

2016: The Voice of the Voters

A Look at Blue-Collar and Working-Class Voters: Perceptions of the Candidates

The Annenberg Focus Group in Pittsburgh, PA, on June 20, 2016

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It has been a rough few weeks for Donald Trump according to political commentators and insiders. But you would not know that if you listened to a group of blue-collar and working-class voters gathered in downtown Pittsburgh to discuss the upcoming election as part of our ongoing work with the Annenberg Public Policy Center of the University of Pennsylvania. These eleven blue-collar and working-class voters are all living on the edge financially and report that they either make just enough to meet their basic expenses or only have a little left over for extras after meeting basic expenses. These voters also do not have much in the way of higher education--only one in the group had a college degree. With the challenges Trump faces among millennials, voters of color, and college-educated women, this is a group he must win if he is going to win the election. There is no scenario in which Trump wins the election without this group of voters. As such, the composition of the group was purposefully weighted toward Trump (five said they would probably or definitely vote for Trump, four said the same about Hillary Clinton, and one is undecided and leaning toward Trump or Gary Johnson).

It is not only these blue-collar voters in Pittsburgh, but also our most recent national NBC/WSJ survey that shows the disconnect between the performance and coverage of the Trump campaign and the head-to-head pairing that shows Hillary Clinton at 46% and Trump at 41%. So before you say "this can't be true," listen to these voters and read what they have to say, recognizing how they view their lives and what their perceptions of the candidates are.

We learn that this group of blue-collar voters has not dismissed Trump. While conservative elites may have been wringing their hands or distancing themselves from Trump in the past several weeks, none of their complaints have broken through to these voters. These voters did not mention anything about Trump's declaration and subsequent backpedaling about a federal judge being biased against him because of his Mexican heritage. Nobody mentioned the tension between the Trump campaign and the Republican establishment or Trump's much-criticized response to the Orlando shooting. In contrast to our focus group in March with Republican primary voters who voiced real concerns and criticisms of Trump, these blue-collar and working-class voters offered more of an apologia. The bottom line for Trump is that the bottom has not fallen out.

The mood is bleak and the outlook pessimistic for these blue-collar workers.

- These are tough times for blue-collar and working-class voters. It is a struggle just getting by for many in this group, and those who are feeling more relaxed these days say they have had to work hard and overcome major struggles just to get to where they are now. As one woman put it, "The middle class is wronged a lot...We're like the step child." Better times do not seem to be on the horizon for most of these voters. Only three in the group said that things will be better for their children's generation, while the rest feel we are passing the baton backward. For many in this group, higher education either is out of reach or not worth the cost. Several volunteered that their

children have had to drop out of college because they could not afford it and did not want to go into massive debt. As others in the group nodded in agreement, another volunteered that his nieces and nephews have chosen not to go to college at all because they are afraid they will never be able to pay off their debt. There is a strong sense among these voters that there is no longer a realistic or viable path to upward mobility in America. Trump's harsh criticism of the status quo and big ideas for change resonate with these blue collar voters' personal experiences in a way that the messages of other candidates do not.

- At the heart of this pessimism is a sense of impending doom for the United States. When these focus group participants each took a moment to imagine America as a ship at sea and draw what came to mind, only one picture depicted a bright and hopeful outlook with a strong ship sailing near the sun (see a sampling of these drawings on page 7). The rest of the group saw America on a markedly darker and ill-fated voyage. Several drew pictures of rocky seas, choppy waters, and "tidal waves and there's no chance of survival." One woman portrayed a sinking ship with a tattered flag, and another drew a picture of a ship with half in good condition while the other half was sinking into the ocean as people jumped off into the rocky seas. Two others drew a picture of a ship at the bottom of the sea: "we have already sunk." One man explains that we are now paying the price for disastrous decisions of previous administrations. Another says that divisions, both economically and politically, have created a "volatile" situation. As these participants see traditional politicians at fault for our country heading toward imminent disaster, they are willing to take a chance on a candidate that represents something (or anything) different.

Fear and disaffection has turned these blue-collar voters inward, and they have become protective and wary of foreign entanglements in the Middle East.

- These blue-collar voters most certainly care about domestic issues such as healthcare and economic growth, which impact them in real and direct ways on a daily basis. But one week after the nation's worst mass shooting in history, national security and terrorism is their current key issue and the lens through which they view the election. They are afraid of ISIS and feel terrorized, when what they really want is for the terrorists to fear us. When Trump says he wants to temporarily ban all Muslims from entering the country, eight of our focus group participants say they agree, including two Clinton supporters. Similarly, eight participants say they agree with Trump's idea to build a 50-foot wall along our southern border. There is a notable lack of compassion or empathy, and instead a very strong anti-immigrant and nationalist sentiment. At no point in the conversation did anyone stand up and say "this is not who we are as a nation." Instead, they complained that Trump probably would not be successful in banning all foreign Muslims from entering the country because he would face too much opposition. But this was a problem rather than a point of pride. One man explains that he thinks we have gotten to this position by caring too much about our neighbors and not focusing enough on ourselves. Right now, they are looking for someone who is strong, confident, and will not be pushed around, and ironically, Trump is making them feel safe.

"I think that we've been lied to for so long. So what he doesn't want Muslims, per se, that are terrorists in the country? Then I'm glad he is saying it, because I don't want them in there either. I don't want terrorists in our country."

-Woman, Trump supporter

Blue-collar workers see potential strengths for Trump in the same qualities that others criticize as shortcomings or weaknesses.

- What is remarkable about this entire conversation is the marked disconnect between how these blue-collar workers view Trump's actions and statements and what the political establishment and pundits are saying about him. Most of these blue-collar workers easily excused Trump's potential faults. In some cases, they even turned his weaknesses into strengths. These voters dismissed out-of-hand issues that political commentators and opponents have used to criticize Trump. Nobody blinked an eye that Trump is the first candidate in recent history not to release his tax returns. Nobody worried that he wants to deport 11 million immigrants living in the United States illegally (five agreed with him). While these voters initially worried about how divided we have become as a nation, nobody voiced concerns that his rhetoric would stoke more division in the country. Instead, even those who were lukewarm toward him or support Clinton said they appreciate his honesty. A few might wish that he would "calm down" or "turn it down a couple notches," but in the end they still see Trump's statements as a net positive, because at least they feel they know where he stands. Whereas other politicians come across as phony or lying, one woman said that Trump is "speaking my language." Trump's lack of experience is not a problem for these voters, either. It is more of a plus than a minus that, if elected, Trump would be the first president without any previous government or military experience. Trump's lack of experience becomes an opportunity when his supporters believe, as one man put it, "We need change and it's not coming fast enough." In this way, Trump's core support and appeal is resilient.

"He just makes me feel very comfortable, safe, and I like to listen to him. I think he has common sense. He speaks my language, just the way he is."

-Woman, leans toward Trump

Blue-collar workers are not connecting with Clinton or her agenda.

- It will come as no surprise that this is a tough audience for Clinton. Most of these blue-collar workers who are sympathetic to Trump also have an intense dislike of Clinton, and as expected, cite her lack of trustworthiness as the major discrediting factor. But in this group, even her supporters were relatively lukewarm and only one woman supporter defended her (though even she seemed to give up as the group progressed). A significant problem for Clinton with this particular group is that they do not connect with her agenda or even know what her message is. Secretary Clinton does not mesh stylistically with these voters, but the main challenge and problem is that substantively, they have a sense that she is not prioritizing the issues they care about. They do not know what she stands for or what she wants to accomplish. There is no perception that their cause is her cause.

Other takeaways: This rich and provocative discussion produced a number of insights into how blue-collar voters are engaging with the election. Below we briefly summarize some of these additional points.

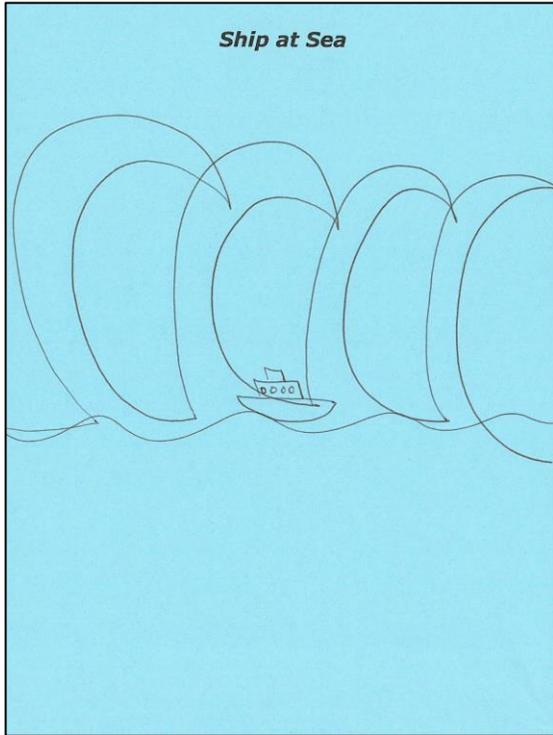
- **These blue-collar workers see Obama in a much more favorable light than George W. Bush.** The words these blue-collar voters use to describe the past seven years of Obama are mostly positive or neutral, and include “reform,” “healthcare,” “success” and “great.” Several Trump supporters are positive toward Obama’s presidency, describing it as “great things” and “fulfillment.” By contrast, Bush’s presidency is described as “comfortable” or “fine,” at best and most (including many Trump supporters) use much harsher words such as “horrible,” “ruins,” and “chaos.” For Clinton, Obama does not appear to be a drag with this constituency.
- **Yin and Yang. Bill Clinton is their friend and they like him and think he did right by them with the economy. Hillary Clinton does not get any “benefit of the doubt.”** While many of these blue-collar voters have positive things to say about the Obama and the Bill Clinton years, Hillary Clinton is not benefitting from those warm feelings. She has not forged a kinship with these people.
- **Not satisfied entirely with either option, these blue-collar voters are willing to consider a third-party alternative.** Eight of the 11 voters gathered in the room said that they would vote for a third-party candidate. They say they are not happy with either candidate and are looking for another option. Right now, Trump is winning some of their votes because they have already taken Clinton off the table. But if a third-party candidate convinced them that their vote would not be wasted, many would seriously consider that option. For now, they will stay with what they have, but they remain open.
- **A contested convention could lead to a serious backlash against the Republican Party among blue-collar voters. They may be open, but they are not about to accept the “elite leaders” denying him the nomination.** These voters were not aware of or had not seriously considered the possibility that Trump might not receive the nomination. But if that were to happen, they would feel “upset,” “robbed,” and “neglected.” Despite his imperfections, they believe he has earned the nomination, and anything less would violate their sense of fair play.

Summary: The question we get more than any other is “Can Trump Win?” The answer people want and expect is “NO.” With apologies to all those who expect this response of “no he cannot win,” the results from this focus group and the current NBC and *The Wall Street Journal* survey say this race is not yet decided.

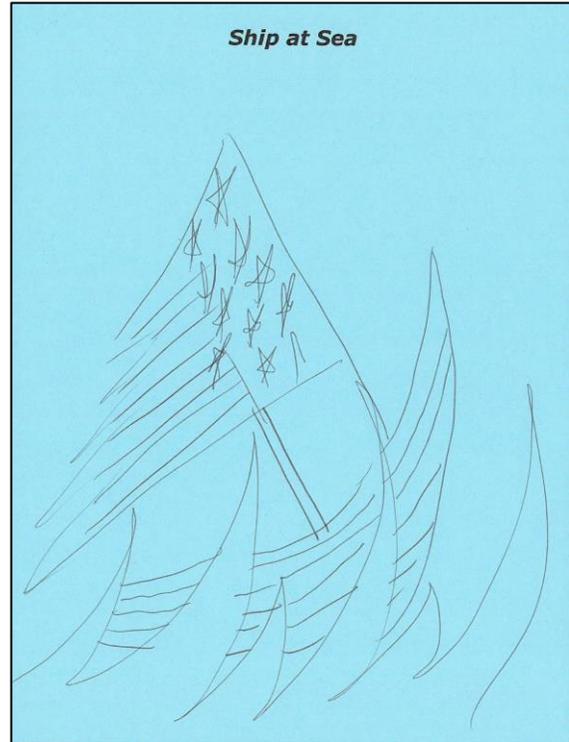
Donald Trump has the highest ever negative feeling thermometer score for a presidential candidate, and he may appear to be taking on more water than any nominee could carry. But for this moment and with this group of voters, he remains competitive, and the election is far from over with the conventions happening this month and the formal campaigning and the debates not that far away. For now, Hillary Clinton is ahead, but how the blue-collar vote goes will tell us whether election night will be a nail biter or one that allows the Democrats to win the presidency with enough coattails to regain a Democratic majority in the United States Senate.

America as a ship at sea

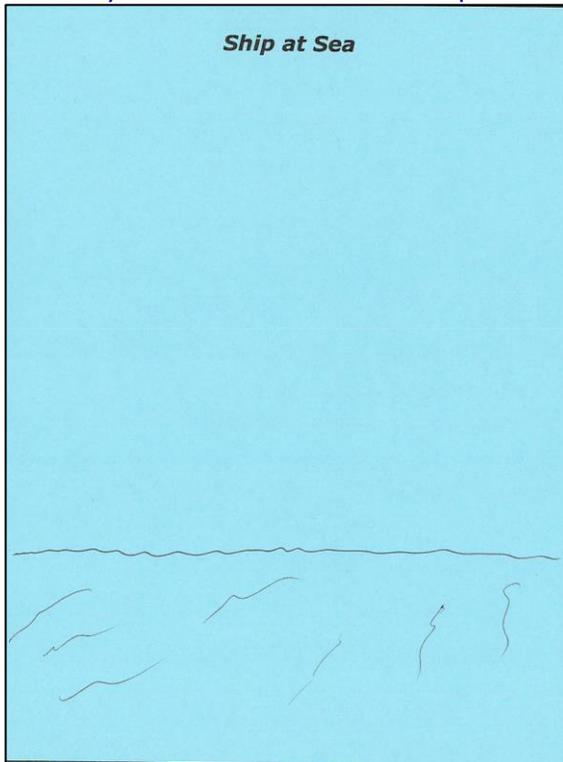
"It's tidal waves and there's no chance of survival."



"I drew sharp, choppy waters, ship sinking, flags tattered, falling apart. The good parts are getting left behind."



"It's a body of water because the ship is sunk."



"Half the ship is in really good condition, the other half is falling apart, people jumping off."

