

2016 Presidential Election: The Voices of Voters

The Annenberg Focus Group in Columbus, Ohio

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Views and Attitudes toward the Republican Candidates

If you follow the polls of Republican primary voters or see the huge rallies showing up to hear Donald Trump speak, it may seem like the time is ripe for an outside candidate to emerge as the next president. Indeed, in our October focus group in Indianapolis, Republican primary voters saw outsider candidates as the antidote to career politicians who fail to deliver on promises. But among focus groups with voters (in which the principal focus was Hillary Clinton) with a mix of party affiliations in Columbus, Ohio, there is skepticism about electing an untested, unknown candidate. We conducted two focus groups (one all men, the other all women) here one year prior to the election. Columbus's Franklin County, which Obama won handily in 2008 and 2012, is a must-win for Democrats and so the composition of the groups was purposefully weighted toward Democrats (both Clinton and Sanders supporters). But six of the dozen participants in each group identified as Republican or independent. Please note the timing was three days after the Paris terrorist attacks.

The climate for an outsider candidate is decidedly different among these mixed groups of voters. Most certainly, these voters are sick of the same old gridlock and partisan infighting in Washington. However, while they are looking for a unifier and consensus builder, most have not discounted the importance of experience. Many agree the 'devil they know' is better than the 'devil they don't know.' When they think about the complexities and demands of the president, they gravitate toward candidates who have proven themselves in some way in politics, which presents a challenge for some of the leading Republican candidates. At the same time, while Hillary Clinton excels on experience and leadership in these voters' eyes, they tend to appreciate the personal qualities more of the leading Republican candidates. It is unclear where or how far these personal qualities can take politically inexperienced candidates, but the door remains open for a candidate who can better relate to voters but also can convince voters that they have the resume and credentials to lead the country.

As noted above, these focus groups convened just three days after the Paris attacks. These focus group participants expressed a range of emotions, from anger, to sadness, to fear, to disbelief. At the same time, there was a sense of resignation that this is the world we live in now, and for many in this Democratic leaning group, the attacks did not fundamentally change the landscape of the country or the 2016 election. They want a solution to fighting ISIS but they do not want important domestic issues, particularly related to the economy, to fall by the wayside. Nevertheless, while these voters say the attacks did not affect their personal feelings about who they want as the next president, they believe it will shift the overall focus of the campaign. Many of these men and women believe that *other* Americans will be searching for a strong leader in the war on terror and that Republican candidates who take more hardline stances will become more appealing to the broader electorate.

Here are some of the key findings on the Republicans seeking the nomination. In this section, we asked the conventional questions (“give us a word or phrase” to describe the candidate), but we went beyond that to get an “insider view” of how they psychologically view and relate to the candidates. Two questions were: “Let us suppose (the candidate) were a member of your family—what relative would he or she be? Also, let us suppose this candidate were a comic strip or TV fictional character—who would they be?” Their answers are revealing. We will detail the two leaders (Trump and Carson), and provide a short take on the others.

- **Trump may captivate audiences of Republican primary voters, but thus far he has failed to win over this more ideologically mixed group of voters.** They already feel they have a sense for who he is and what he stands for, and what they know they do not like. Trump’s “loudmouth” style has alienated these voters and very few can see themselves supporting him for president. More so than perhaps any other candidate, many say they definitely would NOT support him. He is a “bully,” “racist,” “arrogant,” “hateful,” and “inappropriate” in their eyes. As the family member, Trump is the “crazy uncle,” “the drunk racist husband of your aunt,” “the shameful in-law,” and the “smart-aleck teenager who thinks they have to tell you about everything and they’re always right.” His “large and in charge” presence calls to mind characters like Hulk Hogan and Vince McMahon and his offensive, unfiltered style reminds others of Archie Bunker or the Family Guy’s Peter Griffin.

For the few who like him, Trump succeeds because of what they believe he will bring to the economy. The few Trump supporters in these groups think he would be good for business in the United States because he understands from experience how regulations can strangle economic growth. Those who take a more forgiving view see him as just a showman trying to get attention or because it is a competition. They think he's doing well because he's entertaining and what he says about how easily politicians can be bought resonates in this time when the influence of money over politics is so pronounced.

Although some of these voters give Trump credit for being strong (having a backbone of "steel," "iron," or "gold,"), there is a sense that his showmanship lacks substance or even a true understanding of the implications of his pronouncements. One independent man likened Trump to Buzz Lightyear from the original *Toy Story*: he's the "very, very confident Buzz Lightyear who didn't know he was a toy." Furthermore, Trump is lacking the demeanor this group of voters is looking for in their next president. He remains the captivating figure that voters are transfixed by, but they are far from ready to want him as president.

- **Carson is less of a known quantity among this mix of voters.** Those who like him say he is compassionate, and they praise his intelligence and calm demeanor. His gentle and low-key demeanor reminds his supporters of a "sweet grandpa that you would want to invite over." For another fan, Carson calls to mind Mr. Rogers in that "he's lovable, kind, friendly, and wants to be your president and your neighbor." Others know very little about Carson other than that he is a brain surgeon. One man likened Carson to the Professor from *Gilligan's Island* because "we know that he is smart, but that's about all we really know."

If it is the demeanor and combustible personality of Donald Trump that scares people, it is the lack of knowledge and sophistication on issues that frightens off voters from Dr. Carson. Carson appears to have hit a ceiling among this mixed audience; only Trump surpasses Carson as the candidate most commonly named as someone they would NOT support. His pronouncements on the substantive issues have transformed his calming manner into a frightening figure. Some voters are simply uncertain because they do not know enough, but the complaints for those who are more familiar with him are that he is "scary," and "unrealistic."

His low energy and laid-back style call to mind fictional characters such as "Sleepy Smurf." Others have a more extreme reaction, saying that Carson is more like the Mad Hatter in that "he just seems kind of out there with his views, it's not comforting." Perhaps the most ominous news for Carson is that these voters do not see him as ready for the job. When they think about all of the responsibilities of the presidential office, 21 of the 24 respondents say they did NOT feel comfortable with Carson at the helm. With the international terrorism incidents taking center stage, the bar for Dr. Carson gets higher. Looking through the lens at Columbus voters, Dr. Carson will face challenges convincing a broader mix of voters that he is prepared to lead the country.

- **Jeb Bush has the notable position as the only one of the Republican candidates who these voters feel is ready for the job. Yet they do not want him as the next president.** They think he can lead partially because of his family but also because of his connections ("he can call up his dad or his brother.") But Bush himself does not have a strong presence or personality for these voters; he remains amorphous without a clear identity. Compared with the other candidates, Bush received the harshest descriptions of his backbone in both the men's and women's groups; these voters say it is made of "paper-mache," "play-dough," and "Styrofoam, because it can break." One man said Bush's backbone is made of "chalk because it looks normal but there is not a whole lot of substance." There is an awkwardness about Jeb Bush that is not connecting with voters. One woman likened him to Bashful dwarf from *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*: "he just doesn't seem to enjoy being interviewed or on camera or in the spotlight." Another woman called him "your awkward cousin who just tries too hard." In a similar vein, one man says he reminds him of Ernest of the 1990s Disney franchise: "he might do the right thing but he goes about in a goofy way and fumbles around."

The greatest challenge for Jeb Bush may be that voters are not curious about him anymore. He must redefine himself with voters who have already moved on or lost interest. Viewing him through the long lens of the focus groups starting in January in Colorado until today in Ohio, he has gone from the podium in the center of the stage to an ever-shrinking candidate on the outside podium of diminishing interest to voters. In Columbus on a gravitas level, the time may seem right for Bush, but on a leadership level, voters do not see it.

- **Rubio has not yet broken through in this middle-American city, but he shows serious potential among these voters.** He is still somewhat of an unknown quantity among these voters and unlike the other leading Republican candidates, many of these voters say they still want to learn more about Rubio. From what they have seen of Rubio, they say he is interesting and has “charisma,” he is “well-spoken” and “balanced.” Some point out his ideas on education or immigration but most do not yet have a firm grasp of who he is or his positions on the issues. About half do not even know enough to come up with a word they associate with him. Illustrating the distance some of these voters still feel, several men say he’s like the cousin in the family. As one man explained, Rubio is the cousin because you may see him at family get-togethers, “he seems like a good guy, successful, but you don’t know a lot about him.” But what they have seen has left them intrigued in a positive way. These voters are intrigued, but they want to know more before making a firm commitment.

For now, as one man put it: “He’s letting all the leaders go out and he’s biding his time. Then once they clear out, he’s going to make his move.”

The Republican candidates were not the center of these focus groups’ discussion, but the overall impression was of a party that had many candidates but nobody that appeared to be a natural leader for the times. It would take little to start a groundswell for a GOP candidate that can demonstrate that they have both the temperament and wisdom to lead. For now, none has emerged.