

2016: The Voice of the Voters
A Look at Late-Deciding Voters:
Perceptions of the Candidates

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Election 2016 ends where it began—an unhappy electorate looking for change, dissatisfied with the choices they had for president. Back in January of 2015, when we first began listening to the voices of the voters who would decide the 2016 election, this is what we found in Aurora, Colorado:

This group harbors an underlying anxiety and sense of frustration: they feel like no one in Washington is looking out for them and they are pessimistic that things will improve. The distrust of career politicians in the group was palpable, with all in agreement that politicians are out for themselves and not the people who elected them. This resentment feeds directly into voters' feelings about and expectations for the legislative session of 2015, and the political season of 2016.

After a historic and tumultuous primary season and general election campaign, little has changed from the perspective of voters. The single unanimous viewpoint that emerged from a session of a dozen late deciders in Charlotte, North Carolina, in late October 2016 was "I do not like either candidate." It is both sad and dispiriting—yes, there are passionate supporters of both Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton, but the truth is that as this focus group and the polls show, people are voting more *against* rather than *for* a candidate. As one completely undecided man put it, "The message is not 'vote for me because I'm the best candidate'; the message is 'vote for me because I'm less of a sleaze ball.'" The truth is that voters were looking for change, an outsider, and a new direction. But as this focus group shows, Donald Trump may have possessed the right resume, but these voters felt that he had the wrong character. When asked to put the election of 2016 into American historical context, three respondents selected the Iraq War or Vietnam War: "neither was a good option, but you had to choose one."

Three women voters in this group encapsulate why Donald Trump is losing. They encompass three generations: Donna, 57 and retired; Jennifer, 48 and a homemaker; and Katie, 30 and a financial planner. Their concerns are mostly related to the economy and federal budget; the political hero for two of them is Ronald Reagan. These are voters that any other Republican nominee likely would

have been able to win easily, but Trump's escalating childish and insulting behavior left them internally conflicted. Donna captured it best:

"I so much wanted Trump. I so much wanted a non-politician. But I don't trust him and I'm afraid of him. I just don't think he knows when to shut up. If he would just say 'I'm a business man, I'm not a politician, I'm gonna make America great again,' and stop right there. Then I would vote for him."

-Donna, leaning Clinton

"I wanted to like Trump. But I don't know that I can, because it's embarrassing the way he acts, his temper tantrums. I think he's just an embarrassment to our country. I don't embrace Clinton, but I'd vote for her. It's probably going to be a vote against Trump."

-Jennifer, undecided

Hillary Clinton may become the first woman president, and it is people like these North Carolina women who will spell the difference. But it was Donald Trump's actions and behavior that put her there, and ironically her gender was not the telling difference.

Here are the other principal findings that emerged from this session.

Trump's "embarrassing" behavior has alienated late-deciding voters.

- The deck should have been stacked in Trump's favor with this group of late-deciding voters, who lean more Republican than Democrat and identify as moderate or conservative on most issues. He had a chance with them after the conventions, but failed to close the deal. These voters say that Trump's behavior has embarrassed us as a nation. When asked to say what his behavior reminds them of, voters say a child (multiple), including a "child having a tantrum," a "spoiled brat," a "bully," and a "middle schooler." The immaturity and lack of self-control these late-deciding voters perceive in Trump does not amuse them—it frightens them. Several voters in the room volunteer that Trump scares them. They say they are scared that his thin skin could lead us into war and they are scared of what could happen if he had control of nuclear weapons.

The voters in this focus group have not ruled Trump out entirely, however, despite their grave concerns about his temperament and character. In this respect, Trump certainly has benefited from the negativity late-deciding voters feel toward Hillary Clinton. More importantly though, he benefits from his affiliation with the Republican Party. Several voters say that in the end, they may end up holding their noses and voting for Trump primarily because of their desire to see conservative justices appointed to the Supreme Court. One woman, torn between Trump and Johnson, explained that while she did not support Trump, she believes in the Republican Party platform. Some late-deciding voters in the room say that if Trump wins North Carolina, it is likely

because of the religious beliefs of many North Carolinians in the Bible Belt. Conservative-leaning voters are feeling a deep and genuine internal conflict over their choices this election; they still could break either way.

"I'm leaning slightly toward Trump based on Supreme Court decisions, national security, pro-life. Mainly for what the party stands for, not as much the candidate."

-Denise, leaning Trump

While the contrast with Donald Trump has benefited Clinton in the past month, she has a lot of work to do to win over late-deciding voters.

- Clinton does not fair significantly better than Trump among this deeply dissatisfied audience of voters, who offer similarly harsh evaluations of the Democratic nominee. These voters distrust her on multiple fronts, with several describing her as a "liar" and one as "above the law." Clinton's e-mails continue to haunt her with this group of voters; even those who lean toward her right now wonder what else she might be hiding. On the one hand, these voters admire qualities such as Clinton's "professionalism," "composure," work ethic, and persistence. But at the same time, many do not see authenticity or empathy. These late-deciding voters feel that she remains at a distance, and they cannot relate to her on a human level. One man leaning toward Clinton describes her as "robotic," while another undecided voter says she is a "political professional."

"She's too well prepared, she's too well spoken. She looks too good behind the podium. ... I don't envision her as motherly or grandmotherly. I can't see her relating in difficult situations. Only when she has time to prepare does she look good."

-Katie, undecided

Part of the problem is that most of the voters in the group believe that nothing moves her but power and ambition. When asked what motivates Hillary Clinton, they volunteer "power," "herself," "attention," and "self-interest." Only three late-deciding voters offered a more sympathetic perspective, saying that she is motivated by "love of country," a desire for "policy change," or "making history."

Many of these late-deciding voters are only considering Clinton because of Trump's deep flaws. Several say that Trump may have lost their vote, but Clinton still has not won it. She faces serious challenges to earning their trust and support if she wins the election. They say that she needs to compromise, but also keep her promises. One man leaning toward voting for Clinton right now says he wants transparency and for her to set clear goals that can be accomplished. Another man currently choosing between Trump and Johnson raises the bar higher: "she needs to avoid any appearance of impropriety." If the negativity and skepticism these late-deciding voters hold reflects the wider electorate, Clinton will have a significant mountain to climb with respect to governing should she become president.

The Obamas are the ultimate power surrogates.

- Clinton may face hurdles winning over late-deciding voters, but she has some seriously valuable allies to help her get across the finish line. The Obamas—and Michelle Obama in particular—emerge as refreshingly esteemed and admired figures unsullied by the ugliness of the 2016 campaign. Michelle Obama appears as the moral compass in a rudderless election. It did not matter their political affiliations or ideology—everyone in this group could find something to admire in the First Lady. Multiple voters described her as “classy,” while others said “lovely,” “charismatic,” and “wholesome.” In sharp contrast with Trump and Clinton, the voters believe that Michelle Obama is motivated by family, children, and a desire for social change. While several in the group had more critical words for President Obama (including two people who called him a “failure”), he fared quite well for a major political figure. They see him as driven by “justice,” “making change,” “inequality,” and “love of country.” In a time when these late-deciding voters could swing the outcome of a key battleground state, Hillary Clinton could not ask for more appealing surrogates to make the case for her.

Differences in views appear with respect to racial divisions.

- Racial conflict has been at the forefront over the last year with protests in Dallas, Milwaukee, New York, and Charlotte, where these late-deciding voters make their homes. We came to Charlotte, in part, to see how race played into the election, but we found that it was a lower-tier issue for most of the voters in the group. The only people to name racial issues as important to their vote were the two African Americans in the group. They explained that they still see a lot of racial disparities, some of which they say were previously hidden and are now rising to the surface. As the white voters in the group began to discuss race, it became clear that there was a gulf between their perspectives. Several of the white voters put the focus of racial problems on African Americans, explaining that Black Lives Matter is “feeding the flames” and that violent protests are only worsening problems. One white man attributed the racial conflicts to part of a “subculture that doesn’t value education.” Many of the whites in the room expressed the belief that the media sensationalizes and overplays race problems in America and that race relations really are not that bad. Still, as the conversation progressed, most of the white voters acknowledged that they might have a rosier perspective on race problems given their status as white men and women. Although the conversation veered into uncomfortable territory, in the end the voters mostly agreed that there was plenty of work to do to repair and improve race relations in the country (though the road is seen as more of a hill, and less of a mountain). Despite their differing perspectives, they are united in a desire to see greater dialogue and more respect.

Concluding remarks

This is the final Annenberg focus group before the 2016 election. Compared with the other elections in the 21st Century, this has been a wary and unhappy electorate throughout the entire process. Any mandate that will emerge from this election is going to be forged by the president-elect after Election Day. The overwhelming message that emerged from each session is that the voters want to turn the page and begin a new chapter with more stability and an opportunity to reestablish America's standing in the world and to rebuild the shrinking middle class.

Corrie Hunt has been my analytical partner throughout this 2016 election project, and her work and insights were instrumental in this effort. Helena Austin has been the tireless and magnificent director of recruiting and organizing each site.

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