

2015: The Voice of the Voters

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This year, a new set of poll numbers seems to come out every hour, but the one thing we have not heard is the voice of the voters. As part of our ongoing work with the Annenberg Public Policy Center of the University of Pennsylvania, we gathered a group of a dozen GOP primary voters (11 of them hardcore, staunch Republicans) to understand the meaning behind the numbers and provide some sense of what may lay ahead in this GOP nominating process. This is qualitative not quantitative research, but the participants represented supporters of six of the major candidates.

Here is what we learned:

- Voters are paying attention and are much more into the process than in previous political years. And while they are still at the “sound bite” level of knowledge, their awareness and perceptions of the major candidates are quite formed.
- Donald Trump is the “straw that stirs the drink,” both in this group and among voters overall. However, the poll numbers obscure a sense of concern and uncertainty that these voters voiced about having him as president of the United States. But for now, they are attracted to him like a moth is to a flame.
- At the heart of this discussion is the word “temperament.” These Republican primary voters are angry and unhappy with the direction of the country, the leadership and performance of the Congress, and especially with President Obama. Yet, behind this, they still are searching for the right person to be the Republican nominee. Several remain divided between a couple of the candidates. For these participants, Donald Trump feels too strong and divisive, Jeb Bush feels too soft and staid, and currently Ben Carson emerges as a calm and upstanding person they like. Marco Rubio and Carly Fiorina are two additional candidates who have broken through and show appeal. John Kasich and Ted Cruz are on the outskirts.
- Behind all of this is a sense that these people have done a better job of figuring out what they are against rather than what they are for. Part of the challenge that emerges for Republicans is that there appears to be nothing positive around which they can unite. Much of this discussion was spent railing against what is wrong rather than searching for a uniting vision of what they want in their nominee. A uniting leader may yet emerge, but for now the consensus is around a quiet man versus a loudmouth.
- Two surprises: at the end of the session two participants spoke unprompted about the merits and appreciation of Obamacare (it almost seemed like a secret); and most of them wish the Republicans would get off the subject of same-sex marriage.

The Mood

These Republican primary voters come into the 2016 election having already paid a fair amount of attention; they have watched the debates, followed many of the candidates, and have developed opinions on many of the leading contenders. The debates have engaged them and the news coverage has made them aware. This is unlike other years in which primary voters' presidential choices have not really cemented until the calendar officially hits the election year. In metaphorical terms, many have already chosen their favorite in this "horse race."

This group comes into the election year with a real point of view rather than just the sense that we need a new president. However, at this stage of the game, these Republicans are much better at expressing what they are against than what they are for.

- **Republicans are seeing red on a multitude of issues.** These Republican primary voters are angry with the current state of the country for a host of reasons. Immigration, healthcare, taxes, and gun control are frequent sources of ire for them. This anger cuts across intraparty divides: whether they support an outside candidate or an establishment one, primary voters are fired up. In a personal word cloud depicting his anger, one man who supports Carson wrote "professional politicians" and "taxes" as his biggest sources of anger, with "education," "lack of self-pride," "liberal views," and "immigration" as lesser sources. A Bush supporter, by contrast, is most angry about unemployment, but also national security, and retirement.
- **Deficiencies in Congressional Leadership.** President Obama is a frequent subject of their frustration, but the surprise came in discussing the GOP leadership in the Congress. Nine in 12 primary voters give the Congress a grade of D or F. They feel let down by leaders who have failed to take advantage of their majority position and given in far too many times to a president they see as overstepping his authority. These primary voters have lost patience with current Republican leaders who they believe have failed to unite the party and work together to achieve real results.

"I think there's a cultural mistrust of the political process and political figures. I think that programming like *House of Cards* is seen as almost a real-life representation of the corruption that exists in DC, and that people are tired of being taken advantage of... They don't want people who are committed to the political process to be their leaders anymore."

-Man, Bush supporter

"John Boehner? He's a wolf in sheep's clothing... He's not the way he represented himself to us."

-Woman, Cruz supporter

“They don't know how to go forward with their vision. Most of them know what it is, they just don't know how to get there. And they're all politicians, so they're all wanting their way instead of the other person's way even though it shouldn't all be the same.”

-Man, Trump supporter

➤ **Passing the baton backwards; America is headed in the wrong direction.**

The country is on a negative trajectory, moving further and further away from our foundational principles, according to these primary voters. When asked to describe the country, the tone is decidedly gloomy, with primary voters choosing words such as “stagnant,” “chaos,” “plateau,” and “disappearing middle class.” In this respect, 2016 is a little like 1980 in that voters feel that things are off kilter and America is reacting to events rather than creating its own destiny. Only one of the 12 primary voters volunteers that he believes the next generation will be better off—albeit, with reservations. The rest are even more apprehensive or downright pessimistic. Some of these primary voters worry about the education system that is saddling students with debt and leaving out a significant portion of Americans who do not want or obtain a college degree. Others worry about broader economic security. And still others see a general deterioration in values, a lack of self-control, and too little pride in America.

“I have grandchildren and I see what they're going through in school... If we do not remember our history, we will be doomed to repeat it. A lot of that's going on.”

-Woman, Fiorina supporter

“I think this is the generation that has been saddled with greater levels of student loan debt. They're less likely to see property from their grandparents and parents.”

-Man, Bush supporter

Sizing Up the Field

Republican primary voters' anger about the direction of the country combined with their frustration with Washington insiders sets the stage for strong receptivity to and enthusiasm for “outsider” candidates. While this group undoubtedly holds experienced, Reaganesque Republican leaders of the past in high esteem, this by no means raises the bar for political experience or disqualifies candidates who lack it. In fact, instead of searching for a leader who is wise and well-versed in the political world, many prefer a leader who possesses wisdom and experience outside government. They are content to look past or ignore the fact that many of their preferred candidates have little or no experience in elected office. From these primary voters' perspective, any strong leader can do the job as long as they appoint and are surrounded by the right people.

This preference for an outsider is directly borne out of a deep frustration with politics as usual and distrust of career politicians. These voters feel that they cannot count on career politicians to keep their word, understand the average person, or stay out of “the pocket of the special interests.” Thus, these voters are grasping for someone else—anyone else—who they hope could represent them better and get the job done.

“America doesn't want a politician. We're sick of career politicians. We did what we were supposed to do. We wrote the letters, we made the phone calls, and they did not listen, and we're out to clean house.”

-Woman, Trump supporter

“I think we're just tired of politicians, just in general. We just, they don't keep their word. Their morals are loose. They don't have values. We're just tired of them. We're just ready for someone who has not been in that role.”

-Woman, Carson supporter

“I think someone who has not been a career politician would be a little more likely to understand the people instead of just what Congress wants.”

-Man, Trump supporter

Most political professionals have been baffled by the surge of the “unknown and untested” candidates. Listening to these voters, it is less surprising or baffling; voters have gone through hard times and they resent their elected leaders for not getting the job done or helping them. They think their voices are unheard and unheeded. This time they want to do something. The media keeps waiting for this to fade, but listening to these voters suggests that it may not fade. For those who keep waiting for the “establishment” candidates such as Jeb Bush, John Kasich, and Chris Christie to emerge, it may not happen. Listening to the voices in Indianapolis, for those who say “it cannot happen here,” it could happen in 2016.

The Candidates

We have been inundated with survey results showing Donald Trump leading the field, but it is only when one listens to the entire conversation that one begins to get a fuller sense of perceptions of the candidates’ positives and negatives. 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.

- **Donald Trump:** Appealing to Republican primary voters’ psychological longing for a cultural change in Washington and a return to America’s pre-eminence in

the world, Donald Trump has carved out a dominant position in the Republican primary. Not only do primary voters appreciate his straight-talking, no-nonsense candor, but they also believe that, unlike career politicians, he actually will do what he says he will do. Trump’s positive qualities translate beyond personality to issues. They appreciate his hardline stance on immigration and believe that he would be effective on managing the federal budget. He is the candidate they know best.

The Profile of Donald Trump		
<u>Word or Phrase</u>	<u>Family Member</u>	<u>Fictional Figure</u>
Strong	My husband: “hollers at me, then spoils me”	Richie Rich
Leader		Tasmanian Devil: “leaves a mess wherever he goes (short tempered)”
Outspoken	Father-in-law: “you don’t want him around you”	
Salesman	Middle child	Dennis the Menace: “doesn’t necessarily have bad intentions, but he can screw some things up”
Disturbed	Crazy uncle	
Shoot from the hip		Incredible Hulk: “you would not want him angry”
Divisive		
Loud		
Hothead		

“Trump is a loud-mouthed person, yes, and he does sometimes just say things to women to hurt their feelings. But I’m going to stick with my belief, saying that he’s going to try his best to get the country back the way our founding fathers had it at one time.”

-Woman, Trump supporter

“It’s that feeling that he’ll do more good than harm. And yes, he’s an entertainer. He knows how to draw attention. He’s also running in an election now. But at the same time, he knows how to run a business, and I feel he does know how to act appropriately, or he wouldn’t have gotten where he is if he couldn’t do that.”

-Man, Carson supporter

The core of Trump’s support is his strength and his candor. But when the choice comes down to thinking about Trump as president, for most of these participants, the flaws outweigh the assets. Unquestionably Trump is a polarizing figure. Ten of 12 primary voters in the focus group say he would be a divisive leader, as opposed to one who will unite the country. Even some of his supporters believe that he would divide the country; but in the end, they hope he would do more good than harm overall. For others, though, he lacks the measure and balance needed in a president, and the risk factor becomes too

high. The latest NBC/WSJ survey shows more upside and acceptability in his candidacy, but these voices from the heartland suggest that concerns about his temperament could cap his acceptability if these voters move from protest to president.

- **Ben Carson:** Dr. Ben Carson is the other leading outsider candidate and in most ways is the anti-Trump. Carson’s appeal is based primarily on image: he is the safe and steady outside candidate and primary voters love him for his calm demeanor. What’s more, these Republican primary voters see him as wise, upstanding person with a compelling personal narrative, who would represent a return to traditional family values. The warmth and respect they feel for Carson is evidenced clearly in their hypothetical political family; several say he is the grandfather (“a role model”), husband (“he would be a kind father”), or the trustworthy and dependable older brother. The challenge for Carson’s candidacy is not what they said, but what they did not say. There was no real discussion of his positions on the issues or his agenda. They have not yet fleshed out a concept of what kind of leader he might be.

The Profile of Ben Carson		
<u>Word or Phrase</u>	<u>Family Member</u>	<u>Fictional Figure</u>
Thoughtful	Grandfather: nice, strong relationship	Superman
Intelligent	Grandpa	“Dr. Huxtable”: family morals
A gentleman	Husband: kind father	Jamie Neutron: “genius scientist”
Morals	Older brother: role model	Professor Xavier: thoughtful
Don’t like—sugarcoats everything	Cousin	

“I like that he's very transparent. He's very personable... I follow him on Facebook, so I could read all of his stuff. He answers questions every night, and he's just very transparent about what he stands for and who he is.”

-Woman, Carson supporter

“He's a natural born leader. He grew up in poverty, and he became a multimillionaire. So he's lived in every class, and he can relate to every class. And, in doing so, he's a role model... He believes in the Constitution, wants to follow the Constitution. He's a good, honest person.”

-Man, Carson supporter

“If I could take Ben Carson with his moral outlook and family outlook and get Rubio in there on the ticket with him and hook it together, I think that would be something that would help all sides... You’ve got to have family, you’ve got to have morals, and you’ve got to have something every race and every age can look up to.”

-Man, Carson/Rubio supporter

But while Carson currently looks like a candidate for the long haul; he is yet to be tested on issues and positions. These primary voters love him for his style, and this may or may not translate to his substance; currently Carson benefits from a comparison with Trump that focuses on his demeanor. For now, the spotlight on him is both favorable and safe—we cannot tell whether the harsh glare of a bright light will add to or detract from his current very popular image. It is not yet clear what questions primary voters might want answered—and while Carson’s outlook is certainly positive, it is possible that that voters will worry that the grown up Jimmy Neutron is really Dr. Octopus or Felonius Gru.

- **Carly Fiorina:** Though these Republican primary voters also are more positive than negative toward the third outside candidate, Carly Fiorina, there is somewhat less enthusiasm around her candidacy among this group. They credit her for her intelligence and the professionalism she maintains when disagreeing with others, in sharp contrast with Trump’s bombastic, insulting style. Her experience as a CEO mostly is an advantage, with several primary voters noting her executive skill, strong leadership, and presumed ability to efficiently manage the government and budget. Only a few voice concerns that she is too corrupt or has manufactured a false image of competence. There is a large degree of warmth and kinship toward Fiorina, as several women in the group imagine her as the aunt or sister in their family. Several say Superwoman best captures her strength, leadership, and knack for quickly grasping complicated issues such as foreign policy.

“I think she has excellent leadership skills in the position that she was in. She’s very good as far as the political side of it and also being able to make something out of nothing. And she has excellent verbal skills. I think she would be a very good leader of the United States.”

-Man, Fiorina supporter

“She has excellent executive skills, which I think is really important to the economy. She had to make really tough choices where she was at. They were not popular. She had to go against the board, and she wasn’t popular. But as it turned out, a lot of those people she had to lay off, she was able to bring back even more jobs by the decisions that she made.”

-Woman, Cruz supporter

- **Marco Rubio:** Among candidates with political experience, for these Indianapolis Republicans, Rubio is probably in the strongest position. Though he is the first choice of only one of our primary voters and has not yet made a distinct impression with about half, those who know him feel mostly positive toward him. They like his values and how he presents himself. One mentions that she likes that Rubio understands what it means to be an actual immigrant American. It is noteworthy that he is the second or third choice for many who prefer an outside candidate. While this demonstrates Rubio's potential, it also underscores one of his biggest challenges: convincing voters that he has the qualities of the top-tier leader, and not a supporting character. Those who know Rubio still see him as a little brother, buddy, or sidekick. He is still Linus to Charlie Brown and Robin to a stronger leader's Batman. Thus the stage is set for Rubio to assert himself among a crowded field, but the challenge ahead is to prove that he is mature and that he can be the strong, decisive leader they seek.

"[Rubio is] Robin... I think he's still a superhero, he's still the good guy, but I don't know. I see him more as vice president."

-Man, Kasich supporter

"I think he can beat the other guys. But also, I think he understands what it means to be an immigrant American, not just somebody that's come over here, but he's lived that life... And he's nice to look at."

-Woman, Fiorina supporter

- **Jeb Bush:** Maybe the biggest surprise in this group was the lack of traction for Jeb Bush. Jeb Bush's deteriorating position in the polls is reflected in these primary voters' views. They may have loved his father and his brother, but these positive feelings do not transfer over to Jeb Bush, who they believe is just riding his family's coattails. He is Stewie in Family Guy, "too dependent on his family," or Wile E. Coyote following Roadrunner around. He encapsulates so much of what Republican primary voters dislike about establishment candidates: he's a "career politician," a "pushover," and he's "wishy washy." Many feel they cannot trust his stances on issues and that he is just saying things to get himself elected. In their hypothetical family, he is the ex-brother-in-law ("don't like him anymore"), or the much younger "oops" brother, as one respondent colorfully quipped. If he is going to re-emerge as a contender, these voters must start to see a previously nonexistent leadership quality.

"I don't think he did a good job in Florida. And I think he's running off of his family's coattails and I just don't see him being a strong leader... I really don't know where he stands."

-Man, Fiorina supporter

- **Christie and Cruz:** Two other establishment candidates elicited responses of note from these Republican primary voters. Ted Cruz is a polarizing figure; those who like him respect that he takes principled, steadfast positions. His strong sense of values makes him the priest to the family or the trustworthy husband. But others dislike his record on the shutdown. They see him as the youngest son who throws a temper tantrum when he does not get his way. And these Republican primary voters are harsher and more united in their dislike of Chris Christie. He is “Machiavellian” and “a whiner.” He is the shady uncle who just got out of jail for gambling.

A marriage of inconvenience: Republican primary voters are sick of the gay marriage debate. In light of the myriad other pressing issues facing the country, when asked which issues they believe Republicans should stay quiet about and just move on from, Republican primary voters decisively choose gay marriage. Eight in 12 focus group participants say they want Republicans to “just shut up” about same-sex marriage. In a state that has seen its share of controversy around gay marriage, these Republican primary voters say we have so many other bigger problems to fix, such as healthcare, terrorism, and the economy. There is a sense that for the most part it does not affect their lives directly and there is no point in arguing about it anymore.