

2016: The Voice of the Voters
A Look at Republicans' Perceptions of Donald Trump
The Annenberg Focus Group in St. Louis, Missouri, March 22, 2016
Analysis: Peter D. Hart and Corrie Hunt

Donald Trump's ears must have been burning during our conversation with Republican and independent Republican-leaning voters in Middle America (St. Louis). As part of our ongoing work with the Annenberg Public Policy Center of the University of Pennsylvania, we gathered a dozen voters (five of whom voted for Trump in the Missouri GOP primary, the others either voted for his Republican opponents or are waiting until the general election) to understand what is behind the numbers and provide some sense of what may lay ahead for Trump. To be competitive, Donald Trump must have this group's votes. While this is the constituency he must lock up early to become a competitive candidate, most everyone in the group expressed some issue or difficulty envisioning Trump as president of the United States. Their messages to Trump included "tone it down," "act more presidential," and "clean up your act." Yet, what makes Trump a formidable candidate and challenger for the Democrats is what did not occur. What should concern the GOP establishment seeking to prevent Trump from being their standard bearer is not what they said about Trump, but what they failed to say. Non-Trump voters did not demonstrate the kind of true ideological cleavage that causes floor fights or makes delegates walk out of conventions. With the second half of the primary season about to get underway with the Wisconsin primary, the fight is nasty and personal, but it revolves around the personalities and the puerile, not the issues or the candidates' ideologies. In an angry and unhappy nation, this conversation steered away from the challenges facing the country and the agenda ahead. While voters grappled with issues, the Cruz versus Trump argument never moved toward their position or agenda differences. In the wake of the Belgian terrorist attack, these voters did not perceive Trump as out of his depth or as some wild war hawk.

This is not 1964, with Barry Goldwater vs. Nelson Rockefeller and the GOP establishment, nor is it 1976, with Gerald Ford vs. Ronald Reagan, or even 1992, with President Bush 41 vs. Pat Buchanan. There is no single issue on which non-Trump voters draw a line. What emerged in this two-and-a-half-hour conversation is Donald Trump, warts and all, who can be his own worst enemy or his own best advocate. Up to now he has been both, but that is both the genius and the poison of his campaign. Trump's strength and his shortcoming are one and the same: the force of personality. For now, he has one uniting factor working for him (these participants all agree—they don't like or trust Hillary Clinton and will not vote for her). But Democrats cannot count on these people not voting or maybe considering voting for Clinton. Donald Trump's gaffs or shortcomings on policy or lack of specifics did not disqualify him for these voters in late March. Nobody seemed overly exercised about a lack of policy specifics, not even his principal vow to "build the wall" (few expect this to happen). As Donald Trump begins to move forward toward a nomination, few non-Trump voters seem ready to buy into a "stop Trump" movement if he gets close to a majority of the delegates.

To become a formidable and true Republican challenger to Hillary Clinton, Trump must clear some low hurdles rather than a high bar. These Republican voters are the ones he absolutely must have and they lean more in the direction of accepting him than rejecting him, suggesting that we are in for a long hot summer and tumultuous seven months before Americans select their 45th president. Democrats preparing for the general election contest against Trump should not make the mistake that Jeb Bush and most of the GOP establishment made in 2015—he will be formidable and he will be as cunning as he is mercurial.

This memo provides some of this focus group's key findings.

- For the Republican base, the question of Cruz vs. Trump comes down to character vs. strength.** When these focus group participants in Missouri envision their ideal next president, those who cast their vote for Cruz in the Republican primary say they are looking for a president with “integrity” and “character,” someone who is “moral.” Trump, by contrast, appeals to primary voters who say the next president should be “strong,” “tough,” and “decisive.” Nowhere is this distinction between who these candidates are at their core more pronounced than when voters take a moment to imagine the candidates as fifth-grade children on the playground. When they do so, voters imagine Ted Cruz as a child “reading the Bible,” “studying,” or “making sure the other kids are being included.” While most see a young Ted Cruz as already exhibiting conviction and moral character, some question his sincerity and authenticity. For one skeptic, little Ted Cruz’s act is a bit contrived: he’s “giving the teacher an apple, kissing butt.” Fifth-grade Donald Trump is the polar opposite. Whereas these voters see Cruz as more low key and on-task, Trump is already dominating the playground—“wheeling and dealing,” “selling candy bars to kids” and “standing on top of the monkey bars.” For several voters, Trump’s strength and toughness morphs from dealmaker to bully. They imagine Trump “pushing the smaller kids down,” “demanding to be the pitcher for the whole game,” or “beating up a sixth grader.” Whether Trump’s toughness is an asset or a shortcoming, it is clear that he commands attention and everyone else is just a supporting player. You whittle away all the artifice and place these two candidates back in the fifth grade, and as Popeye said: [“I Yam What I Yam”](#)—that is who Cruz and Trump are today.
- It took an Obama for Republicans to get a Trump.** In this conversation with voters, it is clear that there are two ways in which Republicans’ experiences and perceptions of the Obama administration have paved the way for a Donald Trump. On the one hand, many of these voters are frustrated with a president they perceive as “weak” or “soft.” They blame terrorist attacks around the world on Obama’s policies and want a president who they believe will not be pushed around. Trump’s bombastic, macho strength is the antidote to eight years of “weak” leadership.

The other major factor that set the stage for a candidate such as Trump is the Republican establishment’s obstructionist approach to dealing with Obama. These voters are fed up with the dysfunction and constant fighting in Washington. Shaking their heads, they agree that Republican politicians seem more interested in fighting with the other side than getting things done. **Refusing to even meet with the president’s nominee to the Supreme Court is only the latest case in point. Ten of the 12 participants agree in frustration that Republicans in Congress are not doing their job by failing to consider the Supreme Court nominee. As one exasperated woman put it: “You don’t have to dig your heels in every time.”** The political insiders failed with Obama and these voters are ready for someone new who can clean house. The time is ripe for a man whose theme song these voters say would be “Taking Care of Business.”

“These Republican politicians in Washington are now freaking out over the fact that Donald Trump could be the nominee. They have nobody but themselves to blame for putting Donald Trump in the fast lane.”

– Woman, Trump supporter

“I just don’t like that everything has stayed the same in the past 16 years. Nothing has changed. Nothing. There’s promises, but there’s no movement, no surefire destination. No one is working together.”

– Man, Trump supporter

“The people of the United States are kind of disillusioned or fed up with the way government is being run right now, the taking sides and refusing to compromise on anything, let alone matters of the day or anything. I think that that could be why Trump is so appealing. He comes across as someone who is very decisive, just ‘Throw it at me, I can take care of it. I can do anything.’”

– Woman, Cruz supporter

- **Nixon had the silent majority and Reagan had Reagan Democrats; Trump has “The Disaffected.”** Years of insufficient wages, rising debt, increases in the cost of healthcare, and poor job opportunities have left these Republican and independent voters fed up with being ignored. Many may hesitate to describe themselves simply as “angry,” but the litany of negative emotions they choose for themselves dance around it; they say they are “frustrated,” “very disappointed,” and “mad.” While many of these voters are barely scraping by, worrying about their family’s economic prospects, how they will pay for their children’s college, or whether their children are safe, it appears to them that Republican leaders are more concerned with fighting with Democrats. The “common people” feel that they have been left behind. They are looking for a leader who recognizes their frustration.

“But I think people are so frustrated. And Trump has tapped into that frustration. It’s gotten to the point where this [Trump] looks like a good option.”

– Man, Cruz supporter

“We had the New Deal with FDR. What’s going on today is the Raw Deal.”

– Woman, Trump supporter

“I think most people would probably count 10 or more things that are wrong with our country. Major concerns. And if we could, we’d like to wipe the slate clean and just start fresh. I believe that’s what Donald Trump presents to a lot of people, a fresh start.”

– Woman, Cruz supporter

- **Trump’s challenges moving forward are more about personality than policy.** As Donald Trump looks to shore up the nomination and build a coalition going into the general election, he will need to win over Republicans and independents who would have preferred Cruz, Kasich, or one of the other myriad candidates seeking the nomination. The conversation in this focus group suggests that Trump will not face insurmountable hurdles in doing so. These voters do not fundamentally disagree with him on policies. In fact, eight of the 12 participants (including Trump supporters) do not believe that he will end up building a wall or deporting 11 million illegal immigrants. Like most presidential campaign promises, voters are less likely to hold the candidate to specific promises and use them instead as a guidepost to the candidate’s direction and priorities. They appreciate and support the aspiration, but will not hold it against him if he does not succeed in building the wall. Trump’s personality and demeanor worry them most. They have genuine anxiety about how he will handle international affairs and how he would represent the country. They worry he cannot play well with others and wish that he would “turn down the noise” or apply a “social filter.” In one fascinating exchange, a supporter came to Trump’s defense saying he wanted a leader who “can carry a big stick.” A Cruz supporter who had already expressed serious reservations about Trump’s demeanor countered “My take on ‘carry a big stick’ is the other half of that is to walk softly.”

"I think he is very strong, but I think he comes across as a bully, and I don't think you can lead the country when you're demeaning people in such blatant ways."

– Woman, independent general election voter

"I don't think he plays well with others. I think you can negotiate and make the deal, but you could do that through an awful lot of bullying too. I just don't think he is presidential quality."

– Man, Cruz supporter

"My biggest concern with his attitude is you still have to play ball with other people. Are you going to be able to do these things that you say you're going to do in a political environment? In a political environment, you can't just sit at a boardroom table and say, 'I'm the president, we're doing it.' You have to have support from the rest of the government."

– Woman, Cruz supporter

[Postcard to Trump:] "I do not believe your crass and cavalier attitude fits the role of president. There is a distinct difference between strength and bullying, and your morals do not match what I envision a president to be."

– Man, Cruz supporter

Voters' misgivings about Trump's personal style carry over to domestic issues as well. When we provided participants with a list of 12 situations from the past eight years that a president might face, these voters voiced the greatest consternation over how Trump would handle issues that require compassion. Eight participants said they believe Trump would handle the "Black Lives Matter" movement and protests in Ferguson, Missouri, and Baltimore particularly poorly. As one man put it, "I don't think he has any finesse. He doesn't have that softer side... I don't know that the little person matters [to him]." Another woman delicately added "it doesn't seem to be in his wheelhouse." Despite these voters' reservations about how Trump would handle sensitive racial or domestic social issues, it is worth noting that this is not a disqualifier. Many of them "used a rationale" that he will surround himself with "a good team of advisors" and "knowledgeable and respectful people." But again, Trump's shortcomings on policy matters and competence seem more like "speed bumps" than true obstacles among the GOP faithful.

- **Republicans find common ground in their intense animosity toward Hillary Clinton.** These Republican and independent voters may disagree on whether Trump is the president the United States needs right now, but they unanimously agree that Hillary Clinton is not the answer. This is hardly a surprising insight, but more of an expected reality. The same could be said even more so of Sanders voters in their views toward either Cruz or Trump. Still, it is important to point out; Hillary Clinton is the glue that cements most of these voters to Trump in a general election. While there may be a few hold outs that cannot get past Trump's brash, "unpresidential" demeanor or insults toward women, in the end at least 10 of the 12 participants in this group came together against Clinton. These voters display a level of anger toward Clinton that far surpasses their negative feelings toward President Obama. Whereas Obama calls to mind words like "dislike," "snob," and "useless," for these voters, Hillary Clinton is a "criminal," "deplorable," and "evil." This discussion suggests that in looking ahead to the general election, the question is whether their hatred toward Hillary will override their hesitation about Trump in November. For now, it is apparent that most Republican voters will fall in line even if Trump remains for some, a last resort. In an unpredictable year, May seems like a long way away and November an eternity.

- **A “brokered” convention likely would backfire.** The path to the Republican nomination in 2016 is littered with crude insults, personal attacks, and shattered egos. Yet despite the vulgarities and fighting, Republicans and Republican-leaning independents remain willing to join together in support of whoever receives the most votes. The Republicans among these voters find themselves in a very uncomfortable vise. Trump may be a disaster for their hopes in winning back the White House, but denying him may be an even bigger disaster for the party’s hopes of retaining its majorities on Capitol Hill. If Trump is that person, yet fails to receive the nomination through a brokered convention, then these voters predict that their reaction would be hostile and harsh. This is true not only for Trump voters but also many Cruz supporters. Trump’s supporters will undoubtedly feel betrayed and even more alienated from the entire process. As one Trump supporter put it:

“If it's close between him and Cruz, I could probably support Cruz. I wouldn't be happy about it, but I would support him. But if he's robbed of it, if he's close to it, I might not even vote. If I do, I'll write in Trump. Or my wife might back [Hillary], she voted Obama last time. No telling drop.”

-Man, Trump supporter

Perhaps more foreboding, however, is that even Trump’s doubters and detractors would be demoralized. It would reinforce every complaint about political insiders ignoring voters’ needs that led to Trump’s success.

“I think it would demonstrate that it's going to be more of the same. I think what people are frustrated with is the scheming and playing the system. And it would be another example of where that's going on [in Washington].”

-Man, Cruz supporter

At this point in the conversation, an independent woman who had been the most vocal in her opposition to Trump had to agree. She would feel relieved if Trump did not get the nomination, she admitted, but it would be a sign that nothing had changed.

Final Note from Peter D. Hart:

Over the course of the past four presidential cycles, we have done a great number of focus groups for the Annenberg Center for Public Policy with voters of all stripes and types, but none has left me more dispirited than this group. This is not about participants being Trump voters or Republicans. We convened this group less than 24 hours after the terrorist attack in Brussels, and rather than being transformed in a way that signaled a change in what they expect from candidates seeking to be the kind of president needed in these times, they were so quickly ground into the minutiae of the day-to-day politics of this campaign. The stakes may be greater than ever, but the expectations for what is needed to unite a nation or lead the country in this tumultuous period are almost totally ignored. The greatness of the challenges ahead has been met by a public willing to accept candidates who do not challenge the nation to do better, but seek to play to its worst fears. While these St. Louis voters are solid citizens who worry about their economic security and have great fear for the terrorist attacks around the globe, sadly this discussion was less about demanding more from the candidates than it was settling and criticizing what is available in 2016. We have 225 plus days until the election. Having been in the business of public opinion for more than 50 years, I admire and respect voters and expect them to select what America wants and needs at the time of the election. I believe that to be true in 2016, but voters seem to have a long way to go to reach that point.