Perceptions of the Candidates**

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If you look at the latest surveys and listen to David Plouffe, who thinks the presidential election is “likely going to be a landslide,” you might say this race is settled. The most recent *Wall Street Journal*/NBC News survey found a nine-point margin in Hillary Clinton’s favor (47% to 38%). That is wider than the margins by which Bill Clinton defeated Bob Dole and Barack Obama defeated Mitt Romney.

The problem with this analysis is that the 2016 electorate is unlike any of those that produced the landslides of 1964, 1972, and 1984—years when voters reached their conclusions early, were comfortable with the front-runner, and the incumbent’s support margins continued to expand throughout the process. While Mr. Plouffe ultimately may be correct, his buoyant view of the electorate is premature. My warning is to not put so much stock in today’s numbers; instead, pay close and careful attention to the voters’ voices and thoughts.

It was clear in our recent focus group with a dozen swing voters in the Milwaukee suburbs that neither candidate is liked by voters. None of these 12 swing voters feels bound to their vote by partisan affiliation, as each has voted for at least one Republican and one Democrat since 2000. What’s interesting is that what we heard in suburban Milwaukee last week is not all that different from what we heard in Aurora, Colorado, in January 2015. Voters are anxious and angry. They say they are not voting for someone they want to be president, but against someone they do NOT want to be president.

We went to Milwaukee because it is the frontline of many of the issues and challenges in America this election season. Racial issues recently simmered to the surface here, and protests erupted after the police shooting of a 23-year-old black man. Politically, Wisconsin is at the center of the action, with a contested Senate seat that could swing the overall Senate balance; and the home of Wisconsin’s own member of the Republican establishment, Speaker of the House Paul Ryan, who is balancing an uneasy alliance with the Republican nominee, Donald Trump.

In what follows we discuss the key findings from this group.

## **Voters are holding their noses this election season.**

- Voters nationwide may be paying more attention than they normally would to the presidential campaign this season, but the swing voters we met in this focus group are not enjoying the experience. When asked what scent or smell comes to mind when they think of the 2016 election, they offered a plethora of sickening scents. Four participants gave us "garbage" and three said "skunk." The remaining voters gave us similarly offensive smells: "sulfur," "rotten eggs," "dead fish," and "manure." They explained that they are disgusted by the campaign's negativity and mudslinging. They want to hear more about the issues and where candidates stand. Instead, these voters feel like all they have heard is personal attacks. If the campaign continues down this path, these swing voters will still be holding their noses when they cast their ballot.

[Garbage] "I said garbage, and it was just because of the backstabbing and the name-calling."

– Woman, Trump supporter

[Sulfur] "For me, it was Trump's continued lack of respect. I raised my kids totally different than he's coming across. He's an outright bigot, a hater. My kids look at this and say, 'well, it's okay for the guy who's running for president.' That's not what I raised them to do, and that is not what I want to see."

– Man, Clinton supporter

[Rotten eggs] "My biggest thing is the issues versus the slander. I don't care what he thinks of Hillary or she thinks of him. I want to know what their stances on issues, and I want them to explain it in a way that's respectful."

– Woman, undecided

## **They have strong views, but they are not high-information voters.**

- When we sat down with them, these voters did not know who Tim Kaine is. Nor did they cite information that seems key to readers of the major newspapers, such as the investigations of discrimination against African Americans in the Trump family business's rental housing policy, or that 50 Republican foreign policy experts came out against Mr. Trump. These swing voters' opinions are based on the candidates' personalities, the anger they feel toward Washington, and the fact that they are facing difficult challenges in their own lives.

## **Lack of trust is an important element.**

- The big picture is that Hillary Clinton is ahead among these voters because she is perceived as "the safer choice," but they just do not trust her. When asked to rate their opinion of her on five different qualities using a one-to-10 scale (one being the lowest opinion, 10 a very positive opinion), trust ranked lowest. Seven of the 12 swing voters rated their opinion as a one or a two. While they cited the scandal over her use of private e-mail servers while secretary of state and Benghazi, their lack of trust stems from a perception of her lack of openness and

transparency. Several swing voters explained that when these issues arise, she comes across as defensive and dismissive. To win their votes, undecided voters said that Hillary Clinton must be more quickly forthcoming, to offer an explanation and “to take off the mask.” Others in the group openly wondered what else she might be hiding. This is important because she will not get the benefit of anyone’s doubt if something takes a wrong turn.

“I think my problem with her is her transparency. When these things have come to light now, like Benghazi. After a two-year investigation, \$7 million spent, you can bet if there had been some culpability, she'd have been hung with it. The same with the server, we have due process. There was no illegal activity. That's fine, but she didn't make it easy to get there.”

– Man, Clinton supporter

“She’s a smart woman. But when you don’t know that her e-mail is going to be secure and you go that route, you can’t trust her. The trust is about knowing the difference between right and wrong and having integrity. I don’t think she has that. And it’s a shame.”

– Woman, undecided

**Behind this election are the questions of who is going to improve the economy, take on the powerful elite, and change the culture in Washington.**

- These issues, along with terrorism, remain voters’ major concerns. Terrorism and foreign policy are bedrock strengths for Hillary Clinton against Donald Trump. Eight of these voters give her a high rating on competence; only four say the same about Trump. Still, the 2016 presidential contest remains a “change” election. The Clinton campaign has been deft in rebutting Mr. Trump and spotlighting his shortcomings. But it has yet to make the case for Hillary Clinton as a candidate who will take on the establishment and be a transparent leader. That opportunity is open to Mr. Trump. He is the outsider in an election for change.

“Our country is in turmoil because of politicians, not because of people. It's not going to take a politician to fix our country. Donald Trump made his billions before he got into politics. He doesn't need the money... He's doing it to help fix a problem that our political machine, Republicans and Democrats, cannot fix.”

– Man, Trump supporter

## **Donald Trump is unacceptable to most voters in the focus group and throughout the country.**

- That has not changed over the summer. He remains a “risk candidate.” While they might not trust Hillary Clinton to be completely forthcoming or tell them the truth, they do not trust Donald Trump to have the self-control or demeanor required of a president. The undecided and Clinton supporters in the room decried the example he is setting for children and they worry about what he would do in the setting of an international meeting with other world leaders. And even his supporters voice their exasperation with Trump’s seemingly unending parade of controversial statements. Still, many give him credit for being honest. As one Milwaukee participant stated, he is a “bully and a loudmouth, but at least you know that’s what he is ...the package is what the package is.” They want to vote against him, but they feel they are facing a tough choice and many have not yet reached the point of no return. In some ways, Trump is holding a better hand than Clinton. All he has to do is keep himself in check, heed his advisors’ input, and refrain from making bombastic and offensive statements. For traditional politicians, this would be an easy hand to play. But as this campaign has demonstrated, Trump is anything but a traditional politician.

“With Trump, the way he acts, it’s just every day, I turn on the news, and I just shake my head. I think he would really be an awesome candidate if he had his personality under control.”

– Woman, Trump supporter

“He has no filter. He kind of just says whatever comes to mind, and that could end up burning us as a country in the long run. I know that he has advisors, but he currently has advisors that he doesn't listen to. Then he fires them. I don't trust somebody who doesn't listen to the people who are supposed to be giving him advice.”

– Man, undecided

“I keep waiting for Trump 2.0 because starting back, I was planning to vote Republican. But now we are stuck with the same rhetoric that's hateful. I don't know if I can do that, and I don't know that there's another candidate that I could vote for in good confidence either.”

– Man, undecided

## **Voters imagining the candidates as zoo animals reveals the defining character traits they see in the candidates.**

- In focus groups, we often like to give participants an opportunity to think creatively about the candidates, as thinking about an issue or topic in new ways allows the central points to come into focus. In this group, we asked swing voters to imagine each candidate as if they were an animal at the zoo. In these swing voters’ minds, Trump is foolish (and potentially dangerous) and strong (and potentially dangerous). Clinton, by contrast, brought to mind animals they viewed with suspicion, although some of her supporters envisioned an animal

with strength that perseveres through tough times. Below is a selection of swing voters' reactions to this exercise.

| <b><u>Hillary Clinton</u></b>  | <b><u>Donald Trump</u></b>   |
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| <b>Hippo:</b> "It's the most dangerous animal," "she can muscle her way through things." | <b>Baboon:</b> "He's entertaining to watch but eventually he's going to throw something at you." |
| <b>Gazelle:</b> "She tries to be smooth."  | <b>Rhino:</b> "He's a big presence, but doesn't get along with anybody."                         |
| <b>Giraffe:</b> "She looks down on you."   | <b>Lion:</b> "He's got a big roar," "A bully."   |
| <b>Tiger:</b> "She'll claw her way through."   | <b>Hyena:</b> "He makes a lot of noise, and he looks a little funny."                            |

### **This election reminds me very much of 1980.**

- In 1980, people knew that they did not want to vote for Jimmy Carter. Polls showed a close election, but those findings masked a pivotal belief among voters, who only needed to be reassured that Ronald Reagan would be a "safe" choice. It was not until the single debate with President Carter that voters were convinced that Reagan could be a safe choice. This year, a lot of voters know they do not want Donald Trump as president, but they need to know that they can "live with" Hillary Clinton for the next four years. For now, the hurdle they face is to find reassurance that they can trust her and that she will identify with them and their day-to-day challenges. So while her current lead in the polls looks large, in Milwaukee and across the country, Hillary Clinton still has a lot of votes to earn before Mr. Plouffe's prognostication becomes reality.