

GUEST ESSAY

The Real Trump Mystery

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Mr. Edsall contributes a weekly column from Washington, D.C., on politics, demographics and inequality.

The mystery of 2024: How is it possible that Donald Trump has a reasonable chance of winning the presidency despite all that voters now know about him? Why hasn't a decisive majority risen to deny a second term to a man in line to be judged the worst president in American history?

The litany of Trump's liabilities is well known to the American electorate. His mendacity, duplicity, depravity, hypocrisy and venality are irrevocably imprinted on the psyches of American voters.

Trump has made it clear that in a second term he would undermine the administration of justice, empower America's adversaries, endanger the nation's allies and exacerbate the nation's racial and cultural rifts.

John Podhoretz, in a 2017 Commentary article, "Explaining Trump's Charlottesville Behavior," offered one piece of the puzzle, addressing the question, "Whose early support for Trump itself played a key role in leading others to take him seriously and help propel him into the nomination?"

Podhoretz's prescient answer: a conspiracy-oriented constituency with little regard for truth:

If there's one thing politicians can feel in their marrow, even a non-pol pol like Trump, it's who is in their base and what it is that binds the base to them. Only in this case, I'm not talking about a base as it's commonly understood — the wellspring of a politician's mass support. I'm talking about a nucleus — the very heart of a base, the root of the root of support. Trump found himself with 14 percent support in a month. Those early supporters had been primed to rally to him for a long time."

I'm talking about Alex Jones and Infowars, the conspiracy-theory radio show/website on which Trump has appeared for years; the radio show has two million listeners a week, and Jones was said in 2011 to have a larger online presence than Rush Limbaugh or Glenn Beck.

I'm talking about the WWE, which televises wrestling and which, in 2014, could claim a weekly audience of 15 million and on whose programs Trump intermittently served as a kind of special guest villain in the manner of a villain on the 1960s "Batman" show.

I'm talking about American Media, the company that owns The National Enquirer, The Star, The Sun and The Weekly World News, run by Trump's close friend David Pecker; the combined weekly circulation of its publications is well in excess of two million.

Trump, from the start, was operating in a universe separate from the traditional politics of the Republican and Democratic Parties; he was operating in a world rooted in his 25 years in pro wrestling, in which people put up good money to watch fake fights they know in their hearts were fixed.

The pervasive denial of truth has, in turn, been crucial to Trump's continued viability.

In "Popular Reactions to Donald Trump's Indictments and Trials and Their Implications for the 2024 Election," Gary C. Jacobson, a political scientist at the University of California, San Diego, argued that this denial — "motivated ignorance reinforced by right-wing pundits and social media entrepreneurs" — helps explain "the tenacious loyalty of Trump's MAGA followers."

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After an analysis of hundreds of surveys, Jacobson concluded:

- Republicans and Trump voters downplay the importance of the crimes charged, and large majorities refuse to admit that Trump committed such crimes anyway.

- In the abstract and before the fact, a conviction on any of the felony charges would be projected to devastate Trump's support. But after Trump was convicted in that case, the share of Republicans and prospective Trump voters who said they would not vote for a felon fell sharply.
- Not only do a substantial majority of Republicans deny that Trump ever committed a serious crime as president, but an even larger majority of them also believe he should be immune from prosecution if he did.

Jacobson describes the logic of truth denial among MAGA supporters of Trump:

Motivated ignorance differs from the more familiar concept of rational ignorance in that ignorance is motivated by the anticipated costs of possessing knowledge, not acquiring it. That is, it is not simply that the benefits of accurate political knowledge may be less than the cost of attaining it and thus not worth pursuing but that the costs of having accurate information exceed the benefits.

When expressed opinions and beliefs signal identification with a group, it is rational to stay ignorant of contradictory facts that, if acknowledged, would threaten to impose personal and social identity costs for the uncertain benefits of accurate knowledge.

Only by remaining ignorant of such facts as those can Trump supporters avoid facing the painful possibility that they might have been wrong about him and their despised enemies, right? Such a realization could unsettle their self and social identities, estranging them from family and friends who remain within the MAGA fold. As Michael Patrick Lynch, a philosopher who studies political beliefs put it, "To be blunt, Trump supporters aren't changing their minds because that change would require changing who they are, and they want to be that person." Staying ignorant, deliberately or unconsciously, is thus rational.

In fact, there appears to be a self-reinforcing feedback loop that rewards Trump for his incessant distortions of the truth.

Michael Bang Petersen, a political scientist at Denmark's Aarhus University, responded by email to my inquiries, suggesting that "the paradox is that people who are fed up with the political system don't support Trump despite Trump's behavior and the charges against him but, to some extent, because of his behavior and the charges against him."

"According to our research," Petersen added, "people who feel anger and feel threatened reach out to dominant politicians who are willing to act in aggressive and transgressive ways. Such a personality is seen as attractive because people expect them to be able to prevail in conflicts against opponents, including, in this case, the overarching political system."

Support for Trump, Petersen continued,

is part of a greater attraction toward populist politicians that we see across Western democracies, yet, with its most clear expression in the United States. Our own research on extreme antipathy toward the political system — what we term a need for chaos — shows that such emotions are rooted in feelings of loneliness and being stuck in your place in the social hierarchy. Essentially, having an unfulfilling life and not being able to change that. American politicians and many European counterparts have not been able to remedy such feelings, and we are seeing the result of that.

In a 2020 paper, “Dominant Leaders and the Political Psychology of Followership,” Petersen and Lasse Laustsen argued that “followers strategically promote dominant individuals to leadership positions in order to enhance their ability to aggress against other groups.”

In a paper from 2023, “The ‘Need for Chaos’ and Motivations to Share Hostile Political Rumors,” Petersen, Mathias Osmundsen and Kevin Arceneaux made the case that “some individuals circulate hostile rumors because they wish to unleash chaos, to burn down the entire political order in the hope they gain status in the process.”

What drives this need for chaos?

Feelings of status loss and marginalization, even if imagined rather than real, have shaped recent political events, including the election of Donald Trump as president of the United States and the rise of populism in Europe.

Frustrations about status loss have been observed among members of traditionally privileged groups (e.g., white men), but actual experiences of historical injustices to members of marginalized groups can also trigger deep dissatisfaction with the political system (e.g., among Black individuals).

While the destructive impulses of those high in measures of the need for chaos would appear to be maladaptive, Petersen and his colleagues argued that “there may be functional benefits to displays of destructive intent for marginalized individuals.”

For example:

First, displays of destructive tendencies may serve as hard-to-fake signals of the motivation to impose costs and, hence, operate as a general deterrence device. Second, if individuals react with severe aggression to rejection, others may be pressured to invest in burnishing the person’s sense of self as a way to reduce the person’s ire. Finally, as a dominance strategy, marginalized individuals may see destruction as a form of niche construction, in which they cultivate a social ecology where they are more likely to be successful.

After analyzing eight surveys in the United States with a total of 10,921 respondents from February 2018 to February 2022, Petersen, Osmundsen and Arceneaux found that white men, a core Trump constituency, were unique in many respects:

White men react more aggressively than any other group to perceived status challenges. While white men do not feel highly status-challenged on average, they are more likely to seek chaos when they do.

The threat of marginalization is a powerful force among those in this constituency. According to Petersen, Osmundsen and Arceneaux:

Group-based feelings of being unable to advance in society fuels a need for chaos among white men. Consistent with notions of aggrieved entitlement among historically dominant groups, many white men are preoccupied with their societal standing and react with aggression against any threat.

Both Black men and white men may be high in need for chaos but for different reasons. Thus, Black men, on average, face more significant status threats than white men, but consistent with theories of aggrieved entitlement of historically privileged groups, white men react more aggressively when they feel threatened.

In one of the blunter attempts to explain support for Trump, Oliver Hahl, Minjae Kim and Ezra W. Zuckerman Sivan addressed this support in their 2018 paper, “The Authentic Appeal of the Lying Demagogue: Proclaiming the Deeper Truth about Political Illegitimacy,” asking, “How can a constituency of voters find a candidate authentically appealing, i.e., view him positively as authentic, even though he is a lying demagogue, someone who deliberately tells lies and appeals to nonnormative private prejudices?”

The authors’ answer:

A particular set of social and political conditions must be in place for the lying demagogue to appear authentically appealing to his constituency. In short, if that constituency feels its interests are not being served by a political establishment that purports to represent it fairly, a lying demagogue can appear as a distinctively authentic champion of its interests.

In this context, Trump’s brazen disregard for truth, tradition and custom works to his advantage:

The greater his willingness to antagonize the establishment by making himself persona non grata, the more credible is his claim to be his constituency's leader. His flagrant violation of norms (including that of truth telling) makes him odious to the establishment, someone from whom they must distance themselves, lest they be tainted by scandal.

But this very need by the establishment to distance itself from the lying demagogue lends credibility to his claim to be an authentic champion for those who feel disenfranchised by that establishment.

Working to Trump's advantage is the fact that many voters are not willing to punish politicians in their own party who violate democratic norms.

Jan G. Voelkel, a sociologist at Stanford, noted in an email:

Voters value candidates' support for democracy but not very much. Only 13 percent defect from an undemocratic in-party candidate. Even candidates who had political scandals typically get a large share of the vote from their base.

Voelkel cited an April 2020 study, "Democracy in America? Partisanship, Polarization, and the Robustness of Support for Democracy in the United States," by Matthew H. Graham and Milan W. Svolik, political scientists at Temple and Yale.

Graham and Svolik found "the U.S. public's viability as a democratic check to be strikingly limited: Only a small fraction of Americans prioritize democratic principles in their electoral choices, and their tendency to do so is decreasing on several measures of polarization, including the strength of partisanship, policy extremism and candidate platform divergence."

"Most voters," Graham and Svolik concluded,

are partisans first and democrats second: Only about 13.1 percent of our respondents are willing to defect from a co-partisan candidate for violating democratic principles when the price of doing so is voting against their own party.

Partisan loyalty is crucial to Trump's success. He has a base — roughly 43 to 45 percent of the electorate — that sticks with him through good and bad times.

One reason for this is what Yphtach Lelkes, a political scientist at the University of Pennsylvania, called the crystallization of the electorate. In an email, Lelkes explained what he meant:

Crystallization describes a world where people's attitudes won't be swayed, no matter what new information they get. Campaign dynamics do very little to move attitudes. Polarization is the engine of crystallization.

Intense partisan hostility works to Trump's advantage in a number of ways, according to Lelkes. First, MAGA loyalists believe "the investigations against Trump are witch hunts and baseless." Lelkes added that, taking this logic a step further,

people think that the other side is dangerous and that we need someone willing to do whatever it takes to stop them. That is, they think they are protecting democracy by supporting Trump. Finally, in a polarized world, people value policy and partisan outcomes over democracy — they are willing to tolerate some authoritarianism to further their own political goals.

Well before Trump's ascendance, key Republican leaders and strategists set the stage for his near deification within the ranks of the party.

Marc Hetherington, a political scientist at the University of North Carolina, replied by email to my inquiry, making the case that Republican elites adopted strategies that allowed Trump to wrest power from them:

Something important had been occurring for decades at the elite level in the G.O.P. Starting with Black civil rights in the 1960s, leaders started to take positions that would ultimately attract a different party base than the one that existed before.

Next it was opposition to the Equal Rights Amendment and abortion rights, with clear implications for women's equality. Then it was a stance against L.G.B.T. rights. The G.O.P. remained steadfastly religious in its orientation, while Democrats started to embrace secularity.

The thing that ties all these issues together is a stance toward societal change. Traditional or modern, some call it closed or open.

After the defeat of Mitt Romney in 2012, Hetherington wrote, "party elites decided in their autopsy that they needed to take a more open tack in trying to attract a more racially and ethnically diverse base of support."

Trump, however, "challenged this leadership consensus. Elites lost control of the base right there — but bear in mind that Republican appeals on race, gender and sexual orientation were responsible for creating that base."

Trump has remained a powerful, if not dominant, political figure by weaving together a tapestry of resentment and victimhood. He has tapped into a bloc of voters for whom truth is irrelevant. The Trump coalition is driven to some extent by white males suffering status decline, but the real glue holding his coalition together is arguably racial animus and general resentment toward minorities.

The political scientists Lilliana Mason, Julie Wronski and John V. Kane captured this phenomenon in their June 2021 paper, “Activating Animus: the Uniquely Social Roots of Trump Support.”

Trump’s support, they wrote, is “tied to animus toward minority groups,” specifically “toward four Democratic-aligned social groups: African Americans, Hispanics, Muslims and gays and lesbians.”

Mason, Wronski and Kane analyzed data collected by the Democracy Fund’s Voter Study Group from polls in which “respondents were asked to indicate their feelings toward these four Democratic-aligned social groups.”

The result?

Animosity toward Democratic-linked groups is strongly related to Trump approval. People who felt strong animosity toward Blacks, Hispanics, Muslims and L.G.B.T. people were significantly more likely to be fond of Trump.

The authors found that

among those with the lowest level of animus toward Democratic groups, their favorability toward Trump is around 0.3 on the 0 to 1 scale. This level of favorability increases to over 0.5 among those who have the most animus toward Democratic groups, representing a 23-percentage-point increase.

Interestingly, though, “feelings of animosity toward Democratic groups do not predict favorability toward the Republican Party, Paul Ryan or Mitch McConnell,” Mason, Wronski and Kane wrote. Instead, “Trump support is uniquely predicted by animosity toward marginalized groups in the United States.”

The authors continue:

Among partisans, those who are most hostile toward these groups are about 15 percentage points more supportive of Trump than those who are least hostile. For independents, this relationship doubles in size, where those most hostile toward Democratic-linked groups are about 30 percentage points more favorable toward Trump than the least hostile.

Thus, animosity toward Democratic-linked groups predicts Trump support, rather remarkably, across the political spectrum.

Their conclusion amounts to a warning, even if it’s veiled in academic language:

This research reveals a wellspring of animus against marginalized groups in the United States that can be harnessed and activated for political gain. Trump's unique ability to do so is not the only cause for normative concern.

Instead, we should take note that these attitudes exist across both parties and among nonpartisans. Though they may remain relatively latent when leaders and parties draw attention elsewhere, the right leader can activate these attitudes and fold them into voters' political judgments.

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