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DEFINING TRUMPISM: WHERE DID THE MOVEMENT COME FROM AND WHAT IS ITS STATE TODAY?

Aidan M. Arnold
aidan.arnold@trincoll.edu

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WHERE DID THE MOVEMENT COME FROM AND WHAT IS ITS STATE TODAY?

A thesis presented

by

Aidan M. Arnold

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Serena Laws
Thesis Advisor

Stefanie Chambers
Department Chair

Abstract

Donald Trump came roaring onto the political stage when he announced his presidential candidacy in 2015. In the years that followed, he amassed a loyal following of motivated voters. During the Trump era, his followers have developed a reputation for loud bigotry, shameless xenophobia, and unmasked white supremacy. The movement has to come to strongly resemble the nativist populism that, until Trump, was generally confined to Europe. In order to better understand the motivation of Trump voters and their intense dedication to the 45th president, I surveyed 82 voters from the Midwest about their feelings towards politicians, policies, and political opponents. The Midwestern Swing District Voter Survey offers both qualitative and quantitative responses and suggests that Trumpism has redefined identity politics for Trump and Biden voters alike. I find that the great consequence of Donald Trump is not the mass movement of white working class Americans to the Republican party, it is the accelerated evolution of the identity of cultural whiteness that has come to bind together the Republican base.

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Introduction

Early in the morning of January 6, 2021, crowds started to gather in the United States Capitol. Thousands of enthusiastic supporters of the recently defeated President Donald J. Trump packed into the Ellipse in Washington, D.C., ready to participate in the "Save America March." The crowd waited in breathless anticipation until the event finally started around 11:00am. First sons Eric and Donald Jr. kicked off the festivities with energizing speeches, promising any Republicans who voted to certify the election results that "we're coming for you." During Donald Jr.'s speech, *Fox News* decided to break away from their live coverage and air regularly scheduled programming instead. Shortly thereafter, Rudy Giuliani, the president's lawyer and the head of the legal effort to overthrow the 2020 election results, took the stage. Rudy continued to rile up the crowd, promising "trial by combat" and claiming irrefutable proof of widespread election fraud. The crowd, by this point thoroughly excited, was about to get what it wanted more than anything else: Donald Trump. The president delivered an hour long speech that ended with a critical instruction "let's walk down Pennsylvania Avenue."

It started like any other Trump rally, but the end result was anything but typical. Around 12:30pm, law enforcement reported that nearly 15,000 people were marching towards the capitol. At 12:53pm, rioters pushed past the outermost capitol barrier. At 1:03pm, only 10 minutes later, Capitol Police were pushed back to the base of the capitol steps. Even while all of this was happening, law enforcement officers discovered pipe bombs planted outside both the Republican National Committee and Democratic National Committee buildings. Thankfully, they never detonated.

At 1:30pm, Capitol Police are forced to retreat up the steps of the capitol and make their first formal request for National Guard activation. Around this time, Mayor Muriel Bowser makes an official request for military support. Also around this time, Capitol Police Officer

Brian Sicknick was trampled and sprayed with chemical irritants, eventually leading to his death. At 2:12pm, rioters breech the United States capitol. Law enforcement makes the decision to forfeit the building entrance in order to prioritize protecting the lawmakers inside the capitol. As action moved inside the building, the millions of Americans around the country following along on television could not tell what was happening, as the cameras no longer had a view of the action. Around this time, reports of shots fired began to circulate. At 2:22pm, Vice President Mike Pence was escorted out of the senate chamber. Two minutes later, at 2:24pm, Trump tweeted, "Mike Pence didn't have the courage to do what should have been done to protect our Country and our Constitution, giving States a chance to certify a corrected set of facts, not the fraudulent or inaccurate ones which they were asked to previously certify. USA demands the truth!" This has been widely interpreted as support and encouragement of the riot. Around 3:00pm, photographs and videos of rioters in the House chamber and members offices started circulating on television and social media. Shortly thereafter, Trump supporter and Air Force veteran Ashli Babbitt was fatally shot by capitol police as she forced entry into the capitol. Pence called the acting defense secretary and asked him to "clear the capitol." Not until after 5:00pm did National Guard and military personnel arrive at the capitol. The rioters were cleared from the building in the afternoon of the January 6th and all lawmakers escaped with their lives, but investigations into the insurrectionists remain active as of mid-April 2021 (Petras et al., 2021 & Tan, Shin & Rindler, 2021 used as references for the above timeline).

In the end, the January 6th insurrection cost five lives and brought America within mere seconds of catastrophic damage to democracy. In the capitol that day were the Vice President, the Speaker, the President Pro Tempore of the Senate, 99 other senators, and hundreds of members of congress. It could have been a disaster.

In order to understand how America got to a point where thousands of American flag waving “patriots” stormed their own capitol and became the first hostile force to breach the building since 1812, one must look at the movement from whence they came. The insurrection did not come out of nowhere, nor was it unpredictable. It was the culmination of the Trump era and a representation of the strength of the convictions that accompany Trumpism. Understanding Trumpism is critical to understanding the modern era of polarized American politics. Donald Trump’s ability to energize a crowd, while an effective campaign tool, is not what made the insurrection happen. This thesis will prove that Trump supporters share a deep-rooted social identity and a blind loyalty to Trump. This drove them to believe Trump’s lies without evidence, to hate those who stood in their movement’s path, and, eventually, to engage in violence so severe it threatened the future of American democracy.

Chapter 1

Trumpism Takes the Nation by Storm

In November of 2016, the world—especially the academic and political world—was shocked by the election of President Donald Trump. The businessman and reality television star built a campaign that not only fostered but encouraged xenophobia and the belief that white hegemony was at risk in America. Perhaps because of the racial signaling of the campaign, as well as Trump's tendency to speak crassly and insult his opponents and colleagues, common consensus was that educated white Republicans– especially women–would abandon him in the election. An October 2016 article from *The Washington Post* insisted Trump had little chance at electoral success, saying that "Trump's problem is that he has not been able to persuade women to vote for him — and that his pitch seems to keep getting worse" (Bump, 2016b). These premature post-mortem dissections of the Trump campaign were common among the major media outlets. Everyone, perhaps including Trump himself, thought that the Hillary Clinton campaign would cruise to a comfortable margin of victory and academics would be left to study a short-lived and anomalous popular nativist campaign. This was wrong. Donald Trump won a large number of electoral votes, mostly due to unforeseen success in rust belt states like Wisconsin, Michigan, Ohio, and Pennsylvania. Pundits, political scientists, and politicians immediately set about trying to understand who was responsible for Trump's victory.

In the first weeks and months after the election, one common narrative was that the Clinton campaign overreached in attempting to flip traditionally red states and spent too little time and too few resources in Democratic leaning states in the rustbelt (Brownstein, 2016). Attention then turned to blaming media and journalistic mishandling of the campaign, which lent legitimacy to a movement that was fueled by offensive rhetoric. In the end, however, it became

clear that a coalition of voters who, prior to the rise of Trump, felt neglected by American politics was responsible for Trump's election. This "basket of deplorables," which includes former Ku Klux Klan Grand Wizard David Duke along with a slew of neo-Nazi sympathizers threatens to become the new base of the Republican party, ushering in a new, unprecedentedly divisive era of American politics. Politicians like Matthew Gaetz, Marjorie Taylor Greene, and Josh Hawley look to replace the old guard conservative establishment like Mitt Romney, Rand Paul, and Lindsay Graham. Figures such as the late John McCain are already legendary, near-mythical characters of the past. The 2020 electoral defeat of Donald Trump has changed the immediacy with which the American political arena must confront Trumpism, but it does not make Trumpism any less relevant. These voters are here to stay, as are the divisive social issues that bring them together. Trumpism emphasized and intensified the rift that divides Republicans and Democrats in this country, and we, as political scientists, have a responsibility to understand who Trump voters are and what drives them to support Trump.

Research Question

What, other than party loyalty and party affiliation, drives Americans to vote for Donald Trump and why do Trump supporters remain faithful to their candidate? My thesis will examine the motivations, identities, and beliefs of Trump voters in an attempt to understand why such an untraditional candidate garnered such widespread support. Undeniably, the Trump campaign and administration sparked a massive political realignment based largely on race, class, and education—a new identity politics. I want to further understand what made Trump's message and persona so attractive to some voters and so repulsive to others. How do Trump voters define themselves, see the country, and evaluate the president? Political scientists will never be fully able to understand the current moment in our country without first knowing how and why we got

here. By taking both quantitative and qualitative approaches to this question, I will be able to make claims about the 2016 and 2020 elections that are not reliant on data manipulation, educated guesswork, or mere theorization. I will work towards a definition of a group with which liberal academia is generally out of touch. Understanding the Trump voter is essential to understanding America.

Literature Review

Understanding the voters who are part of the Trump coalition and why they voted for Trump requires an exploration of existing theories around his rise to power. Scholars will continue to unravel this shocking political event for the decades to come, but over the four years since the 2016 election, some well-developed theories have been published. They are laid out in separate sections below, but these theories, of course, work in tandem with one another. I will start with theories around the growing polarization in America, which is generally based around identity and not policy. Next is the undeniable presence of white supremacy within the Trumpist movement. Both identity formation and white supremacy are supported by media and voter perceptions of media. Lastly, there are several theories about the coalition of Democrats and "never Trumpers" who worked together to elect Joe Biden. No single explanation will tell us why voters were attracted to Trump, yet we must ascertain how various theories have worked together to create Trumpism.

Popular Polarization

The Trump era has brought the polarization that divides the nation to the forefront of the political arena. Political scientists have been exploring this issue for the past twenty five years, tracking social changes that welcomed polarization. Robert Putnam (1995) first observed a decline in what he calls "social capital," a theory of social well-being that emphasizes networks,

relationships, and civic engagement. In his 2000 follow up, Putnam concludes that two factors, the polarization of media and significant generational change spurred by the internet and communications advances, are responsible for the majority of the decline in social capital (p. 283-284). Putnam pushes further, claiming that a greater proportion of social capital is now represented by bonding relationships, which are homogenous, than by bridging relationships, which bring heterogenous groups together (p. 362-363). The consequence of the breakdown of social capital has been a less interconnected and more polarized society. Thus, as people become more wrapped up in their own in-group, the candidates whom they prefer will become more extreme. Donald Trump is the ultimate bonding candidate, encouraging rural white identity formation while demonizing minority groups. Mason (2018) has observed a dramatic increase in American polarization. In her book *Uncivil Agreement*, she argues that American partisans have become obsessed with the battle between Republicans and Democrats (p. 51-57). In-group members, she argues, show significant bias towards members of the same group, placing overwhelming emphasis on scoring political victories while matters of substantive policy are relatively under-emphasized (p. 47). Abramowitz and McCoy (2019, p. 139-140) have referred to this phenomenon as negative partisanship, wherein partisans are more motivated by voting against the opposition than by voting for their own party (see also Abramowitz & Webster, 2016). The Trump coalition was, perhaps, just as interested in hating Hillary Clinton as they were in loving Donald Trump. The demonization of the former Secretary of State played a prominent role in Trump's rhetoric (Diamond, 2016). Further, in a theory Mason refers to as identity sorting, Americans have grouped multiple identities together (p. 65). Party is often aligned with race, religion, income, and other demographic factors. As the nation becomes more

sorted, there has been a decrease in cross-cutting identities, which encourage relationships across typical boundaries.

One such identity that has played an increasingly important role in party politics is the rural American, or perhaps, more accurately, the white rural American identity. In a groundbreaking ethnography of Wisconsin inspired by the gubernatorial victory of Republican Scott Walker, Katherine Cramer (2016) conducted dozens of hours of interviews with rural Wisconsinites, cultivating a portrait of midwestern rural resentment. Cramer's methodology of listening allowed her to understand the mindsets of these voters without formulae or numbers (p. 26-44). She found that, unequivocally, rural residents strongly resent urbanites and government programs, feeling unjustly ignored and slighted by government programs and politicians (p. 91-100 and throughout). In supporting Republican candidates, they do not necessarily vote against their own interest, for their interest is constructed out of their identity. Despite the fact that they might benefit from more government, these people vote for less government because, in their experience, government has left them behind (p. 164-168). The rural resentment which she has studied is one of the foremost explanations of the support Donald Trump has garnered. Trump has used the rhetoric of persecution, pointing to immigration, liberal elitism, and people of color as the source of economic misfortune in rural communities. Cramer herself (2016b) claims that rural resentment was one of the foremost reasons Trump was able to secure the presidency. Trump dug into the resentment of the rural class, feeding their emotional state and encouraging them to continue feeling emotions of resentment (Ciulla, 2020). The president has consistently managed to fuel resentment towards "professionals, mainstream politicians, liberal journalists, the well-educated, and the experts" (Ciulla, 2020, p. 34). In other words, the elite.

The President's invocation of these anti-establishment, anti-opposition, and pronationalist ideas, including three of his favorite refrains "drain the swamp," "lock her up," and "Make America Great Again," represent typical populist rhetoric (Oliver & Rahn, 2016). Similar to Mason (2018), Oliver and Rahn (2016) suggest that the homogeneity of the Republican base as well as the political distance between the conservative base and the center opened the door for right-wing American populism (p. 202). Further, nationalist identity building, which is a common hallmark of populism, was a strong focus of Trump's during the 2016 campaign. His supporters began to see themselves as the only true Americans, justifying any means to achieve their goal of reclaiming their country. In a similar vein, Graham and Svolik (2020) have found that increasing polarization is negatively correlated with voter concern for democratic institutions (p. 398). While an overwhelming majority of voters express support for democratic norms, very few voters will vote against their party's candidate, even if she supports anti-democratic policies, explaining why so many Republicans voted for Trump despite the threat he posed to democratic institutions. This has the potential to be a permission system for politicians to endorse increasingly polarizing legislative action with little fear of electoral retribution (Graham & Svolik, 2020, p. 399). Much of the Trump-related consternation from the left and the center focused on his lack of respect for democratic norms; Trump's supporters were unconcerned by this, for the far-greater threat was a Trump electoral loss.

Building a Coalition of Whiteness

While Cramer (2016) attempts to explain the Trump appeal as bigger than racism, there is no question that racism and rural resentment as presented in Cramer's study go hand in hand. Race-motivated resentment and anti-immigrant resentment both likely played a major role in the 2016 election of Donald Trump (Hooghe & Dassonneville, 2018). In fact, when all else is held

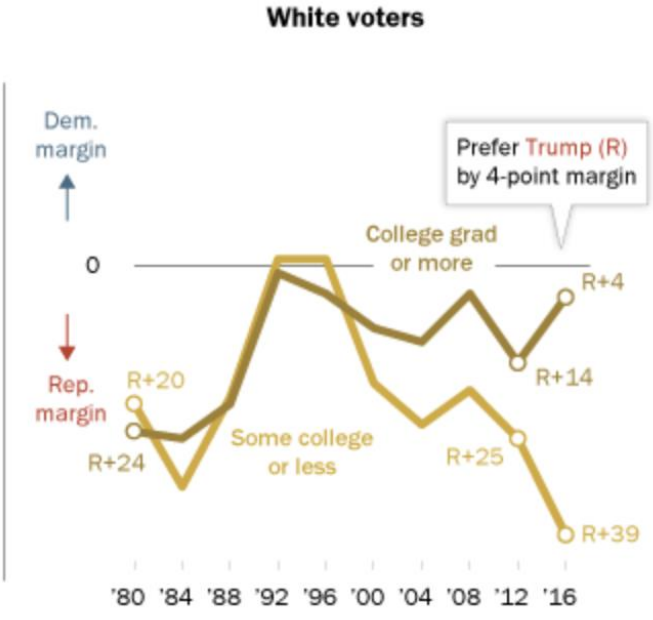
constant, racist and anti-immigrant sentiment is one of the greatest predictors of supporting Trump (Hooghe & Dassonneville, 2018).

In 1996, Kinder and Sanders created the racial resentment scale for the American National Elections Survey (ANES) in order to help political scientists understand the role of racism on public opinion. Engelhardt (2019) has found that, over time, white Democrats have seen marginal decreases in racial resentment while white Republicans have expressed slowly increasing racial resentment. However, since 2018, there has been an acceleration, with white Republicans becoming significantly more resentful while white Democrats are becoming less resentful. Cramer (2020) attributes this realignment as well as the racialized support for Donald Trump to the (imagined) "threat to the white racial order" represented by people of color and immigrants (p. 164). She goes on to say that rather than questioning whether cultural or racial anxiety spurred the Trump movement, politicians and political commenters should recognize that both economic and racial fears are at play. Sides, Tesler, and Vavreck (2017) have opined that, while typically white Americans have less in-group identity than members of other racial and ethnic groups, emphasizing collective risk to white dominance awakens white consciousness (p. 9). The authors fear that the Trump coalition may be the beginning of a new age of white identity politics in America (Sides et al., p. 3, 16-18).

Trump was not blind to the vulnerability felt by the white middle class. In an analysis of 73 of Donald Trump's 2016 campaign speeches, Lamont et al. (2017) found that Trump specifically and intentionally pandered to the white working class in five major areas: the rural work ethic; fear of elites; the dangers of undocumented immigrants, Muslims, and refugees; parallels with Black Americans; and the role of working class men as the protectors of women.

Appealing to hostile racism and sexism had interesting implications for the Trump coalition (Schaffner et al., 2018).

Figure 1



From Tyson and Maniam (2016). Pew Research Center

In 2008 and 2012, the Republican presidential candidates (John McCain and Mitt Romney, respectively) won the white vote by margins of 12 and 20 percentage points; in 2016 Donald Trump won the white vote by 21 points (Schaffner et al., 2018; Tesler, 2016; Tyson & Maniam, 2016). However, while in 2012 Mitt Romney won college educated whites by a 14 point margin and those with less education by a 25 point margin, Donald Trump only won college educated whites by four points, compared to an astronomical 39 point advantage among less-educated white voters (Tyson & Maniam, 2016, Figure 1). Schaffner et al. argue that this bifurcation of the white vote is not about education, but about other identity differences that tend to line up with education level, such as socioeconomic class, geographic location (i.e. urban, suburban, or rural), and, most important, racism and sexism. Reny et al. (2019) have theorized that vote switching, the act of voting against the candidate of the party you have tended to support, was particularly common in 2016 (p. 92). The study found that the primary reason for vote switching in this election was racial and immigration attitudes (p.109). In 2016, Trump attracted non-college educated voters with his rhetoric of hate while alienating some of the college-educated Republican voters. In fact, a common narrative headed into the

2016 election was that Trump was seriously handicapped by his lack of support among educated Republicans and elite members of the Republican party (Borchers, 2016 is one of hundreds of such editorials and opinions from the 2016 cycle). However, the #NeverTrump campaign did not carry the potency in 2016 that many on the left hoped it would, and the Trump campaign effectively mobilized unlikely voters. In fact, in the 2016 election, there were twice as many Obama-Trump voters (six million) as there were Romney-Clinton voters (three million) (de la Fuente, 2017). Furthermore, an additional six million Trump voters voted in a presidential election for the first time (de la Fuente, 2017). That makes a rough total of 12 million Americans who voted for Donald Trump not because of party loyalty but because they were drawn into politics by his rhetoric, policies, and persona.

John Farley (2019) found that, while Obama-Obama-Trump voters make up a relatively small proportion of the 2016 electorate, they were likely the deciding factor in electing Donald Trump. He points to the key often-blue states that Hillary Clinton lost, Wisconsin, Pennsylvania, Iowa, Michigan, and Ohio. These states had the highest number of Obama-Obama-Trump voters. Obama-Trump voters are almost entirely white, working class, and non-urban. This mid-western region had been particularly hard-hit by the decrease in manufacturing and was thus ripe for harvesting feelings of political resentment. Cramer's disillusioned Wisconsinites (and their midwestern brethren) are, mathematically, the reason Trump was able to win.

Elite Contributions

Several high profile Republicans and many lower-level party officials spoke out against Donald Trump in 2016 and even indicated that they would not vote for the then-candidate. Senators McCain, Collins, Murkowski, and Sasse along with Governor Kasich and former governors Bush and Romney all refused to endorse Donald Trump (Levitsky & Ziblatt,

2018, p. 70). However, not a single one of them endorsed Hillary Clinton. In fact, the only Republican to endorse Clinton while in office as a governor, representative, or senator was NY congressman Richard Hanna (who was not seeking reelection in 2016). Levitsky and Ziblatt, who saw Donald Trump as a dangerous authoritarian capable for shaking American democracy to its core, lament the failure of the Republican party to call out the abnormality of Trump. Instead, Republican leaders lined up for Trump, acting as if the 2016 election was relatively typical. Levitsky and Ziblatt accuse Republican leaders of "normalizing" a national "moment of crisis," resulting in a standard two-party race (p. 70). Republicans knew, of course, that Trump would not be a typical president, but their fear of retribution from his intensely loyal base pushed Republican higher-ups to grit their teeth and endorse Trump (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018, p. 69-72). Republicans in the senate have backed their president throughout the Trump presidency, despite taking a significant beating in the 2018 midterm elections. While Levitsky and Ziblatt may overemphasize the role of elites in their work and underemphasize the growing unrest among the electorate, Gabel and Scheve (2007) have found that elites have significant impact on public opinion. The behavior of the higher-ups in the Republican party contributed to the electorate's acceptance of the outside candidate. Thus, even if elite behavior around norm enforcement was less impactful than Levitsky and Ziblatt propose, by signaling support for Trump, Republicans may have swung the election. Concurrently, this elite behavior informs the potency of the Trump coalition. As of late 2020, even after Trump lost his reelection campaign, there has been no major Republican exodus from the Trump movement. In fact, they continue to support his antidemocratic antics as he challenges the legitimacy of the 2020 election (Raju & Zaslov, 2020; see also Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018, p. 60-61).

Some of the scholars' fears may have come to fruition. In early 2016, when the late Justice Antonin Scalia passed away, Republican Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell refused to even hold a hearing for Obama nominee Merrick Garland, signaling the beginning of a Republican departure from norms in the Senate (Bravin, 2017). After 293 days, Garland's nomination expired when Trump assumed the presidency. This was certainly a violation of the norm, but it was, at the time, conceivable that Republicans were simply establishing a new set of norms to follow. When Justice Kennedy retired in 2018, the process for filling the seat followed the typical process (of course, the nominee was anything but typical, but as far as norm based behavior goes, the Kavanaugh nomination should not have raised concerns). However, when Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg (z"l) died on September 18, 2020, the president and Republicans began a sprint to confirm a replacement in the six intervening weeks before the election, exposing their hypocrisy. One of the greatest fears of Levitsky and Ziblatt is that the president would gain a powerful majority on the bench and use it to challenge democratic norms (p. 207). Trump has already rejected election results, and it is quite possible that the Supreme Court will have a say in the 2020 contest. President Trump may have run an anti-elite campaign, but four years later it is clear that his presidency is defined by the permissions of the establishment. The Trump coalition is not just the fringe and it is not just the voters. It is an entire political party. When elites accepted Trump's brand of politics, they granted Republican voters permission to engage in Trumpism.

Media

Francia (2017) has suggested that Donald Trump's ability to capitalize on free media coupled with the media's obsession with Trump massively advantaged the Trump campaign. Trump's boisterous presence on social media combined with his large Twitter following gave

him a platform unmatched by his opponents. His tendency to be crude and unusual made him interesting "ratings gold" for traditional media outlets. Even then-host of *The Daily Show* and noted progressive activist, Jon Stewart, celebrated Trump's candidacy announcement on air in 2015, expecting a few months of comedic entertainment value. The constant presence of Trump on news stations and social media made some of the conventional indicators of electoral success less salient. In the end, despite Hillary Clinton's extensive fundraising and Super-PAC support, she was unable to raise enough money to compete with the free media access of Trump (Francia, 2017).

The saying "all press is good press" has never been truer than when it is applied to the 2016 Donald Trump campaign for the presidency. Donald Trump's most provocative comments on the campaign trail tended to be related to immigrants, infamously kicking off his campaign with the comment that "[Mexicans are] bringing drugs. They're bringing crime. They're rapists. And some, I assume, are good people." His seemingly absurd rhetoric about immigration prompted major U.S. newspapers to write hundreds of pages about his position on the issue, unintentionally bringing his views into the mainstream (Oates & Moe, 2016). The media ensured that the election became about immigration, Donald Trump, and little else.

Perhaps no source of information was more important in establishing the Trump coalition than Twitter and Facebook. An avid Tweeter himself, Donald Trump benefitted massively from the polarized echo-chamber of social media. Conover et al. (2011) have found that "blue check" Twitter timelines tend to be partisan with few connections between users on the right and users on the left (something to which any student of politics with a tendency to doom scroll can attest). While the authors do find interparty interaction in what they term the "mentions network," this is both unlikely to include dissemination of persuasive information or

broad audiences, leaving the majority of eyes and consumption of political information in the partisan fray of the verified elites (Conover et al., 2011). Further, Ott (2017) found that political twitter is simple, impulsive, and uncivil. In a post-election examination, Ott (2017) remarked on the existence of ideological grouping on social media, in which political tweets, news stories, and ideas are most likely to reach people who agree with them (p. 65). Ott takes issue with the algorithms of Twitter and social media, finding that politics in 280 (or 140) characters is responsible for the creation of an irresponsible electorate. From the perspective of the voters, however, Trump's Twitter presence provided a platform for the candidate to speak directly to his base in a simple vernacular that they understood. Never before has an American presidential campaign been so closely followed or so easy to access.

Counter-Coalition Building: The Resistance

The Trump campaign and subsequent presidency has led to the formulation of a counter-coalition of politicians, voters, celebrities, and PACs with little in common except for significant dislike for Donald Trump. In the final days leading up to the 2020 election, this group includes former Republican aides and strategists, the founders of the Black Lives Matter movement, a Silicon Valley PAC with massive financial resources (Schleifer, 2020), and myriad former officials from both sides of the political spectrum. The resistance has mobilized millions of people for mass protests, such as the Women's March in early 2017 and The March for our Lives in 2018, in its attempt to garner anti-Trump momentum (Fisher et al., 2018). The movement, marked by the presence of intersectional identities, stands in stark contrast to the racial homogeneity of the Trump coalition. Fisher et al. (2018, p. 460-465) have suggested that the movement may fall apart after the end of the Trump days when the common enemy recedes from center stage, but there is hope that these bridging relationships that have been built out of

necessity will lend themselves to more civil conversations across the aisle (Mason, 2018). More importantly, the demographics of the resistance are informative when hoping to understand the Trump coalition; understanding those who are not Trump supporters is critical in understanding why some people support the president.

Gaps in Research

Defining the voter motivation behind the election of Donald Trump is critical to political scientists' understanding of the American political arena. In the wake of an election that challenged decades of theory and precedent in the field, the need for clarity in regard to the Trump coalition is evident. There has already been a significant amount of research done to this end, much of which is represented above; however, there are still areas ripe for further exploration. Cramer's (2016b) work is admirable but is not specifically geared to understanding the Trump coalition. Of course, the rural resentment of Wisconsinites is enlightening, but the Trump base has adopted national identities into their resentment as well as regional ones. Theories from Putnam and Mason describing long-developing national polarization fall short as well, for they fail to identify why Trump in particular was able to harness this movement. There was clearly a trigger in 2016 that must be explained by more than a slowly developing trend. Questions remain about how the candidate himself swayed voter opinion, how members of the Trump coalition view one another and their opposition, and why so many moderate Republicans (both voters and elites) joined the movement. This study takes a holistic approach to understanding the Trump base by both analyzing literature and election results *and* engaging voters in a qualitative survey to understand their feelings about Trump. This study will provide an even closer look at the voters behind the 2016 election, a coalition that political scientists must understand, as it has permanently changed American politics.

Methodology

In order to get at the question of the political identities and beliefs of the Trump coalition, I will use both quantitative and qualitative methodology. This study has collected original data from voters to come to new conclusions. The most important electoral region in 2016 was the Midwest, so my data collection focused on swing districts in the rustbelt. Notably, there are more CDs that flipped from Obama to Trump from 2012 to 2016 than in any other region of the country. Thus, in partnership with CloudResearch, I have conducted online surveys with Midwestern voters in swing districts, a study that I have coined the Midwestern Swing District Voter Survey (SDVS). The SDVS includes responses from 82 Trump and Biden voters from two key swing districts in the Iowa and Minnesota. Response collection began on Friday, February 26, 2021 and lasted until Friday, March 12, 2021. The survey asks some basic screener and political questions including voter history, but it will focus foremost on a series of open-ended questions that drive at respondent's feelings about Trump and other key political issues[1]. This survey was created as a hybrid. In one regard, it is styled after questions that Cramer (2016) asked of voters during her Wisconsin study (p. 233-238). On the other hand, it includes quantitative questions like those found in larger and more frequent polls of American voters. The data from SDVS allowed for a unique interpersonal comparison between Trump and Biden voters. Identity politics is the defining characteristic of voter behavior in 2021 and allowing voters to respond without the restriction of multiple choice created a unique opportunity for analysis. I worked in consultation with Professor Serena Laws in addition to Dr. Dan Douglas to make this research a reality; the Trinity College Political Science Department paid CloudResearch $720 for the data collection.

[1] The questionnaire is available in PDF form as appendix A

Chapter Outline

In order to more fully understand the impact of rural resentment on the politics of today, this project will rewind the tape in order to discuss the origins of this complex political identity. I will discuss the demographic and economic shifts that have taken place over the past few decades in America. There has been decline in the rate of local business ownership, leaving shops boarded up in rural towns. Inflation in the late 20th century left farmers in economic turmoil, and now there are fewer governmental resources available than ever as the economy grows increasingly global and less rural. There are certainly valid complaints and hardships confronting rural America, and the next chapter will explain how economic and demographic change made this culture the origin of Trumpism. It will go on to explain how, though the phenomenon existed before his arrival, Trump has actively and intentionally stoked the resentment of rural America to energize his movement. Riding the media wave of *Fox News*, Qanon, *One America New Network* (*OANN*), and Twitter and Facebook, Cramer's rural resentment has turned into a somewhat more insidious revitalization of xenophobia, white nationalism, and anti-Semitism and Islamophobia that seems to be here to stay.

Chapter three will dig into the SDVS, analyzing the similarities and differences between two voter groups: Trump voters and Biden voters. At the surface level, the survey allows for basic analysis of demographic factors. It shows us that, as expected, Trump voters are less educated than Biden voters, that the two voter groups are relatively parallel when it comes to finances, and that Biden voters are more likely to have strong policy interest than Trump voters. It confirms that both sets of voters feel hostility towards the other, revealing a surprising amount of hostility towards Trump voters felt by Biden voters. Also in the chapter, I will discuss the intense affective candidate loyalty felt by both voter groups.

Chapter four will also rely on data from the SDVS, this time focusing on media and misinformation, which both loomed large throughout the Trump presidency. The SDVS will show that Trump and his fellow Republicans' "big lie" has had startling salience among voters. A plurality of SDVS Trump voters believe that Donald Trump won in 2020, and a vast majority of his supporters believe that media has a liberal bias. Contributing to this polarizing and troubling trend, right-wing media has become the mouthpiece of Trumpism, pushing lies, conspiracy theories, and anti-Democratic party rhetoric that serves only to rile up the base. Even in the aftermath of the Trump administration, a plurality of Trump voters still believe that Donald Trump won the 2020 election.

Finally, this project will consider the 2020 presidential election results. Without a doubt, this election was primarily a referendum on the Trump presidency. Despite a raging pandemic (or, perhaps, because of it), a record breaking number of Americans cast ballots and voted convincingly to oust Donald Trump from the White House. Initial exit polling and post-election analyses seem to indicate a degree of racial dealignment, meaning a lower proportion of white voters and a higher proportion of voters of color broke for Trump in 2020 than in 2016 (Medina, 2020). This national condemnation of Trumpism is a promising sign, but the election has also proven that Trumpism is alive and well. Around 75 million Americans cast their ballots for Trump and, considering Trump and his base's refusal to acknowledge defeat, they are going to be here for some time to come. This makes it even more necessary that Democrats, the Resistance, and political scientists understand the Trump coalition going forward.

Conclusion

Americans should be scared by Trumpism. White supremacy and anti-Semitism have rebounded from the darkest corners of the internet and are once again in the mainstream. As

North Korea improves its missile capacities and Iran inches closer to nuclear capability by the day, America's international relationships teeter on the edge of catastrophe (Ward, 2020). Worse still, a pandemic has gripped the world and Trump, along with his supporters, have rejected the expertise of doctors and scientists, spurning the need for mask-wearing, social distancing, and targeted business closures (Baker, 2020). The question in the long-term, however, is not "how do we fix these problems?" We must confront the fact that a coalition of Americans felt so badly overlooked by politicians, government, and media that they were ready to jump into the erratic populism of Donald Trump. It is likely that this movement, which is laced with conspiracy and the manipulation of truth, is here to stay. Trump is headed out, but Trumpism may become the new Republicanism. Thus, the question we need to be asking is "what is Trumpism, where did it come from, and what will it look like going forward?"

Chapter 2
How Nativist Populism Took Over the GOP

Donald Trump's rise to power was and is one of the most monumental events in American political history. From the moment he announced his candidacy, the political world did not know what to do about Donald Trump's presence. His primary opponents were stuck between stooping to his level to punch back and stubbornly taking the high road while he bombarded them with personal attacks ranging from phallic imagery to insults about their families. During his time in office, he continued to flout tradition and process, preferring to communicate in sound bites and tweets rather than formal addresses and memorandums. He consistently engaged in racially charged language, often targeting Latinx immigrants or Hispanic Americans, Black Americans, and other foreign nationals (his favorite target being China). In short, Donald Trump was nothing like any President America has ever had. His support is unprecedented in this country. While the electoral success of Trump came as a surprise to many, this chapter will explore how Trumpism was propelled by demographic and political trends in America. The Republican base had been shifting for some time, and the arrival of Trump was enough to catalyze what may have been an inevitable change. Trump was able to capture that potential energy and charged to the forefront of a popular nationalist movement that shook American democracy to its core.

The Republican party has long entertained racially motivated identity politics among its ranks. In the 1970s, the Southern Strategy aligned southern Republican support and provided a permission structure for racism, anti-Semitism, and anti-elitism (Inwood, 2015). In Ronald Reagan's 1976 reelection campaign, the then-president frequently engaged in race-baiting, though he did not engage in the explicit racial rhetoric that has been popularized by the 2016 and

2020 contests (Krugman, 2007). For example, in 1980, Reagan spoke of the importance of state's rights at the Neshoba Country Fair in Mississippi, a rallying point for segregationist sentiment. In doing so, Reagan signaled acceptance of white supremacist beliefs, beginning a long trend of coded Republican acceptance of white supremacy. During Obama's first term, Republicans welcomed the Tea Party into their ranks, a group of right-wingers who much more actively embraced the party's racial undertones than their mainstream counterparts. The movement reshaped the GOP, capitalizing on the growing conservative racism and the resentment felt by white middle class Americans (Williamson, Skopcol & Coggin, 2011). Tea Partiers emphasized the dispossession of white power in America, making racial identity an important factor motivating support of the Republican party (Zeskind, 2012). Though no Tea Party candidate ever became the Republican Presidential nominee, the GOP underwent significant change during the Obama years, setting the stage for an outside presidential candidate willing to speak loudly about race to motivate resentful white voters. Republicans began to abandon their dog whistles in exchange for their bull horns. Support for Donald Trump cannot be easily explained using traditional metrics of American politics. His movement represents an unprecedented change in the American landscape, exponentially elevating the prevalence of race, place, and class in our national politics. This chapter will further explore the support behind the identity-motivated polarization of the Trump movement and the reason that Trump was able to build such an impregnable base.

Rural Resentment

Scott Walker's 2010 victory in the Wisconsin g ubernatorial election has become a focal point for the political science community, representing a case study of the kind of fundamental shift in voting patterns that may have eventually led to the election of Donald Trump. In general,

political observers tend to expect voters to support candidates and policies that will bring positive change to their lives. For the rural Wisconsinites, this would mean supporting wealth redistribution policies and other government programs designed to ease the economic burden on the struggling working class. However, Walker, who is a staunch conservative, was able to garner support among rural Wisconsin voters despite a policy agenda that threatened to roll back benefits for that same group. Katherine Cramer's (2016) exploration of this phenomenon focused on rural resentment as the key explanatory variable, claiming that identity, not policy, was driving voter behavior. This chapter extends Cramer's research, applying her framework to the national stage and Trumpism as a whole.

Of course, there is nothing new about the discovery that rural voters tend to be Republicans while urban voters tend to be Democrats, but Cramer found gaps in the literature when it came to understanding how the "rural-versus-urban divides function as a perspective through which some people think about politics" (p. 53). In an attempt to fill these gaps, Cramer suggests that rural American voters hold a set of unique beliefs that makes voting for a Republican candidate a logical choice for them. When urban Americans—Democrats—wonder why these people would seemingly vote against their own self-interest, they fail to see beyond the legislation. Americans are growing increasingly polarized; however, that polarization is not driven by policy. Lilliana Mason, in her 2018 book *Uncivil Agreement,* demonstrates that social identity sorting is the root of American polarization. The parties–especially the GOP–have become so strongly sorted on identities of race, education, gender, class, and religion that Americans feel as if they have no choice but to side with the group that looks and acts like them. Figure 1, taken from Mason (2018, p. 97), shows differing anger reactions to political messages.

Clearly social sorting, not partisanship or salient political issues, is the most important factor in determining anger at the other side. Cross-cutting identities make voters less likely to be angry or emotional whereas highly socially sorted Americans are more likely to experience political anger (Mason, 2018, p.100).

While Mason calls it anger, it is easy to see how her findings parallel Cramer's resentment. Rural voters hold shared beliefs about decision-making power, values and lifestyles, and the distribution of resources, resulting in a common mistrust of government, urban dwellers, and outsiders (Cramer, 206, p. 55). Rural Americans feel as though they are being targeted by unfair tax policy, abandoned by globalization, and short-changed by government programs (Cramer, 2016). Whether or not these shared perspectives and beliefs, which Cramer coins "rural consciousness," are grounded in fact is not relevant to their potency; more and more Americans are voting on issues of identity. Rural Americans do not only share geographic identity. They are overwhelmingly white, older, and struggling financially as the middle class wanes in a changing economic environment. This sorted identity is what helps to strengthen and make universal the

Figure 2

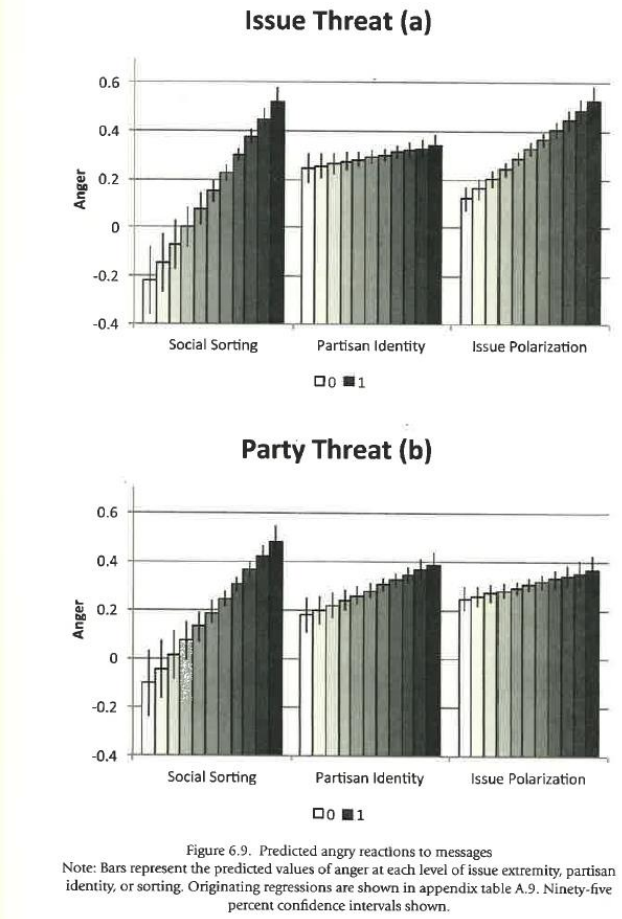


Figure 6.9. Predicted angry reactions to messages
Note: Bars represent the predicted values of anger at each level of issue extremity, partisan identity, or sorting. Originating regressions are shown in appendix table A.9. Ninety-five percent confidence intervals shown.

themes of rural consciousness; people are biased to look favorably on the ideas of people who look, act, and think like them (Mason, 2018). The strength and popularity of this rural consciousness has been growing for some time. First, in Wisconsin, it landed Walker in the Governor's Mansion–only a few years later it landed Donald Trump in the White House. The growth of rural consciousness has been spurred by changing American demographics and economics, and it was further enflamed by the intentional stoking of the Trump campaign, culminating in heightened American polarization and the bold reemergence of fringe groups.

Demographic Change in Rural America

Understanding the history of rural America is critical to understanding the rural role in modern American politics. The trends that were exposed by the 2016 election have been in the making for decades.

The post-war years, from the 1940s through the late 1950s, were something of a golden era for white, rural Americans. As white Americans sought property ownership in pursuit of the American Dream, rural counties saw population booms (Johnson & Lichter, 2019). In 1940, 75 million Americans lived in rural municipalities. The American nonmetropolitan population began declining in the late 1980s and has continued since. Today, the rural population sits somewhere between 45 and 50 million. More dramatically, the proportion of the American population living in rural (or non-metropolitan) areas has fallen from 57 to 14 percent (Johnson & Lichter). Nearly half of all rural counties have experienced depopulation over that period, compared to a mere six percent of metropolitan counties. Johnson and Lichter (2019) offer three factors that tend to contribute to depopulation: migration, fertility, and mortality. While there have been fluctuations and some down-trends in rural American birth and death rates, the majority of the depopulation seen in this demographic can be attributed to net out-migration.

That said, the rural population is also generally older and less likely to procreate than the general population, driving population even further down. As industry has changed, marked by the mechanization of agriculture as well as the automation and exportation of manufacturing, employment and business opportunities in rural America began to run dry. Concurrently, demand for labor in cities and metropolitan areas grew, driving urban migration among rural Americans and discouraging others from moving into the country. This established trend of out-migration led, in turn, to a decrease in birth rate and an increase in mortality, as quality of life in rural America fell and average age increased over time. In short, depopulation has devastated a majority of rural communities, leaving them a shell of what they were fifty years ago.

Depopulation is a vicious cycle: businesses close because of dwindling profits, leaving more people out of work who, in turn, are forced to seek work in suburban or urban centers. This leaves the remaining businesses fewer customers, eventually driving them to close as well. Johnson and Lichter (2019) have called depopulation a "signature demographic phenomenon" in rural America, suggesting that reversal of the trend is unlikely (p. 3). The diminishing population and economy in the rural regions of the country comes amidst a new age of urbanization and digital revolution that has Americans flocking to the city. Further compounding the rural predicament, wage and wealth inequality is at an all-time high, with the top quintile of American earners averaging nearly 13 times more income than the bottom quintile (Horowitz, Igielnik & Kochar, 2020). As they watch their social and economic status diminish, rural Americans see wealth accumulating in cities. Thus, they feel as if their towns are losing out time and time again while the urban folks only stand to profit off of rural suffering. Of course, there is also significant poverty and inequality within the urban setting. Millions of Americans in cities are food insecure, homeless, or live below the poverty line; however, this reality is unimportant

when compared to the strength of the illusion of urban prosperity. The resentment built by even the appearance of dichotomous economic opportunity and prosperity is politically salient in and of itself. One of the Cramer's central findings is that the accuracy of the rural perception of being short-changed by the state is unimportant; the perception itself is what drives the rural identity.

Cramer (2016) finds that her rural subjects draw a strong correlation between the city folks and the state government housed within Madison. Distrust of government is central to rural consciousness, as rural Americans tend to blame government for the breakdown of their society. As an example, one of Cramer's interviewees says,

> The cost of the water and sewer here is outrageous compared to what they pay in Madison. So here is big rich Madison, with all the good high-paying jobs, getting the cheapest water, and we have people up here who have three months of employment . . .what are they paying? And I feel like there should be more sharing—less taxes going to Madison. (Cramer, 2016, p. 78).

Expressing a similar frustration, an Iowan Trump voter who responded to the SDVS (which will be properly introduced in the next chapter) said that one of the most important problems facing him today was that "Taxes are getting out of control. The country has become [too] divided. We seem to never solve problems." Rural Americans have come to believe that government is not only oversized but is actively making their lives harder with no intention of providing relief. Thus, the rural consciousness has developed into an us-versus-them mentality, in which rural America is an entity separate from the rest of America, fighting to remain viable in an ever-evolving country. As this sense of being left behind has evolved, politicians have started rhetorically targeting and encouraging rural distaste for big government. Scott Walker, in a 2012 address at the Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC), said, "We are the ones

who are looking out for the middle class. Who do you think pays for the endless expansion of government? Its middle class taxpayers." In this intentional framework, *they*, the Democrats and city-dwellers, want to tax the hardworking middle class in order to expand government jobs and benefits in urban areas. Similarly, Donald Trump frequently engages in anti-urban rhetoric, continuously referring via tweet to "badly run Democrat cities" or "high crime Democrat run cities." In an October 2020 tweet, Trump continued to emphasize the threats of Democratic leadership and cities: "Just don't see any way Nancy Pelosi and Cryin' Chuck Schumer will be willing to do what is right for our great American workers, or our wonderful USA itself . . .Their primary focus is BAILING OUT poorly run (and high crime) Democrat cities and states.[2]" Though it is a short tweet, this message is packed with hidden meaning, fear-mongering, and dog-whistling. Trump's message is this: corrupt politicians are going to spend even more money on the black and brown people in the cities while ignoring the hard-working white Americans in the heartland. In doing so, they will continue to foster hot beds of crime, which will surely spread out from the cities and threaten the safety of rural America. Worse still, they are refusing to cooperate with immigration enforcement, welcoming in illegal immigrants to take jobs from real Americans.[3] Donald Trump affirmed that leaders from American cities care little about rural America while insisting that he would "Make America Great Again" by restoring rural America to its former glory.

Trump's rhetoric around race and immigration played off of another demographic shift in nonmetropolitan America: the growing minority population. While the absolute population of rural America has fallen over the past decades, the Hispanic population in the same areas has

[2] In January of 2021, Twitter deactivated Donald Trump's official Twitter account, an action which included making his past tweets unavailable for public viewing. Therefore, this project will rely on secondary compilations and archives when referencing Trump tweets.
[3] Trump frequently tweeted misinformation about sanctuary cities, mongering fear of immigrants.

increased significantly (Lichter & Johnson, 2020). In fact, Hispanics make up as much as 20 percent of the population in some areas, tending to immigrate to places with less significant population decline. While much of the existing white population of rural America is aging and beginning to experience heightened mortality, Hispanic newcomers tend be younger and more fertile, making it likely that the Baby Boomer generation will slowly be replaced by a younger majority-minority population (Lichter & Johnson, 2020). While this trend is overwhelmingly positive for the economic health of rural America, providing an opportunity for recovery to rapidly depopulating counties, xenophobia, racism, and bigotry have cast Hispanic migration as a threat to "American values," competitive jobs, and white hegemony. The growing population of color in rural America has become a tangible scapegoat for many of the problems facing the region.

Trump Rhetoric and the Racialization of Resentment

While these demographic trends have been in motion for years and are not new, Trump worked actively to increase and elevate xenophobia among his voters. Prior to his rise to political saliency, Trump was at the forefront of the birther movement, a racially charged conspiracy theory that claimed Barack Obama is a Muslim who was not born in the United States. During the 2016 campaign and his presidency, Trump repeatedly emphasized the dangerous nature of immigrants of color. Some of his most dangerous quotes are below:

- "[Mexicans are] bringing drugs, they're bringing crime, they're rapists, and some, I assume, are good people" (A June 2015 event announcing his candidacy)
- "CHAIN MIGRATION must end now! Some people come in, and they bring their whole family with them, who can be truly evil. NOT ACCEPTABLE!" (A November 2017 tweet)

- "Why are we having all these people from shithole countries come here?...Why do we need more Haitians? Take them out" (A 2018 immigration event)
- "Some people call it an invasion . . .they have violently overrun the Mexican border" (Speaking on refugees and asylum seekers at the US-Mexican border)

Trump played on existing bigotries and phobias to paint a picture of armies of black and brown immigrants rapidly approaching American borders, with corrupt Democratic politicians waiting to welcome them in with open arms. The rural resentment that Cramer first observed has been coaxed into fully fledged racial resentment, leading to historic racial conflict in the Trump era. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the correlation between Republican candidate sympathy and racial resentment was significantly higher in 2016 than it has ever been since the American National Election Study (ANES) began asking racial resentment questions (Abramowitz & McCoy, 2019, p. 142). Over time, the most racially resentful Americans have been sorted into the Republican party, and Trump only served to accelerate that trend (Abramowitz & McCoy, 2019).

In 1958, English novelist T.H. White wrote that "few people can hate so bitterly and so

Correlations of Racial Resentment Scale with Presidential Candidate Feeling Thermometer Difference Ratings by Education among White Voters, 1988–2016

Year	All White Voters	College Grads	Not College Grads
1988	.205	.308	.175
1992	.275	.510	.157
2000	.247	.398	.154
2004	.398	.628	.261
2008	.485	.611	.416
2016	.636	.699	.549

NOTE: Feeling Thermometer Difference Ratings subtract the average feelings (scale of 0–100, from cool to warm) toward the Democratic candidate from the average feelings toward the Republican candidate.
SOURCES: American National Election Study Cumulative File and 2016 American National Election Study.

Table 2 Correlations of Racial Resentment Scale with Presidential Candidate Feeling Thermometer Difference Ratings by Education among White Voters, 1988–2016

self-righteously as the members of a ruling caste which is being dispossessed." There is, perhaps, no better illustration of this truth than the Trump base. White Americans are, in all likelihood, going to lose their status as a majority demographic in America by the year 2045 (Frey, 2018).

For the entire history of America, this group has enjoyed unchallenged power, autonomy, and control. Since its origin as a slave-based economy, this country has always been a stronghold of white power and dominance, and the beneficiaries of that system fear the day when they no longer wield hegemonic control. When whites are no longer the majority, power will begin to even further disperse across different groups, threatening to bring America closer to being the land of opportunity that it has always claimed to be. White rural Americans are afraid of being replaced.

Embracing White Radicalism

In early August 2017, the now-infamous "Unite the Right" rally took place in Charlottesville, Virginia. At the rally, Trump supporters made clear just how worried they were about the threat of replacement. They gathered to protest the removal of a Confederate monument, wearing "Make America Great Again" hats, holding torches, and engaging in racist, anti-Semitic, and Nazi chants, including "Blood and Soil,[4]" "You will not replace us,[5]" "Jews will not replace us," and "White Lives Matter" (Lind, 2017). The rally, which resulted in one death and several injuries, was a loud, visible example of the reemergence of fringe hate groups and militias in the Trump era. In the days following the rally, Trump seemingly endorsed the views of the neo-Nazis and white nationalists, refusing to condemn rally-goers outright and drawing a moral equivalence between left-wing counter protestors and neo-Nazis, tweeting that there were "very fine people on both sides" of the rally ("Trump Twitter Archive").

[4] According to the Anti-Defamation League (ADL): [the term 'Blood and Soil'] was popularized by the Nazi Party (as a Hitler Youth slogan and elsewhere). Since World War II, this German phrase has commonly been used by white supremacists in Europe, the United States, and elsewhere

[5] According to the ADL: "The slogan ['You will not replace us'] is a reference to the popular white supremacist belief that the white race is in danger of extinction by a rising tide of non-whites who are controlled and manipulated by Jews."

Throughout the duration of the Trump era, the president's masked hints about the fall of white economic and social power were accompanied by collaboration and shared goodwill with neo-Nazis, the KKK, and other member groups of the alt-right. From the outset of the Trump campaign, former KKK Grand Wizard and member of the Louisiana House of Representative David Duke was outspoken about his support for Trump (Kessler, 2016). Alt-right political strategist Steve Bannon was also a close Trump ally, serving both as campaign director and as a Chief Strategist at various points (Hawk, 2019). Donald Trump did more than tolerate the alt-right and the white nationalists, he actively coveted their support, engaging with their issues and offering sympathy to their views. In a presidential debate with then-candidate Joe Biden, Trump instructed the Proud Boys, an infamous right-wing militia, to "stand back and stand by," seeming to encourage their support rather than discourage their lawless behavior[6] (Ronayne & Kunzelman, 2020). Trump's dangerous flirtation with these offensive fringe groups has had a wide range of consequences (including armed insurrection) and has fundamentally altered the Republican base and changed the behavior of Trump supporters. By allowing the extremists to come into the light, Trumpism normalized less aggressive forms of racism that occur every day. "Blue Lives Matter" and Confederate statues and flags, symbols of state brutality against black Americans, became regular wardrobe pieces for Trump supporters; racism became an essential part of the Trump brand.

There are obvious consequences of this heightened racial rhetoric: increased presence of hate groups, increased hate crimes, and higher incidences of anti-Semitism and Islamophobia (Arango, 2020). While the members of these groups make up an incredibly small proportion of

[6] Admittedly, there is debate over the true meaning of these remarks, as the context was never clear. What is clear, however, is that Trump's hesitancy to denounce his militant following led to a tragic death on January 6 at the capitol.

the Trump base, they have a disproportionate amount of influence over the rest of Trump's voters because of their visibility. The latent result of Trump's behavior towards bigotry is the normalization of racism, ableism, Islamophobia, and xenophobia. Trump followers chant enthusiastically for a defensive wall to be built around Mexico. They laud the administrations "Muslim Ban.' They chant "send her back" in relation to non-white representatives Alexandria Ocasio-Cortex, Ilhan Omar, Ayanna Pressley, and Rashida Tlaib. A large number of Trump voters have adopted his language of casual racism, flippantly dismissing the reality of structural racism, sexism, and white privilege. Even as American society as a whole has become increasingly aware of white privilege, the hardships faced by women and people of color, and Islamaphobia since 2016, Trump voters have increased in race-blindness and privilege denying over the last four years (*Pew Research Center*, 2020). In fact, Trump enthusiasts have recently grown obsessed with the idea that white conservatives are at risk of being "cancelled" and are marginalized for their beliefs. One Midwestern Swing District Voter Survey respondent said the biggest issues facing him was "the growing fear that I am being ostracized simply for having conservative beliefs. He was one of several Trump voters to express this sentiment.

From White Exceptionalism to Populist Movement Building

As the racial undertones of the Trump base have taken hold, Trumpism has evolved into a fully-fledged political movement. Trump-hesitant Republicans, like Mitt Romney, Liz Cheney, and the late John McCain have expressed concern that the Republican party—and Republican voters—have undergone permanent change over the last several years of Trump-laden politics. Romney, a senator from Utah, the former governor of Massachusetts, and the 2012 Republican Presidential Nominee, has said that, if Trump were to run again in 2024, that he would likely win the nomination. He went on to say that he would not support Trump, but "would probably be

getting behind somebody who I thought more represented the tiny wing of the Republican Party that I represent" (Kaplan, 2021). Romney, who won the 2012 GOP primary in a landslide and netted 61 million votes and 206 electors in the general election, has been forced to recognize that, in the age of the Trump Republican party, he represents a small minority of his former voters (*The New York Times*, 2012). The Republican party, once the party of Lincoln, has become the party of Trump. In fact, on March 8, 2021, nearly two months after he left office, Trump released a statement urging his voters to stop donations to the GOP and to donate to his "America First" PAC instead (Breuninger, 2021). Trump is aware of the power he holds over the Republican party in this political moment; he has clearly won over a fiercer type of support than any of his predecessors.

As the identity-motivated Trump base has grown louder, Trumpism has come to strongly resemble a populist movement, engaging in exclusive nationalism, rejecting experts, and rejecting democratic norms. One of the most consistent traits of populism is the emergence of exclusionary nationalist movements, groups who believe that they are the only true patriots and that they alone want what is best for the country. Further, populist groups tend to view their opponents as not mere political rivals but enemies of the state (Mounk, 2018).

As an anecdotal example, in the summer of 2019, I traveled to Arizona for a family wedding. In passing, my grandmother, a senior citizen from Albuquerque, NM, mentioned that she did not care for Trump. My aunt, a Trump supporter, responded, "Why, do you hate America too?"

In this same vein, one Trump supporting survey respondent described Biden voters as either "misinformed or haters of our country." This idea, that those who stand against the movement stand against the country, is a common populist trope.

Authoritarian populism also tends to reject elites and experts, seeing them as alternative sources of power "who seek to undermine the rightful sovereignty of the common folk" (Oliver & Rahn, 2016, p.190). The Trump movement has left no room for ambiguity when it comes to elites and experts. Hillary Clinton, who, as a career Democratic politician and a woman, is in the Trump base's target hate demographic, has been the object of hundreds of "Lock her Up!" chants. Doctor Anthony Fauci, who has led the federal response to the Covid-19 pandemic, has also been the target of MAGA hate, with crowds calling for his termination and Trump repeatedly targeting him on Twitter ("Crowd chants fire Fauci," 2020). Comedian and activist Sacha Baron Cohen, disguised as a Trump enthusiast named "Country Steve," attended a 2020 right-wing rally, where he convinced attendees to sing along to offensive lyrics about Fauci, Clinton, Barack Obama, the WHO, and more, including the lines "Dr. Fauci, what we gonna do? Inject him with the Wuhan Flu!" and "The WHO, what we gonna do? Chop 'em up like the Saudi's do[7]!" (Baron Cohen & Woliner, 2020). While Cohen is, first and foremost, a comedian, the willingness of the crowd to enthusiastically participate in threatening harm against medical professionals in the midst of a global pandemic demonstrates the extent of the Trump base's blanket dislike for experts and effortless descension into groupthink. This mob-like behavior in Trump crowds motivates the highly sorted identity politics of Trumpism–'if everyone else like me is doing something, it must be ok for me to do it too.' Of course, the Trump distaste for experts, elites, and professionals was not limited to crowds and chants. Trump gutted the American bureaucracy, firing career professionals and either replacing them with industry executives or leaving crippling vacancies (Lu & Yourish, 2020).

[7] A reference to the 2018 Jamal Kashoggi assassination in Saudi Arabia

Last, Trump loyalists have demonstrated a willingness to override liberal norms and checks and balances in order to serve their purpose. Populists seek to dismantle liberal democracy, which lauds protections against factional control, minority rule, and the equal distribution of power, preferring instead to cede absolute power to the leader of the movement (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2013). Populists justify this removal of balances and minority power by insisting that the movement represents the general will, and that all dissenting groups must not have the national interest in mind. In 2016, Donald Trump laid the groundwork to claim that the election was conducted unfairly, suggesting that officials would rig the election in favor of Hillary Clinton (Martin & Burns, 2016). Of course, Trump would go on to win that election, but he was able to exercise his plan in late 2020, when he repeatedly claimed that, via mail-in voting and other voting processes, Joe Biden had been unfairly declared the president-elect. This lie, known now as "the big lie," has done significant and lasting damage to American democracy, resulting in millions questioning the legitimacy of the President of the United States and an armed insurrection against the United States government.

Conclusion

Trumpism has become a team. It has been built from a foundation of resentment and fears about an uncertain future, but it now represents a popular nationalist movement focused on racial and geographic identity. Trump's supporters are highly identity sorted, fueling their like-minded groupthink and reluctance to challenge or question other team members. As rural America and disenchanted white voters fostered growing resentment throughout the 21st century, they grew riper and riper for a candidate like Trump. When he burst onto the scene, he fueled their anger and offered scapegoats to blame for the decreasing economic and social salience of white Americans. While the movement certainly has not rejected extremists, Trump supporters are not

all white nationalists, nor are they all populists, but the themes of the Trump brand have spoken to underlying insecurities in normal people, spurring them to support the movement. The result has been potentially permanent change among the Republican base, the rural electorate, and American democracy. The next chapter will break down voter responses to questions of political identity, as this project moves closer to understanding the nature of Trumpism in America.

Chapter 3

Defining Identity Politics in the Age of Trump:

An Analysis of the Midwestern Swing District Voter Survey

The previous chapter dove into the theories of Trumpism, using hypothetical reasoning and statistical analyses to explain the trends, beliefs, and behaviors that put Trump in office. Of course, no national scale dataset will ever be able to define the individual motivations behind Trump voters from thousands of towns across the country but defining the movement as a whole is a good start. These macro-level data sets leave the question: "who are Trump supporters and how can they support him?" Yes, we know they are overwhelmingly white, less educated, and male. We also know that they tend to test high on racial resentment scales and are generally supportive of anti-democratic behavior. These large data sets, however, are unable to give their aggregated respondents a voice. For this project, we set out to create a qualitative profile of the Trump voter. Trumpism has left the field of political science scrambling to keep up; the movement breaks all of the rules of the discipline. There is no group with which we, as academics, are more distanced from than socially conservative Trump enthusiasts. Political scientists, civics majors, and, generally, people who spend their time thinking critically and theoretically about politics are entirely different than those who only marginally interact with politics. We are infatuated with intricacies of policies and minutiae of campaign strategy, whereas the common once-every-four-years voter sees only soundbites, memes, and headlines. Thus, in order to understand Trumpism, it is critical that the humanity and individuality of the Trump voter be recognized as the field begins to pull together Trump post-mortems and attempts to rationalize, normalize, and process the last five years of American politics. Playing an equal role in the Trump story is the staunch group of Biden voters who were incredibly determined to

remove the 45th United States president from office. They too have a group mindset of which the following data will create a snapshot.

Methodology

In order to gain a better understanding of the motivations behind both Trump supporters and Trump detractors, I created a hybrid style questionnaire that emphasizes open response style questions, capturing at least a small snapshot of voters' voices. The questionnaire, known as the Midwestern Swing District Voter Survey (SDVS), combines these qualitative inquiries with quantitative questions that will help garner an understanding of the political priorities and worldviews of respondents. Because I wanted to look at the most consequential voters, I targeted congressional districts (CDs) in the Midwest that were won by Obama in 2012 but swung to Trump in 2016. There were seven such districts: MN 1, 2, and 8; IA 1, 2, and 3; and WI 3. Because department resources were limited, I randomly selected two CDs from this list: MN 2 and IA 3 from this list. After the random selection of these districts, both happened to be won by Joe Biden in 2020, meaning they both went Obama-Obama-Trump-Biden (the same way the national elections turned out). I partnered with CloudResearch, a service that pays respondents to take surveys online, to distribute the questionnaire. I targeted 80 total completed questionnaires, 40 from each district equally split between Biden and Trump supporters. Response collection began on Friday, February 26, 2021 and lasted until Friday, March 12, 2021. In the end, 82 respondents completed the survey, including 39 Trump voters, 43 Biden voters, 41 Minnesotans and 41 Iowans. Respondents to the SDVS were asked to answer 15 substantive questions, seven of which were multiple choice and eight of which called for a text-based open response. The median respondent took just over 5.6 minutes to complete the questionnaire. The mean time of 6.6 minutes to completion is relatively higher than the median, likely due to the questionnaire

being left idle in the background while participants multitasked, resulting in some exceedingly long interview times. Significantly, SDVS respondents were much more likely to be women than men, with 51 women (62 percent) responding compared to only 31 males (38 percent). According to Adam Dietrich, a Research manager at CloudResearch who oversaw response collection for the SDVS, this breakdown is relatively common for online research, though nonetheless important to consider in data analysis. Survey respondents were also almost entirely white, with white voters representing nearly 94 percent of respondents. Though this project did not set out with the intention of surveying mostly white voters, the demographics of the CDs that I surveyed render this hardly surprising: the MN 2nd district and IA 3rd are 83 and 88 percent white respectively (2019 ACS). Unfortunately, this will make it effectively impossible to make concrete claims about the effect of race on support of Trumpism, but, as Cramer (2016) found, these rural white voters are reluctant to talk about race anyway. The whiteness of this sample reflects the whiteness of the rustbelt support for Donald Trump.

Trump voters do not exist in a vacuum; the coalition that elected Trump was answered by enthusiastic opposition around the country. Thus, our survey targeted both Trump voters and Biden voters, choosing instead to define both in the context of the other rather than attempting to draw conclusions about Trumpism without an anchoring comparison. Our questionnaire, which is attached as appendix A, had two central goals: establish the respondent's self-conceptualized political and social identity and gather enough data to make generalized statements about certain voter groups. In early conceptualizations of this research, I had hoped to reach a large number of voters who engaged in vote switching or party disloyalty—people who voted for Obama in 2012 and then Trump in 2016 or those who went Romney in 2012 and then Clinton in 2016. I figured that by targeting swing districts that went heavily for Trump in 2016 I would be able to collect at

least some information or written responses from these people who were direct examples of the power of the Trump message. This, however, was more difficult that I had imagined. Of the 113 total entrants to my questionnaire, only four indicated that they switched parties from 2016 to 2020 and, of those, only two switched from voting for Hillary Clinton to voting for Donald Trump.

Hoping to capture voter attitudes that binary variables and sliding scales are unable to approximate, the questionnaire solicits a fair amount of free-response, text-based answers. These answers are intended to give the respondents an opportunity to express their voices independent of the options provided by a multiple-choice answer. In presenting the results of this survey, I will offer both graphics and statistical analyses of quantitative data as well as excerpts from respondent text-entry questions.

Findings

This project has, to this point, emphasized the importance of identity politics and social sorting in the age of Trump. Understanding the demographics of Trumpism is only a cautious first step towards gaining insight into the Trump-voter mindset. This section will start by presenting the demographics and political leanings of the SDVS sample and will progress to analysis of the issues and identities that hold together the Trump coalition and their rivals. Of course, this project's sample was limited to the Midwest, so any firm conclusions generalized out to the greater United States are based in conjecture; however, as Cramer (2016) has demonstrated through her exposure of the motivations of the resentful rural class, the nationalization of politics has minimized regional differences in political identity. Thus, the SDVS data does help us understand the Trumpism mindset at a national level.

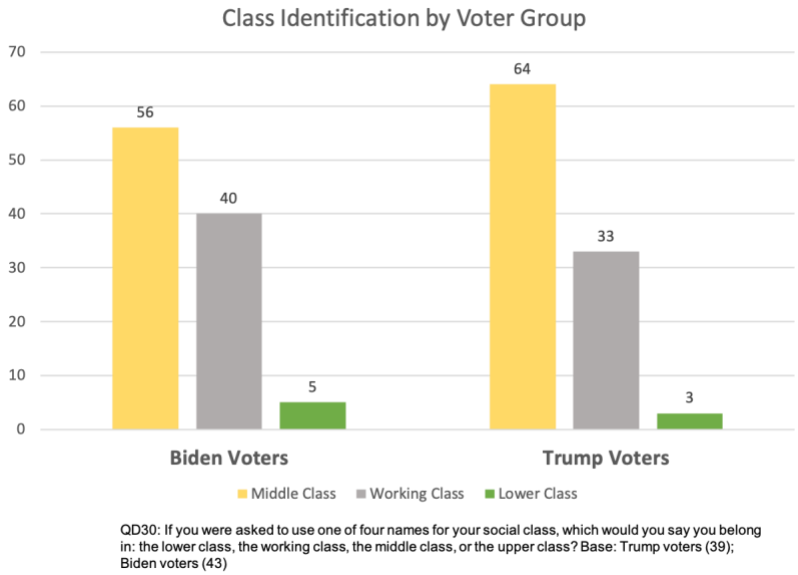
Class and Education

Demographics are the first step of social sorting. Socioeconomic class and education disparities between Trump voters and Biden voters is one of the most common explanations for the rise of Trumpism. Recall that an earlier chapter of this work discussed at length Trump's unusually high numbers among voters without college degrees in 2016, taking the demographic by 39 points compared to the 25 point received by Romney just four years earlier (Tyson & Maniam, 2016). Political scientists such as Cramer, Mason, and Tesler have demonstrated that lower socioeconomic class is correlated with support for Trump, with Cramer (2016) specifically claiming that working and lower class Americans from rural America share a common consciousness of resentment towards the urban liberal elite. The SDVS asked about these key demographics, allowing for a quantitative analysis of a midwestern sample's education and class-based breakdown. While these indicators of identity are essential to understanding the Trump coalition, the SDVS also gave voters an open-ended opportunity to discuss their identities. One of the focuses of the survey was to attain a non-numerical definition of Trump voters, and this question, "In this survey, we are interested in hearing from real people about how they see themselves and the issues that matter to them. To start, how would you describe yourself to someone you had never met before? Please answer in a couple sentences," is integral to this goal.

Figure 1 is a representation of how Biden and Trump self-identified their socioeconomic class[8]. Biden voters were about seven percentage points more likely to identify as working class than Trump voters while Trump voters were about nine percentage points more likely to self-identify as middle class. Of course, this is inconsistent with the image of the blue-collar, agricultural, rural Trump base; however, one has to bear in mind that the traditional Republican

[8] All figures and data presented in this chapter are derived from the Midwestern Swing District Voter Survey responses unless explicitly indicated otherwise. Raw SDVS data is available upon request

Figure 3

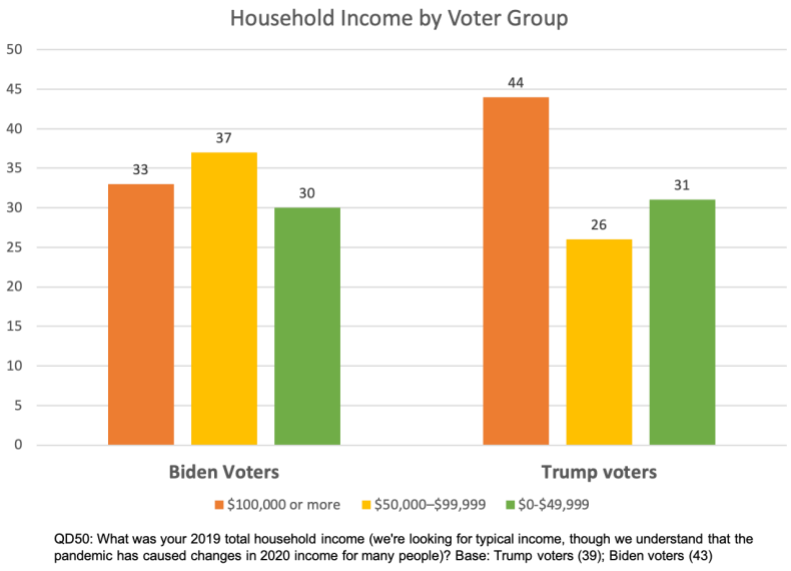


QD30: If you were asked to use one of four names for your social class, which would you say you belong in: the lower class, the working class, the middle class, or the upper class? Base: Trump voters (39); Biden voters (43)

base, while sharing a great deal with the Trump base, represents a great deal of upper-middle class suburbanites who are far less vocal about their support for Trump. All of that said, survey respondents are historically unreliable in their self-assessment of social class. Americans want to believe that they are part of the elusive middle class, and thus a disproportionate number of Americans think of themselves as either middle class or working class. Tellingly, the SDVS question included an option for respondents to select "upper class" but not a single one of the 82 respondents chose to identify as such. To put these numbers in perspective, a *Gallup* longitudinal study that has run since 2008 finds that as many as 58% of Americans typically identify as middle class (Newport, 2016). The SDVS Trump voter sample, therefore, is slightly more likely to identify as Middle class than the national average, though by a small margin with no statistical significance. Perhaps the anti-elitism of Trump rhetoric turns Trump voters away from identifying as upper class and the emphasis on American exceptionalism and the successful Trump economy encourages those on the borderline between working class and middle class to choose the latter. The Biden voters captured by the SDVS were also more likely to identify as middle class than as any other social class but were spread more evenly between middle and working class.

More reliable than self-reported class, however, is household income. Figure 4 shows that the actual (reported) incomes of survey respondents do not necessarily line up with their class identification. Thirty percent of respondents made less than $50,000 per year. Of those, six report making less than $25,000 per year, which, according to a 2018 *Pew* study, certainly qualifies as lower class (Kochhar, 2018). The others, who make between $25,000 and $50,000 per year, may also be considered lower class if there are more than two people in their household. Considering only three total respondents self-identified as lower-class, it is obvious that there is social stigma bias occurring when it comes to self-reporting social class, seeing as at least six and as many as 25 respondents' incomes could qualify as lower class. On the flip side of the scale, 38 percent of respondents reported incomes of $100,000 or more, including 20 percent (16 individuals) of total respondents who reported making over $125,000 per year. In households with one or two members, earners of $100,000 or more are likely to be considered upper class; in households of three or more, earners of $125,000 or more may qualify as upper class. While the CDVS does not ask respondents to report the number of people in their household, it is clear that a non-zero number of respondents qualify as upper class, contrary to their self-reporting.

Figure 4



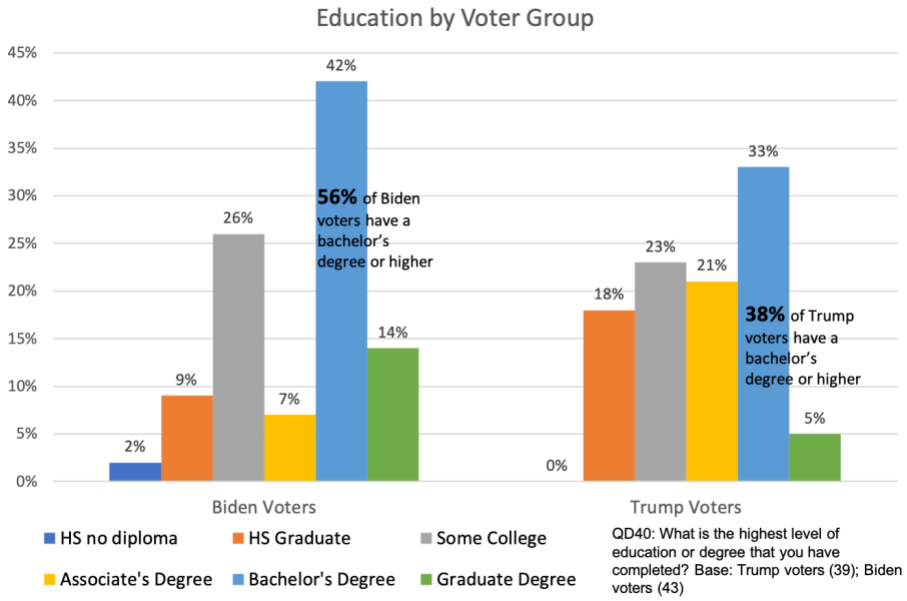
QD50: What was your 2019 total household income (we're looking for typical income, though we understand that the pandemic has caused changes in 2020 income for many people)? Base: Trump voters (39); Biden voters (43)

Figure 4 does more than simply tell us that our respondents have a faulty sense of their social class; it tells us that, financially, there is relatively little financial difference between Trump voters and Biden voters in the SDVS. Yes, there are more Trump voters in the $100,000 and more club by about 11 percentage points and there are more Biden voters making between $50,000 and $99,999 than Trump voters by about 11 points, but the biggest takeaway from this figure is that, in the SDVS, both voter groups have a fairly even distribution of incomes. Trump and Biden voters earn a diverse set of incomes and their social class identity is impacted more by social desirability than by their actual financial situation. This may be an area where the geographic limitations of the SDVS are exposed. This sample pulls from two individual CDs, and it stands to reason that people who live near each other have similar incomes. The SDVS does not allow for analysis of, for example, rural versus urban incomes or average incomes in Trump versus Biden CDs. In fact, in 2017, Republican CDs had a median household income of $53,000 compared to $61,000 in Democratic CDs (Muro & Whiton, 2019). However, when analyzing the intra-district identity-based difference between the SDVS voter groups, income seems to play a relatively minor role.

Education is another indicator of social class, and perhaps a more objective indicator than household finances or socioeconomic class. Cramer's (2016) rural consciousness is motivated, in large part, by resentment of universities and people with university educations. Cramer finds that universities, especially state universities supported by taxpayer dollars, hold a "symbolic place" in rural perception of power and decision making (34). These are the institutions in which future leaders are indoctrinated with the elite attitudes that lead to the subversion of rural communities and the preferential treatment given to urban centers. Education is the demographic in the SDVS that reveals the greatest difference between voter groups (Figure 5). Biden voters were more

likely to have a bachelor's degree or higher than Trump voters by 18 percentage points. Trump voters were twice as likely as Biden voters to have no education beyond high school and three times more likely to have earned an associate's degree but not a bachelor's degree. Though the base size of voters with graduate degrees was less than ten, Biden voters were more likely to have advanced degrees than Trump voters. Mirroring the national trend, SDVS respondents who voted for Joe Biden in 2020 were more educated than those who voted for Donald Trump. This pairs well with the Grossman and Hopkins (2016) theory around asymmetric polarization. The Democratic party is host to a wide array of groups each with different issue focuses, so it stands to reason that more educated people would gravitate to a party that prioritizes policy making. Republicans, on the other hand, are not policy oriented and are brought together by affective identity sorting; one of the identities that they sort on is education. In this conceptualization of identity politics, being a part of the "true America" means not attending college, working hard in a blue collar or working class position, and rejecting the elites who fail to comply with these standards as un-American and oppositional.

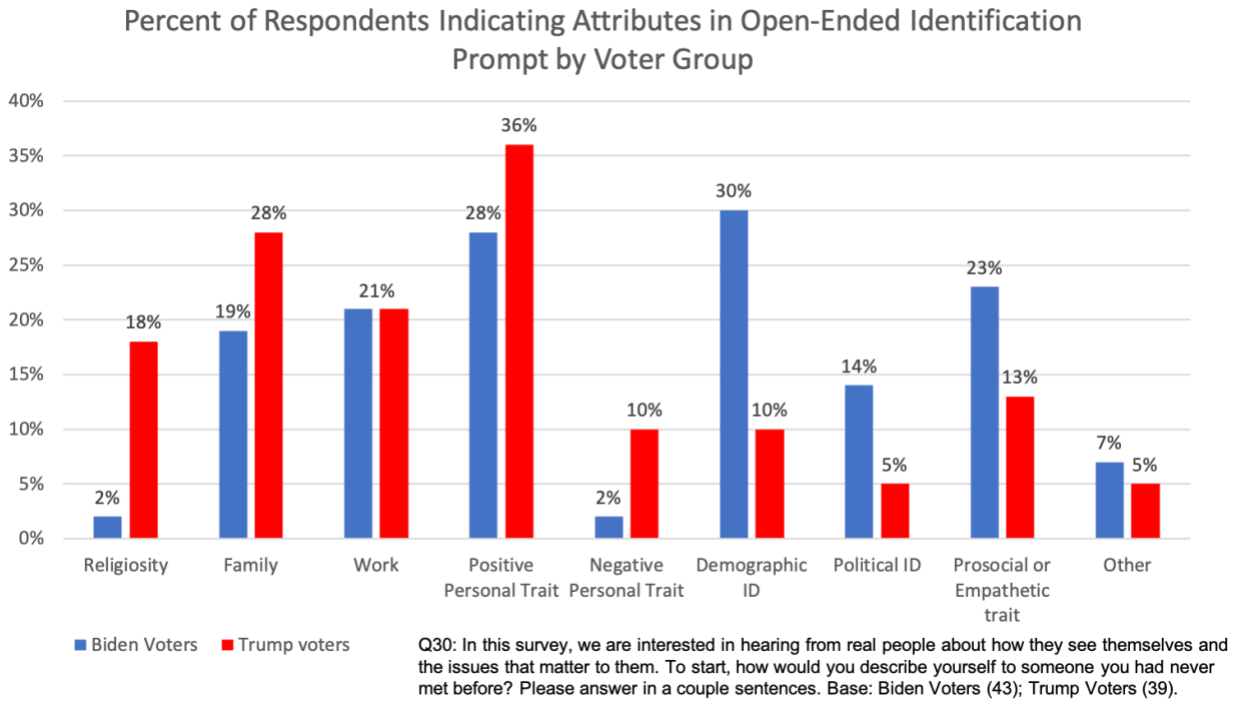
Figure 5



These data leave an unsatisfactory gap between education and income; generally, scholars and political observers have correlated both education and income with social class. A

new study of the 2016 Trump electorate from Carnes and Lupu (2021) has found that, while Trump made gains among the less-educated working class, the "working class" and "uneducated" voters that Trump attracts are high-income compared to the typical working class. Perhaps best demonstrated by the high rates of associate's degrees observed among Trump voters in the SDVS, the working class Trump voter tends to make a better income than the working class Biden voter. The authors write, "Trump support [in 2016] was actually *higher* among affluent people without college degrees than among lower-income people without college degrees . . .Although the "education gap" reached historic levels in 2016, this phenomenon was driven largely by *more affluent* Americans" (Carnes & Lupu, 2021, appendix II, p. 8). I concur with Carnes and Lupu that, considering this and other data around Trump voters, subjective class identity is likely more indicative of voter behavior and political identity than the traditional demographic metrics of social science.

Figure 6



Bearing in mind the undeniable relevance of subjective identity, the SDVS' most important demographic measure may be the open-response identity question. Figure 6 is a quantitative representation of the open-responses, which have been grouped by response type.[9] In order to create this visual, I went through each response and simply counted which of eight attributes respondents noted about themselves. These attributes, religion, family, work, positive personal traits, negative personal traits, demographic identity[10], political identity, and prosocial or empathetic tendency, were selected because they were the most common among respondents. Unsurprisingly, respondents who voted for Trump were far more likely (16 percentage points) than those who voted for Biden to reference their religion in their response, with 18% or nearly a fifth of voters in this group referencing religion. These responses ranged from the curt "Christian," which was one respondent's entire answer, to the more elaborate, "I am a loving and caring mother and wife. I have a strong faith in Christ and this belief impacts my daily outlook and actions. I also am a hard worker and my values are very important to me." Religion is central to the Republican identity; Trump, who has proven himself to not be a particularly religious person, has made a concerted effort during his political career to court the religious right. The respondent quoted above is not unusual in her pride in the shared values of Christianity, it is one of the points of social sorting over which Republican voters have come together. For several who mention Christianity, it is not a point of emphasis, but more of an afterthought, an obvious addition to their identity: "I am an encouraging, garden-loving Christian." Another respondent says, "I am humble, honest to a fault. Religious." They are proud of holding this in-group identity. As a point of contrast, the single Biden voter who mentioned religion wrote "I'm an

[9] The sum of percentages will exceed 100% because multiple attribute mentions were counted for each response
[10] Responses were deemed to include a demographic identity whenever the respondent mentioned their age, gender, sexual orientation, race/ethnicity, or disability status. Religion was intentionally excluded from this category—any mention of religion was grouped in with the religion category.

Irish Catholic lesbian liberal feminist qoman," identifying herself as part of a minority religious group rather than using the term Christian.

Both Trump voters and Biden voters were more likely to identify themselves based on their familial status or relationships than based on their religion, but Trump voters were nine percentage points more likely to do so than Biden voters. Trump voters believe in the preservation of the American family structure and worry that liberalism is a threat to dismantle the family institution (Brewer, 2020). Thus, signaling support for family values and the nuclear family structure is a logical method for indicating identity as a Trump supporter. In this vein, one Trump voter responds, "I'm . . .a father, husband, son, brother and friend." Two other Trump-voting women write, "I am married with two children and two grandchildren" and "I am a loving and caring mother and wife." Biden voters seem less likely to primarily define themselves based on their family. One woman writes "I am an attorney who is a mom of three;" another man writes "I am a 50 year old white divorced male. I am a father of two girls and a federal employee." Notice how both Biden voters quoted above list a primary identity before they reveal their family status (one mentions her employment status and the other mentions his age and race), whereas all three Trump voters lead with their family identity. Family, while important to all voters, is an emphasized more strongly as an identity by Trump supporters than Biden voters.

Biden voters are more likely than Trump voters to identify themselves based on a demographic trait or their political and ideological leanings than Trump voters. This is likely a reflection of two things: first, Biden voters are more likely to be from minority or marginalized groups than Trump voters. Second, part of the identity of Democratic voters is awareness of privilege and expanded rights for minority groups; voters who understand the role that demographic identity traits play in the American political and justice systems are more likely to

think about their own demographic traits. To the former point, one woman who voted for Trump wrote, “I'm a college junior at the University of Iowa. I'm Indian (Asian) and proud to be.” To the latter point, another woman responded, “I am a liberal, white female who loves to learn, read, play video games and garden.” While “white” is not a point of emphasis, this respondent is signaling that she is “woke” about race by including her racial demographic in her identity even if she is a member of the dominant racial group. Related to this idea of woke culture is the fact that Democrats were 20 percentage points more likely to indicate empathy towards others or prosocial traits that encourage positive social interaction. These responses trended along the lines of, “I would describe myself as non-judgmental and friendly to get along with. I enjoy being around people and getting to know other people.” Another respondent “strives to find ways to give back to those around me.” The Trump mantra of America first has bled into a self-first ideology; just consider that Trumpists refused to wear masks as a symbolic protest despite the scientific evidence that masks protect both the wearer and those around her from COVID-19. Biden voters, on the other hand, seem to have identities built around positive interactions with and lending help to others.

Relatively few voters indicated political leanings in their open response identity answers, but Biden voters were about nine percentage points more likely to do so than Trump respondents. Trump voters whose responses indicated political leanings tended to simply note that they are “conservative.” While a couple of Biden voters did refer to themselves as “liberal,” others used the phrases “activist,” “social justice,” “human rights,” and “healthcare, education, and student loan debt.” Once again, the SDVS respondents prove that the Biden voters and Democrats in general are a diverse group of policy-interested individuals loosely bonded over party

polarization whereas Republicans are, in general far less interested in ideology and party than they are in identity.

While the SDVS is not a perfect reflection of the nation and is bound to have Midwestern influences, the identities of the Trump and Biden voters responding to the survey fall in perfectly with the hypothesized outcome. Trump voters are focused on family values, religion, and identity politics; the Biden voters are focused on ousting Trump, achieving policy change, and virtue signaling woke culture. The next section will explore how the two voter groups feel about each other.

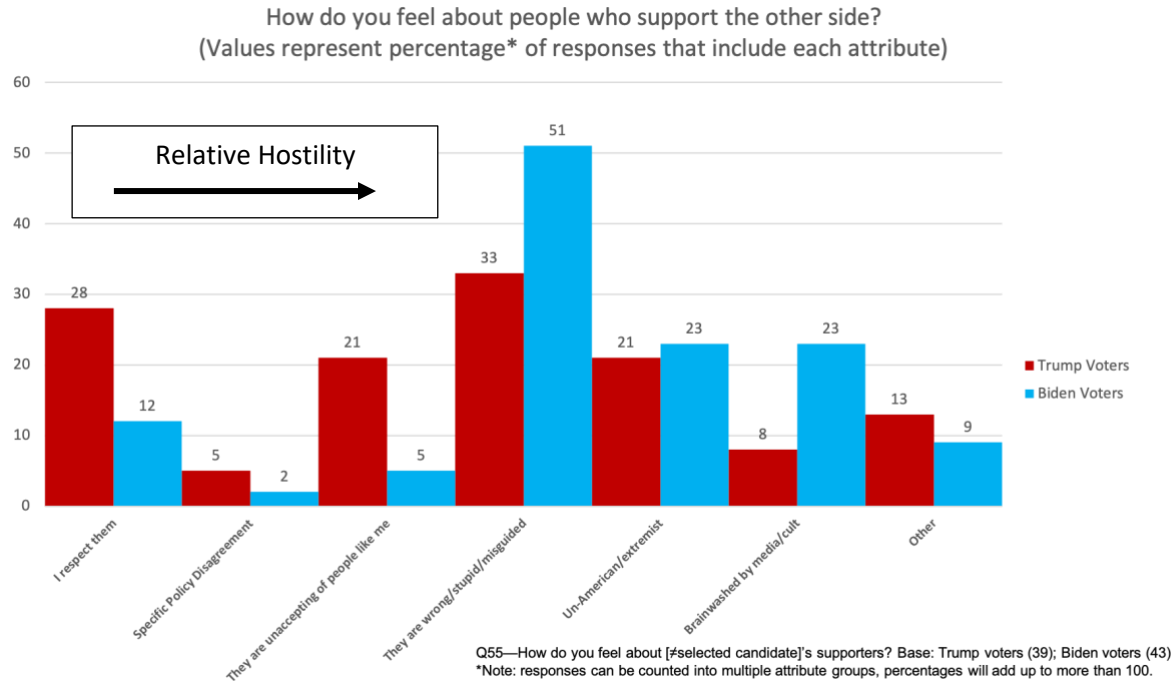
Feelings Toward the Other Side

Another defining marker of Trumpism is the visceral language of polarization that Trump and his supporters have engaged in since mid-2015. From "lock her up" to "own the libs," Trump supporters have made clear their disdain for the other side. Mason (2018) makes clear that the United States is in a moment of intense intraparty unity and interparty hostility. Because of this Trump era polarization around race, class, gender, and immigration, I expected to see quite plainly the ugly side of Trumpism reflected in the open-responses about the other side. My hypothesis was that Trump voters would have much more negative views of Biden voters than Biden voters have of Trump voters. This did not turn out to be the case.

Respondents were asked, "We live in a polarized time in which people have disagreements with each other. How do you feel about [Donald Trump's/Joe Biden's][11] supporters?" I hypothesized that Trump voters would have highly negative views of Biden supporters, referring to them as un-American communists intent on destroying the America they know and love. Similarly, I expected Biden voters to see Trump's supporters as uneducated

[11] Question text piped in the 2016 presidential candidate that the respondent did NOT vote for (e.g. a Biden voter would have been asked about her feelings towards Trump supporters).

Figure 7



racists obsessed with maintaining the social power of white America. While hostility was anticipated from both voter sets, I expected greater negativity from Trump supporters than Biden supporters towards their political opponents. In order to compare the two voter groups responses to each other, I created an attribute scale on which I evaluated each individual response (figure 7). After going through the responses, I identified the six most common feelings expressed towards the opposition. The least hostile beliefs about opposing voters, those expressing respect for the other side, are on the far left of the x-axis. The most hostile, those expressing the belief that voters on the other side are brainwashed cult members, are on the far right of the x-axis. This scale is far from perfect and far from linear, but it should offer a loose visualization of the relative warmth or coolness that Trump and Biden voters feel towards one another.

The data tells a different story than I expected. In this graph, I see that Trump voters were far more likely to attribute the least hostile attributes to Biden voters, with 28 percent of Trump voter's indicating respect for Biden voters while only 12 percent of Biden voters

indicated the same for Trump voters. These responses are along the lines of this example from a white woman from Iowa who voted for Trump: “I am totally okay with them. I don’t think I should classify people based on who they support. Just because someone voted for someone doesn’t mean they agree with everything that person stands for.”

On the flip side, over half of Biden voters called Trump voters wrong, misguided, or stupid, with another 23 percent indicating that Trump voters are either extremist or members of a cult. One respondent wrote, “I feel that the Donald Trump clan is almost like a cult. They follow him blindly with no morality,” calling attention to the groupthink that dictates the behavior of Trump voters. Another Biden voter said, “They live in a Matrix of their own choosing; they have taken a red pill that confirms all their biases and ignores “alternative facts” that refute them. I liken them to someone who has been brainwashed by a cult group.” It might be tempting to look at this graph and these responses and come away with the conclusion that Biden voters have greater hostility towards Trump voters than Trump voters do towards Biden voters, but there may be another story here. Trump voters were nearly four times more likely to feel that their opponents are unaccepting or disrespectful of their views than Biden voters. In the late months of 2020 and the early months of 2021, the Republican party has successful emphasized the opposition of cancel culture in their platform. These responses may suggest that this message and those about Republicans being denied first amendment rights have taken hold with the Trump voter base. Trump voter’s hostility towards Biden voters, therefore, may be being channeled into this avenue, in which Trump voters feel disrespected or silenced by people who they associate with Biden voters. Furthermore, they may be expressing respect for their opponents, as shown above, as a nod to this anti-cancel culture obsession. Take this response, offered by another white female Trump supporter from Iowa, for example: “I respect them and

their beliefs. I would expect the same in return." This quid pro quo formulation suggests that Trump voters are not, in fact, more empathetic towards their opponents than Biden voters, but rather express their hostility differently.

The above being said, the open hostility that I expected to see from this question is most certainly present. One of the following two responses comes from a Trump voter and the other from a Biden voter. They are impossible to distinguish after the candidates' names are removed:

- They are either imbeciles that can't think for themselves or people willfully trying to destroy the country. Not sure which is worse.
- I don't like to generalize, but a majority of Trump supporters refuse to see truth and only listen to what Trump and his allies present them.

Both of these quotes were coded into the "wrong/stupid/misguided" category, and they clearly represent hostility towards the political opposition. Fascinatingly, there is often little difference between the hostile language used by Trump supporters and that used by Biden supporters. Response number one (1) above is a from a Trump supporter while response two (2) is from a Biden supporter, but there is nothing about them (short of Trump's name, which I blacked out), to indicate this. While the polarization of the Trump era is stark, it is not limited to the Trump base. Biden supporters hold similar hostile feelings towards Trump supporters. It is important to note once more that nearly every respondent in this dataset is white, so while there is certainly racially motivated hostility in the current political climate, these responses are devoid of such rhetoric.

Most Important Political Issues

The central quantitative section of the SDVS was a ranked choice question which asked respondents to rate twelve political issues on a scale of one to five, where one represented "not at all important" and five represented "Extremely important." These political issues were not chosen at random. *The Pew Research Center*, in partnership with Ipsos, has conducted a survey called "The American Trends Panel" (ATP) since 2014. The questionnaire, which asks a number of questions about political candidates and voter preferences, also asks about political issues. I chose to mirror the issues that the ATP asks about so that I would have a larger database to compare results to (please see the full SDVS questionnaire text appended). These issues, which are attached in the appendix and are also depicted in figure 8 are national and widely discussed in the political world. As such, I hypothesized that my sample would not deviate largely from national trends, especially once disaggregated by party.

The data, as predicted, do not deviate heavily from the *Pew* findings; however, there are some differences between the two samples that are worth pointing out. The ATP survey found a

Figure 8

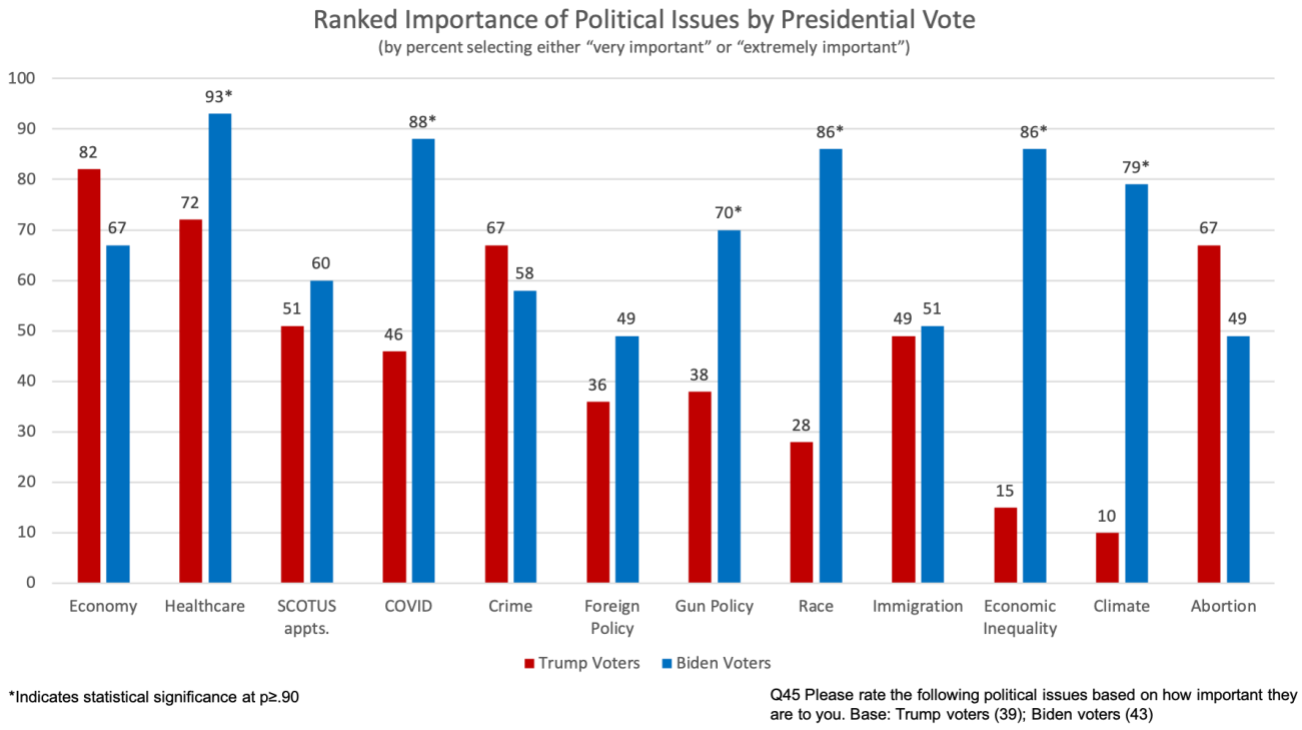
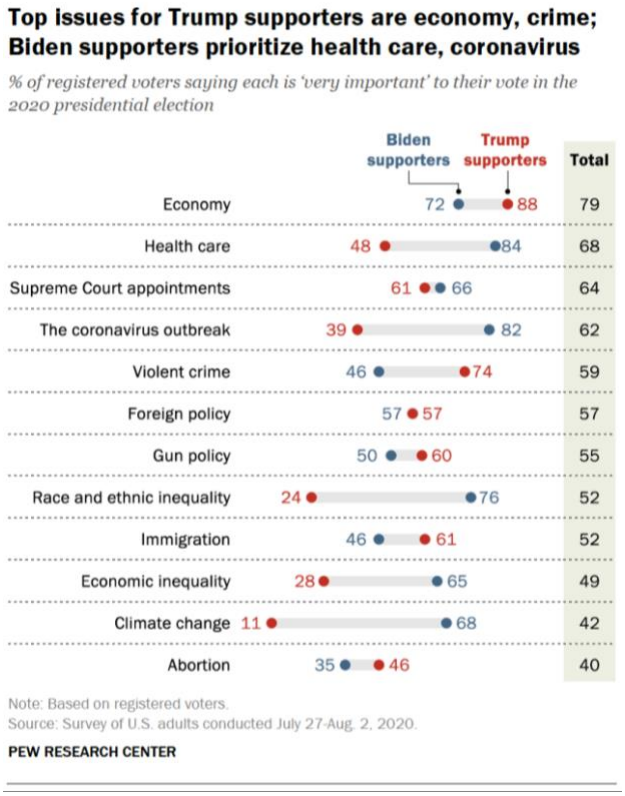


Figure 9



nearly 30 point spread between Democrats and Republicans in how frequently they rated "violent crime" as "very important to their vote in the 2020 presidential election." Respondents to my questionnaire in Iowa and Minnesota, when asked how important "violent crime" is to them, had a much tighter spread, with only nine points separating Trump and Biden voters who rated "violent crime" as either "very important" or "extremely important." The reason for this divergence could be attributed to several possible factors. First, it is possible that the wave of post-election violence in late 2020 and early 2021 that was largely carried out by Trump supporters made Biden supporters more likely to rate violent crime as important. Second, the *Pew* data wave shown here was collected over the summer of 2020, when the protests and rallies in the wake of the George Floyd and Briana Taylor police brutality incident were at their height. It seems likely that the partisan divide over violent crime would have been elevated at a time where police were under scrutiny as aggressors by Democrats and Republicans worried that the Democrats would let the violent mob destroy the country. Lastly, the whiteness of the midwestern sample is again relevant. Support for police and consternation about community violence and criminals have become political dog whistles for race. Drakulich et al. (2020) have found that, for those with high levels of racial resentment, support for police and votes for Trump are correlated. Nationally, Democrats tend to be far less

white than Republicans; however, in this sample, 40 of 43 Biden voters are white. Thus, the relatively high concern with violent crime among Biden voters in the SDVS as compared to the ATP panel may be indicative of lower attentiveness to and concern about racial violence than the average national Biden voter.

There is another discontinuity with the ATP panel on the issue of immigration. The *Pew* panel finds a 15 point difference between Biden voters and Trump voters on the importance of immigration, with Trump voters being significantly more likely to describe immigration as important than Biden voters. In the survey of Iowans and Minnesotans, there was a two percentage point difference in the opposite direction. Because these questions are not phrased with partisan tilt, these data do not display relative polarization around an issue. Trump voters are likely responding to "immigration" with negative images and headlines of Latinx immigrants crossing the border illegally. Biden voters, on the other hand, likely consider immigration reform when rating the importance of the political issue. What I know is that, in this survey data, when compared to the ATP, Republican voters found immigration to be relatively less important and/or Democrats found immigration to be relatively more important. One explanation for this may be the highly public debate around immigration; Democrats in recent years have come out strongly in favor of humanitarian immigration enforcement, making it an issue Democratic voters care more about.

While these deviations from a relatively normative data set provide some insight into the individuality of my sample, there are lessons to be learned from those trends that reflect the national data as well. I found statistically significant difference between voter groups in the relative importance of healthcare, the COVID-19 pandemic, gun policy, economic inequality, and climate. In general, these numbers do not indicate partisanship or the position that a

respondent takes on the issue, but rather they represent how much an individual cares about them. With the possible exceptions of the COVID-19[12] pandemic or economic inequality, these issue are not presented with partisan tilt. In other words, when responding, a pro-life activist and a pro-choice activist would both rate "abortion" as highly important. Thus, these results do not suggest strong policy-based polarization between voter groups, but rather reflect the asymmetric polarization that pervades the American political system.

The Democratic party, which is an amalgamation of policy-oriented activist groups, issue-driven voters, and ideological liberals. The party has refused to adopt a unifying ideology and has instead focused on technical, policy-oriented leadership as a strategy for courting voters from various groups (Grossman & Hopkins, 2016, pp. 100-102). On the other hand, the Republican party is made up of three distinct groups: egalitarian fundamentalists and social conservatives, libertarians and neoliberal budget hawks, and national security-obsessed America-first patriots. This "three-legged" stool is united by the Republican party under the umbrella ideology of conservatism. Because these groups have such vastly different policy goals, the Republican party is far less policy oriented and far more identity-oriented than their Democratic counterparts (Grossman & Hopkins, 2016). Thus, the disparity in the self-evaluated importance of key issues between voter groups can be, in part, attributed to the tendency for Democratic voters (in this case, Biden voters) to care far more about policy than Republican (Trump) voters, who are more interested in identity. Trump voters are, perhaps, the most strongly culturally polarized voter group in American history, while the resistance, the anti-Trump Democratic coalition, rallies around policy. While the goal of this project is to understand what motivated

[12] While science leaves little room for debate about the vital importance of the COVID-19 pandemic, in the early months of the crisis and throughout, Republicans and Donald Trump minimized the seriousness of the virus and politicized the response to it. Thus, seeing COVID as an important or unimportant issue is likely reflective of partisan identity.

support for the untraditional candidate Trump, it is important to remember throughout this chapter that the strongest predictor of a Trump vote was membership in the Republican party. The majority of his voters would have voted for anyone with an (R) next to their name on the ballot. This question, therefore, is why traditional Republicans so easily came over to the Trump brand and how he inspired enough turnout among unlikely voters to win an election.

Affective Loyalty to Candidate

Throughout Donald Trump's presidency, his approval rating stayed remarkably constant, tending to fluctuate up or down 5 percentage points from an average of 41 percent approval (*Gallup*[13], 2021). Trump boasted an intraparty approval rating that, typically, ranged from the high 80s into the low 90s (*Gallup*, 2021). In the first months of his presidency, Joe Biden has averaged 56% approval, including 94% intraparty approval. Trump and Biden voters in Minnesota and Iowa were also asked a Trump approval question. Of course, the SDVS was conducted in the weeks and months following the end of Donald Trump's tenure as president, so this is a feel about Trump's job performance in the wake of the election, these results may very well be obfuscated by the insurgence at the capitol and some of the other lame duck happenstances of the Trump presidency. Questionnaire respondents did not evaluate Donald Trump's job particularly different than the national *Gallup* survey, though the 82 percent approval among Trump voters indicated by figure 8 is slightly lower than

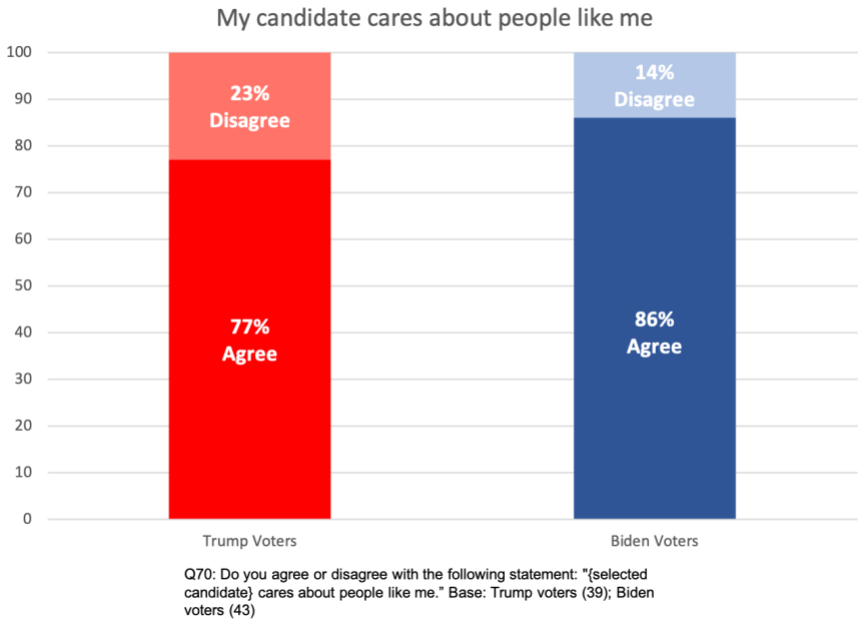
Figure 10

Trump Presidential Job Approval	Trump Voters n=39		Biden Voters n=43	
Strongly Approve	33%	82%	0%	5%
Somewhat Approve	49%		5%	
Somewhat Disapprove	10%	13%	12%	91%
Strongly Disapprove	3%		79%	
Neither Approve nor Disapprove	5%		5%	

[13] These numbers come from an archive of *Gallup*'s weekly approval polls, which are conducted entirely via telephone. While individual *Gallup* polls have a slightly higher margin of error than larger polls, the frequency of their interviews make *Gallup* presidential approval polls a good tool for tracking approval over time.

Trump's average intraparty approval during his time in office. That said, the overwhelming majority of responding Trump voters continue to approve of Trump's administration despite the relatively disastrous final year and months of his term, which saw a devastating pandemic and a Trump-supported armed attack on the United States government.

Figure 11



While these numbers seem to confirm that Trump's voters are remarkably loyal and that his opponents are put off by his antics, approval rating alone does not give us a complete sense of how voters view their candidate. Hoping to get at a more affective, identity based assessment of how Trump and Biden voters viewed their candidate, I asked respondents two questions, one qualitative and one quantitative. First, they were asked "Why did you vote for your candidate," and asked to respond in open-response format. Then, they were asked "Do you agree or disagree with the following statement: [my candidate] cares about people like me?" For this question, they were given a 5-point agree-disagree scale on which to respond.

While the difference between Trump and Biden voters' assessment of their candidates' attitude towards them is not statistically significant, these data do suggest that nearly one out of five Trump voters (which, if generalized out to the electorate as a whole, represents about 15 million people) do not believe that Donald Trump cares about them. It is tempting, then, to

ascribe policy motivation to these voters, to believe that they reason they voted for someone who cared so little about them was because he stood for an ideology or style of governance that they believed in. However, American voters are generally not ideologically focused or policy-driven, lining up far more predictably on social issues and geographic, demographic, and religious identity (Mason, 2018). In fact, only four Trump-voting respondents named a specific policy concern when explaining their vote for Trump, all four of whom expressed concern about abortion policy. It is fair to guess, therefore, that this 20 percent of Trump voters who disapprove of Trump's job performance but remain loyal at the ballot box are members of social groups that identify with the Republican party, voting out of loyalty to their team more so than loyalty to the candidate.

This type of voter is typical within the American political system and is in stark contrast to the populist-like loyalty observed in much of the Trump base. One unenthused Trump voter wrote "I tend toward more Republican beliefs although [I] wasn't overly happy with the choice available." This is the perfect snapshot of the Republican voter who is not particularly motivated by policy or ideology but is a Republican by identity and voted for Trump to help the team win. Contrast this response with an enthusiastic Trump voter: "He is actually trying to do good things for the country." Another voter who better embodies the Trump persona wrote,

> Joe Biden is senile . . .However, even thought that is one heck of a reason not to vote for Biden, I wanted Donald Trump to continue his work on making AMERICA GREAT and AMERICAN CITIZENS FIRST. Joe Biden's mental condition makes me sad but it is TRUE!

Of course, Trump voters are a diverse set of Americans, and here it is clear that there is a significant difference between reluctant Trump voters and those who fully embraced Trump's

message and movement. That being said, even these most enthusiastic Trump voters still tend not to zero in on policy issues when speaking about the reason for their support of Trump. They do not respond, for example, "I am excited by Donald Trump's protectionist trade agenda because I am concerned by globalization" or "Donald Trump will push a restrictive immigration policy and I am worried about the erosion of American culture." Trump voters are motivated by identity.

Biden voters are situated differently, though there remain stark similarities. Similar to Trump voters, only five respondents named specific policy motivations for support of Donald Trump. The majority of these responses indicated concern for women's rights, minority group rights, and access to reproductive healthcare (abortion rights). Recall that abortion was also the most common policy issue brought up by Trump voters. Further, Biden was rated similar by his supporters when it comes to their evaluation of how their candidate feels about them, scoring a mere nine percentage points higher than Trump. One remarkable difference between the two voter groups is the frequency with which they mentioned the opposing candidate when justifying their vote. Of the 39 Trump voters surveyed, a mere seven respondents, or 18 percent, referenced Joe Biden when asked to explain why they voted for Donald Trump. On the other hand, 27 Biden voters (64 percent) said that they were at least somewhat motivated by voting against Donald Trump. Clearly, Biden voters were heavily motivated by disdain for Trump and Trump voters. While this is a different source of motivation than what Trump voters felt, it still represents identity-motivated voter behavior. In their self-reporting, Biden voters do not emphasize policy or ideology, but the identity of the opposition. Voters coming together to vote against a common opponent, while an entirely different process than the social sorting of Trumpism, is also an identity-based movement. There could and maybe should be concern among Democrats about what this means for their alliance that beat Trump, for in the absence of a common enemy and

the identity of the resistance, there is even less holding together the Democratic coalition. From Mason's (2018) perspective, Democratic diversity is positive and reduces social sorting. People sharing ideology with those who look different than them is good for American society. On the other hand, the social identity movement of Trumpism is explicitly socially sorted, bad for society, and generates negative social capital (Mason, 2018; Putnam, 2000). So, while these trends reveal identity politics among voter motivations from both sides of the 2020 election, it remains valid to worry more about Trumpian identity politics than about Biden and Democratic identity politics.

Discussion

The SDVS reveals a lot about both Trumpism and the opposition to Trumpism that defined the 2020 presidential election. Financially, Trump voters and Biden voters are relatively similar (when one controls for geography, as sampling by CD does); both Trump and Biden voters prefer to identify themselves as middle class, wanting to avoid both the stigma of poverty and the superiority of wealth. When it comes to reported annual household income, Trump voters tended to have higher incomes than Biden voters, but by a bare margin. Generally, there was little fiscal difference between Trump and Biden voters. While at first blush this seems surprising considering that many rural Trump voters are proud of being blue collar or working class, the significant number of affluent suburban Republicans who have long been a part of the religious right drive up the Republican fiscal figures. Neither group revealed particularly strong feelings about fiscal identity in the open response section.

Education is a different story. Cramer's (2016) theory of rural resentment suggests that Republicans from rural America take pride in not having college educations. They are put off by elitism, and no greater indicator of liberal elitism exists than the institution of higher education.

This hypothesis was generally supported by the data. While the two voter groups were relatively close when it came to those with only high school or less than high school educations, 56 percent of Biden voters compared to 38 percent of Trump voters had bachelor's degrees or higher. Put differently, Biden voters were 47 percent more likely to have bachelor's degrees than Trump voters. This disparity in education is representative of the asymmetric structures of the two parties and two voter bases; Democrats come from diverse backgrounds and have myriad specific policy demands while lining up on a few loose, cross-cutting identity traits. While both sides seek to win above all else, Republicans are not polarized on policy; they are sorted on social identity issues, including education.

Trump voters are known for rallying around these common social traits in order to form their in-group identity. Mason (2018) details the sorting of the American political system, and when Trump voters responding to the SDVS were asked to define their identity in their own words, they resolutely supported this hypothesis. Trump voters were more likely to point to religious and family values while Biden voters were more likely to identify themselves based on their political identity or their age, gender, race, or sexual orientation. The open-ended responses further emphasized that Trump voters are socially sorted and share a much more consistent group identity than Biden voters. Biden voters emphasize bonds with those who are different, demonstrating or perhaps performing "woke culture," the emphasis on understanding privilege and discrimination that has merged with the Democratic identity in the era of Trump. This trend flowed through when voters were asked to rank a dozen political issues on an importance scale. Trump voters were generally less likely than Biden voters to rate issues highly, with Trump voters rating only three issues higher than Biden voters: economy, violent crime, and abortion. Democratic policy focus was on display again, with Biden voters rating healthcare, COVID, gun

policy, race relations, economic inequality, and climate significantly higher than Trump voters. At risk of overstating the point, the Democratic party and Joe Biden emphasize policy whereas Donald Trump and Republicans do not.

Next, the SDVS reveals interparty polarization within American politics. This came as little surprise; dozens of political scientist have written about the growing rift in America, many of whom are cited in this project. I expected to see strong evidence of Trump voters expressing strong disdain for their political opponents and strong loyalty to their leader (Trump). Trump voting respondents did not disappoint. They see Biden voters as disrespectful, anti-American, fooled by the media, and brainwashed. They failed to consistently mention policy disagreements, preferring to voice their disdain for the identity of Biden voters rather than their beliefs. They indicated their frustration with "cancel culture" and the rejection of conservative ideology. In short, they played the role of the Trump voter quite well. However, Biden voters from the SDVS were surprisingly hostile, much more hostile than anticipated. Over half of Biden voters believe Trump voters to be either wrong, stupid, or misguided. Another 23 percent believe them to be brainwashed by the media. Biden voters were less than half as likely as Trump voters to indicate respect for the other side. Shockingly, Biden voters measured higher on the crude SDCS hostility scale than Trump voters, proving the polarizing effect of Trumpism is not limited to his supporters. The resistance has built an identity around political hatred for Trump supporters; as Mason's political gamesmanship heats up, Trump voters seek to "own the libs" as the resistance rallies against the injustices of Trumpism.

These motivated voters show extremely high affective loyalty to their candidates. I expected Trump voters maintain their loyalty to Trump, both because of their unwavering support throughout the Trump presidency and their unflinching willingness to take signals from

him. The relationship between Donald Trump and his voters is undeniably indicative of authoritarian populism. As expected, Trump respondents are incredibly loyal. Even after his electoral loss and the stunning insurrection at the capitol, 82 percent of SDVS Trump voters approved of Trump's performance as president. Further, 77% of Trump voters believe that Trump cares about people like them. Biden rated even higher on this scale, scoring 86 percent. When asked why they chose to vote for their candidate, a large number of Trump voters echoed typical Trumpian America first, Make America Great Again taglines, while a smaller number indicated distaste with Trump that was outweighed by Republican party loyalty. Biden voters, on the other hand, were remarkably likely to mention Donald Trump when explaining their vote for Biden. The presence of negative partisanship and the politics of competition cannot be overstated when it comes to the 2020 election.

Limitations

I want to be transparent about some limitations of this research. The era of Trump has been marked by a viciously fast-moving news cycle, stressful headlines, political drama, and unprecedented conflict. To make matters worse, the global pandemic wreaked havoc on Americans' finances, social lives, and health, rendering the American future more uncertain than ever before. Both because of the Trump administration and for reasons outside of its control, the last five years have been some of the most difficult and emotional in recent memory. For this reason, there are some factors that, if not properly considered, could confound the findings of this work. First, the 2020 election was anything but routine. Because of the way the then-president challenged the results of the election, the electoral process itself, rather than the results, became, for a time, became the most discussed political issue. For many Americans, the last salient memory they have of the Trump administration was the futile effort to invalidate a free

and fair election. This brings us to yet another compounding factor: the January 6, 2021 armed insurrection against the United States Capitol. This attack, which resulted in one death and could have caused so many more, looms large as the final event of Trump's term and has critically changed how some Americans look on Trumpism. Furthermore, this project, which lends a great deal of thought to the rise of Trump, comes nearly six years after the critical launch of Trumpism. There is no doubt that the movement has undergone significant change in the intervening years, but it is impossible to gauge motivations around Trumpism from the past without interference from the present. Thus, our survey results are best informed by the events that happened in the weeks and months leading up to the period of data collection. Furthermore, there is near-daily evolution to the Trump story and the Trump base. This project has been updated frequently to include the most recent events, but there is no reason to expect the whirlwind of the 2021 political news environment to slow after this paper is published. It will inevitably lack analysis of whatever major event comes next. Lastly, since the beginning of Trump's rise to popularity, political scientists and other academic commentators have claimed that Trump supporters are less likely to be honest in polls, worried about the social undesirability of identifying as a Trump supporter. This research is imperfect, but it can give us significant insight into the mind of American voters.

Chapter 4

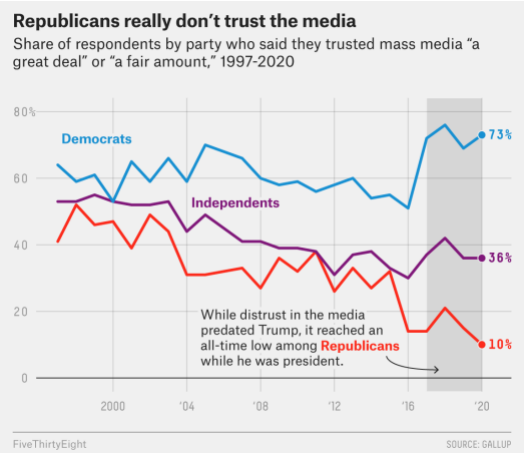
Right Wing Media and Misinformation Among the Trump base

Donald Trump capitalized on demographic trends and highly polarized social identities in order to build a fiercely loyal base. Understanding his ability to manipulate his followers, Trump and his administration took on a dangerous campaign to politicize the media, journalism, and truth. During the Trump presidency, reporters were thrown out of the briefing room (Abbruzzese & Romero, 2018), the president called the press the "enemy of the people" (Simon, 2018), and journalists had reason to fear for their safety. One of Trump's favorite ways to delegitimize the media is the phrase "fake news." No one described what the term means to the former president better than he himself in a 2018 tweet:

> The Fake News is working overtime. Just reported that, despite the tremendous success we are having with the economy & all things else, 91% of the Network News about me is negative (Fake). Why do we work so hard in working with the media when it is corrupt? Take away credentials?

To Trump, any news that is in the slightest way negative is fake. Or, even if he does not truly think that the news is false, he has learned that calling a story or an outlet "fake news" is an effective way to stop his supporters from believing it. The intense loyalty of his followers has led them to unreservedly hate the mainstream media, labeling it the propaganda arm of the left. Trump's messaging has been enthusiastically picked up by right wing media hosts, who relish in attacking center-left media while shamelessly airing conspiracy theories and misinformation (Blake,

Figure 12



2021). GOP voter distrust in media has been on the rise since the late 20th century, but when Trump came roaring on to the political stage, Republicans reached an all-time low in trust in media (Figure 12, Conroy, 2021). Trumpism, which is steeped in shared social identity, has adopted mistrust and disapproval of media into amalgamation of beliefs shard amongst Trump voters (Conroy, 2021). At the same time, media hosts have adopted the identity and rhetoric of Trumpism, maximizing ratings by engaging in the America first, xenophobic language of the Trump base. Chapter three discussed the hostility felt between voter groups; this chapter will look at the role that media plays in exacerbating the Trump base's distrust and dislike of those who are not part of their movement.

This chapter will look at the Midwestern Swing District Voter Survey (SDVS) data around media and misinformation, suggesting that Trump voters' readiness to believe Trump and rally behind him on nearly any issue represents a threat to American democracy and indicates that Trumpism's longevity may continue to outlast his tenure in office.

Media and Fake News

One of the defining characteristics of the Trump movement and the Trump administration was and is misinformation and disinformation. Misinformation, which is untruths spread by people who believe that what they are saying, sharing, or promoting is true, and disinformation, which is the intentional dissemination of lies or partial truths, have furthered the divide between American political parties, making truth a highly politicized issue. Media plays an important role in this phenomenon. First, there are the conservative media corporations who *actually* spread misinformation and disinformation. In the waning months of the Trump administration, this "real" fake news was centered around two key issues: the COVID-19 pandemic and the 2020 presidential election. News networks like Fox News (especially the late-night hosts like Sean

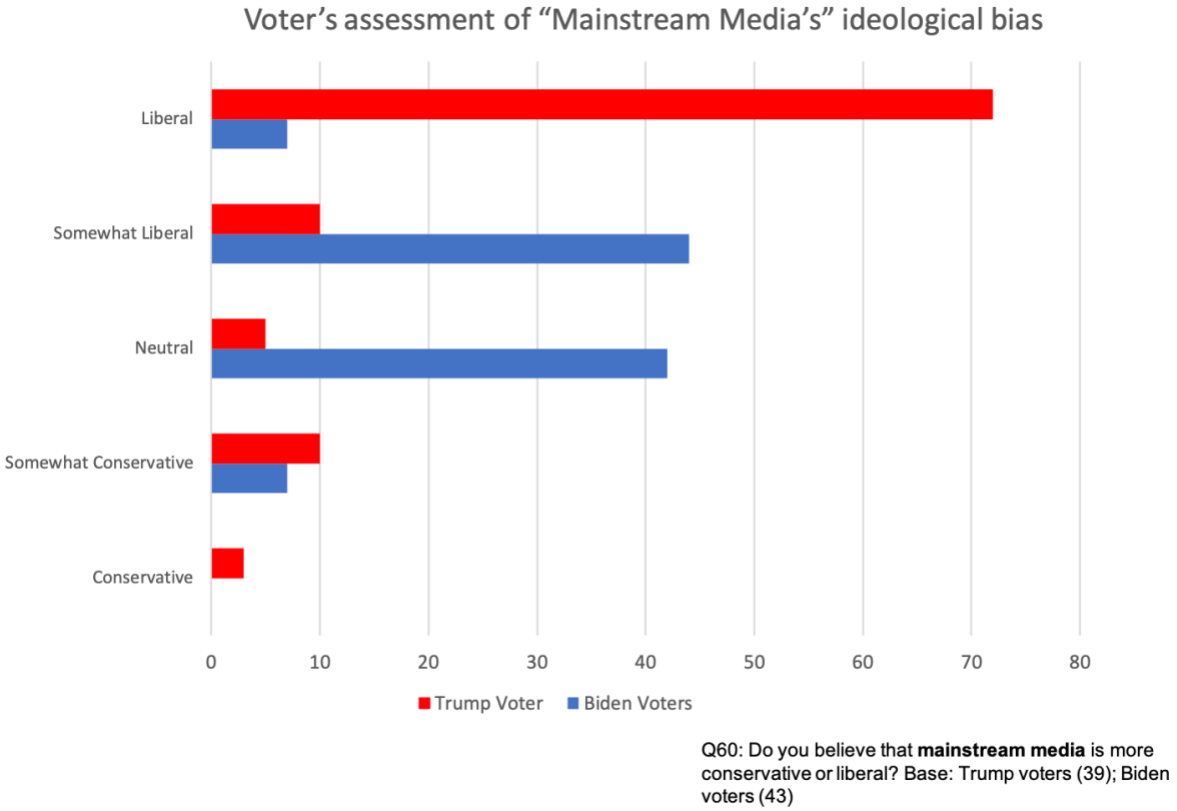
Hannity and Tucker Carlson, who more closely represent political talking heads than journalists), One America News Network (OANN), and NewsMax were responsible for spreading and elevating Trump's lies about the coronavirus and the election results (Garber, 2020). The lies about the pandemic have likely resulted in increased loss of life as those who believed them spurned critical health and safety measures such as mask wearing and physical distancing. The lies about the election resulted in widespread distrust of the American presidential electoral process and, eventually, violence and loss of life at the capitol on January 6, 2021.

Misinformation and "fake news" have also been adopted as rallying cries of the right, who claim that media outlets like *CNN, The New York Times,* and the *Washington Post* are peddlers of false narratives of the left and refuse to publish the "real" version of the story. Trump has encouraged his supporters to believe that these institutions push anti-Trump and left-wing propaganda, and this was evident among Trump supporters in the SDVS. One survey respondent wrote that Biden supporters have been "Duped. Swallowed hook, line, and sinker . . .the so-called national news media spitting out negative propaganda about Trump even months before he was elected in 2016 all the way through [the] 2020 election and is STILL doing the same thing." This voter, who is obviously concerned with the perceived fake news of the left, was himself persuaded by disinformation from Trump, Fox News, and other sources of alt-right media. He continues his comment: "I wonder now if [Biden voters] know that VP Kamala Harris is actually the one making decisions, not poor old senile Joe. Prop him up, give him a pen or his medicine so he can function a bit. Never seen this in my lifetime. Maybe Eisenhower after his strokes when VP Nixon took over." Here, he expresses belief in multiple conspiracy theories as well as frustration that the other side does not see the truth behind these conspiracy theories. Distrust in

reputable media sources among Trump voters seems to push them to fringe right-wing outlets, where conspiracy theories fester and proliferate.

In order to gauge how typical voters view the media, survey respondents were asked to indicate where they felt the "mainstream media" fell on a five-point ideological scale that ranged from liberal to conservative. Figure 13 reflects the results. A whopping 72 percent of Trump voters believe that mainstream media is liberal, a number that edges up to 82 percent when those

Figure 13

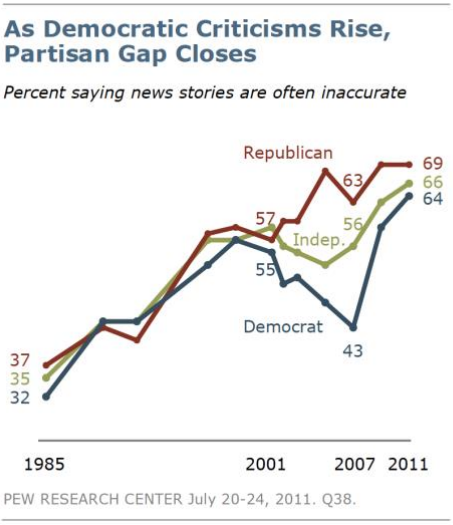


Q60: Do you believe that **mainstream media** is more conservative or liberal? Base: Trump voters (39); Biden voters (43)

who rated media "somewhat liberal" are included. Only five percent of Trump voters view mainstream media as a neutral source of information. In comparison, nearly half of Biden voters viewed media as neutral, with the majority of the remainder rating mainstream media "somewhat liberal." While there seems to be a consensus about the direction of media's tilt, Trump voters believe media to be more extremely aligned on the left while Biden voters perceive a much more subtle lean. By associating the established media with the opposing side (recall Mason, 2018)

and the gamesmanship that voters perceive in partisan politics), Trump voters are expressing a form of anti-elitism. If mainstream media is seen as a propaganda machine of the left and the political left is an anti-American group standing in the way of the "real" American people's agenda, then the distrust of mainstream media among Trump voters can be construed as a populist expression of elite hatred and the rejection of experts and facts. Of course, the perceived ideology of mainstream media is not a direct measure of populist resentment towards Democrats, Biden voters, or elites, but it presents a stark contrast between voter groups. If an opposite or reactive sentiment existed among Biden's voters, one would expect to see Biden voters reporting an extreme conservative bias among the media; thus, this one area where there is stark contrast between Trump voters and Biden voters.

Figure 14



While the difference between Trump and Biden voters shown here is stark, it may be best explained as yet another long-term trend among Republicans than a consequence of Trumpism. An Obama-era *Pew Research Center* study found that 76 percent of Republicans compared to 54 percent of Democrats viewed news organizations as politically biased (2011). The same report found that the trend of growing distrust in media and perceptions of media bias has been relatively steady since about 1985. Unlike my findings, however, the *Pew* study found that the gap between perceived media bias between Democrats and Republicans was narrowing over time (Figure 14). This data is nearly ten years old, and newer data suggests that the trend of rising Democratic distrust in media faltered as Trumpism and Trump-obedient Republicans aligned themselves against journalism, truth, and

science, making the press and news industry into a political issue. Another, more recent *Pew* study finds that 91 percent of Republicans compared to 69 percent of Democrats "think news coverage favors one side" (Walker & Gottfried, 2020). Perhaps Republicans were so willing to embrace Trump's anti-news media messaging because their frustration and distrust of the news media was so high already. When they found a candidate who was willing to express that frustration, they lined up behind him. One survey respondent wrote that they voted for Trump because "he wasn't afraid to tell the truth to the American people," whereas the rest of the elite system, the politicians, the journalists, the scientists, have left Trump supporters behind.

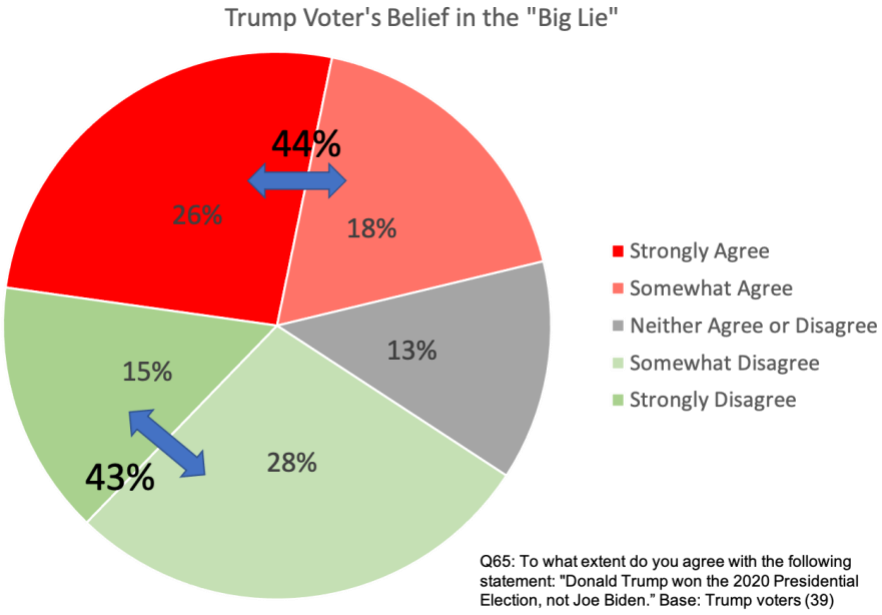
The Big Lie

Just as central to Trumpism as distrust in traditional media is the subscription to misinformation and conspiracy theory. While Trump told the American people and his supporters a plethora of lies during his tenure as president (The *Washington Post* tallied the total number of Trump lies as president at 30,573, see their massive database of Trump lies here), one of his most consequential lies was what is now known as "the big lie," the insistence that the 2020 presidential election was rigged, that Donald Trump was the true winner, and that Joe Biden is an illegitimate president elevated to the position by conspiracy and fraud. This belief has been picked up by other Republican politicians at the local, state, and national levels along with a large portion of Trump's voter base. In February of 2021, 76 percent of Republicans believed that there had been widespread voter fraud in the election (Malloy & Schwartz, 2021). In order to measure the extent to which survey respondents were tuned into the "big lie," they

were asked “To what extent do you believe the following: "Donald Trump won the 2020 Presidential Election, not Joe Biden."

Now, the aforementioned Quinnipiac poll, the one that found that 76 percent of Republicans believe voter fraud played a role in the 2020 election, does not ask respondents whether they believe that the election as stolen or wrongly decided. On the contrary, my survey asks for respondents to rate their agreement with a more extreme version of the lie, so it stands to reason that fewer than 76 percent of Republicans believe that the election was stolen as opposed to simply being riddled with fraud. As figure 15 shows, 44 percent of surveyed Trump voters agree that Donald Trump was the true winner of the 2020 presidential election. In comparison, only 4 percent of Biden voters agreed with the statement, with 91 percent of those voters strongly disagreeing.

Figure 15



These findings represent further evidence that Trump voters are engaged in a brand of anti-democratic populism. Calling elections into question and challenging the legitimacy of a fairly elected government is one of the most common traits of populism (Mounk, 2018). Hoping to better understand why respondents believe the “big lie,” I asked those who agreed or strongly agreed that Donald Trump was the true winner of the 2020 election, “why do you think that so many people believe that Joe Biden won the 2020 election fairly?” Of the 17 Republicans who

were asked this question, only 12 gave substantive an intelligible answers. Of those 12, half blamed the media and media-related brainwashing for the refusal of the establishment to recognize Trump's authentic victory. Here is a sample of the media responses:

1. The media doesn't report the disreputable things democrats did. Also, protected Biden as he hid in his basement and didn't campaign.
2. Because people are brainwashed and believe everything they see on the media
3. A lot of cases have been dismissed and hardly any news coverage of fraud

Notice how "the media" takes on agency for these voters as if the media itself is the force preventing Trump from taking power. In the second response, there is a clear establishment of an in and out-group mentality; this voter sees "people" or "them" as the enemy who are working against the proper patriotic nation. Those who do not see the world the way the Trump movement sees the world are inherently opposed to Trump and therefore anti-American. Another Trump voter exposes just how susceptible she is to Trump lies when she responds, "because they rigged the election and [Biden] did get the most electoral votes and the most popular vote but there were votes from people who were dead and in prison it wasn't a fair election." In this short answer, she indicates her subscription to three separate Trump conspiracy theories: that the election was rigged, that dead people voted in significant numbers, and that prisoners voted illegally. According to the *Trump Twitter Archive,* Trump tweeted multiple times about all three of these theories between the November 2020 election and the suspension of his Twitter account in early January. The obedience of Trump's followers is startling, suggesting a devotion to the leader of the movement that cannot be explained by party loyalty, identity sorting, or other common American explanations for voter behavior. The SDVS Biden voters who compared Trump's base to a cult may not have been particularly far off.

Conclusion

The SDVS examined the ability of Trump and right-wing media to feed misinformation and disinformation into the minds of voters. In the late Trump presidency, two focal areas of misinformation loom above the rest: the seriousness of the pandemic and "the big lie," the insistence that Donald Trump only lost the 2020 election because of cheating, illegal voting, and a rigged system. His lies are consequential. Trump supporters around the country have minimized the pandemic, refused to wear masks, and are now refusing vaccination. Because of the effectiveness of this lie, I expected the "big lie" to be fairly popular among Trump voters. The SDVS found that a plurality (44 percent) of Trump voters either somewhat or strongly agree that "Donald Trump won the 2020 election," a statement that is simply not true. As a reminder, these data were collected over six weeks after the insurrection at the capitol and over four weeks after Trump left office. The incredible loyalty of the Trump base is on display: they will insist that a lie is fact if their leader tells them to. This phenomenon is aided by Trump's and his supporters' campaign to delegitimize the media. Over 80 percent of Trump voters believe that the "mainstream media" is liberally biased, often blaming the media in open response answers for the perceived stupidity of Biden voters. When it comes to media, there is little to say about Biden voters. They watch the news and believe the facts. They are aware that Joe Biden won the election and that the pandemic is real. This is a story about the intense identity-linked loyalty of Trump voters that drives them to believe blatant lies, reject truth from journalistic sources, and label any dissenters as un-American. Taking signals from their leader, they reject the reporting of center and center-left institutions and instead believe the Trumpist spins fed to them by the right wing media conglomerate. The power of Trump to delegitimize media is perhaps best exemplified by his post-election attacks on *Fox News.* Trump sent or retweeted at least 12 tweets

disparaging the network in the days after the election, angry that *Fox News* had called Arizona for Biden earlier than the other networks. After the tweets, Trump supporters across the country participating inn "Stop the Steal" protests took up the chant "Fox News Sucks," echoing Trump's anger at their once-favorite network (Beckett, 2020). While much about the hostility and motivation of Biden voters in the SDVS was surprising and suggests a deeper shared identity among Biden voters than I expected to find, no finding was as disturbing as the power that Trump and the right wing apparatus wield over Trump voters.

Conclusion

The Future of American Politics in the Context of Trumpism

The months following the 2016 election of Donald Trump were, for many, filled with fear, anger, and uncertainty. People of color, trans people, and people with disabilities had legitimate concerns for their safety. Activists and policy advocates were angered by the impending backwards progress in their field. Immigrants and first generation U.S. citizens worried about their status in America. Some of this anxiety faded as Republicans proved their inability to legislate even with a unified government in Washington, and even more dissipated as the Democrats came sweeping back in the 2018 midterms. However, the anxiety that accompanied the 2016 election results was ignited once more as the greatest international health crisis perhaps of all time gripped the nation. Americans, locked down in their homes, watched in shocked horror as the leader of the free world denied the severity of the virus, attempted to circumvent science, and encouraged his followers to disregard medical advice and guidelines. Then, in late 2020 and early 2021, Trump and his followers demonstrated that even an electoral loss would not slow their movement. Starting on election night when he prematurely declared victory, Donald Trump did everything in his power to question the legitimacy and veracity of the 2020 election results. The Midwestern Swing District Voter Survey analyzed in the preceding chapters showed that even several weeks after the commencement of the Biden administration, a plurality of Trump voters believed that Donald Trump was the true winner of the 2020 election. The culmination of this particular Trump disinformation campaign was, of course, the January 6, 2021 riot at the United States capitol. It has become clear during the Trump era that Trumpism has the potential to cause unrest, make people feel unsafe, and dismantle democracy. What is unclear, however, is what remains of Trumpism in the wake of the 45th president's departure

from office. Will he run again? Where will Trumpism go if Trump is not around? How will the Trumpian identity proceed in the months and years following the Trump administration? How have Democrats reacted and how should they continue to react to Trumpism in years and elections to come?

One of the central findings of this project and the body of political science research built around the Trump movement is that the trends that gave us Trumpism have been in motion much longer than Donald Trump has been involved in politics. Since before he published *Bowling Aone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* in 2000, Robert Putnam has been warning about the decline of social capital in the United States. Bridging relationships that used to exist by way of small town social groups, card games, and bowling leagues have fallen by the wayside, replaced by bonding relationships made through partisan news media, Facebook groups, and social sorting. Lilliana Mason (2018) adds to this concern, describing growing polarization in America as Republicans and Democrats become socially sorted. The two parties, she finds, have come to resemble rival professional athletic teams, focused only on beating one another and cultivating blindly loyal followings. Policy has taken a back seat in influencing the choices that voters make choices at the polls; identity and affinity are now the chief motivating factors for American voters. In a study that makes an even stronger argument that these trends predate Trump, Carnes and Lupu (2021) find that, while the white working class has been supporting Republicans at a higher rate over recent election, Donald Trump did not increase white working class support at a fast rate than did Romney or Bush (though McCain did have decreased white working class support in 2008). The great consequence of Donald Trump is not mass movement of white working class Americans to the Republican party, it is the accelerated

evolution of the identity of cultural whiteness that has come to bind together the Republican base.

This unifying social identity, what I referred to in chapter one as the "new identity politics" of Donald Trump, has taken strong hold of the Republican base. In chapter three, I indicate that some 20 to 25 percent of Republican Trump voters likely fall into a category of Trump-hesitant voters, but that leaves a large majority of Republican voters who hold membership in the Trump base. The identity is built around a strong belief in individualism, Christian social values, America First policy, the preservation of white hegemony in America, and the distrust and fear of immigrants and people of color. This identity exists in stark contrast to the evolving Democratic base; liberals have radically embraced "woke culture" and anti-discrimination slogans and rhetoric, including Black Lives Matter, Defund the Police, and #MeToo. Whereas Trumpism has become a culture of exclusiveness, the 2020 Democratic party became the party of radical inclusion. This is not to say that the Democratic party is free from racism or bigotry, but the politics of acceptance has certainly become the emphasis of the party.

The changes that Trump ushered in will not be limited to the scope of his presidency. David Graham, a writer for *The Atlantic*, wrote an April 2021 article entitled "What Ever Happened to Donald Trump? Just months after leaving office, the former president has all but disappeared." In the article, Graham calls attention to the significant drop in attention that Trump has received on social and news media since he left office, calling the former president "[relatively] irrelevant." Comparing him to other former presidents, the author concludes that Trump's power is dwindling, leaving him with little more ability than to sink Republican candidates who break from Trumpism. "The basic problem for Trump," writes Graham, "is that

despite his best and most nefarious efforts, he is no longer president. He just doesn't matter that much now."

Articles and tweets like this, celebrating the departure of Trump from the daily news cycle and his diminished influence over American politics, have become relatively common in the days since the Biden inauguration and the Trump twitter ban. However, this argument misses something about the strength and endurance of the *identity* behind the success of Trumpism. Yes, public interest in Donald Trump has dropped and the former president has a greatly diminished public platform, but his relevance and the consequence of his influence on American politics is just as salient as it was the day he left office. Democrats and established ideologically moderate Republicans see Trump's departure as an opportunity for a less extreme, unifying Republican candidate to rise out of the parties disheveled ranks. However, these types of GOP members are leaving the party in droves and the "new new right," (or the "socially conservative right," or the "Trump right," or whatever term we want to use for Trumpian Republicans) are gaining in numbers with every passing election. Specifically, five Republican senators and several prominent Republican congresspeople have announced that they will not be seeking reelection in 2022 (Peoples, 2021). The non-Trump wing of the Republican party is falling apart. Kevin McCarthy, the Republican leader in the House of Representatives, has already strongly signaled his support for Trumpism by endorsing the big lie and publicly feuding with Conference Chair Representative Liz Cheney over her opposition to Trump and resistance to challenging election results. Among the party elites, the Republicanism of even five or six short years ago has been overrun by Trumpism. Yes, Trump is gone (or so it seems), but the politicians who grew and evolved out of his brand of politics are gaining power.

Elites are only part of the story when it comes to the persistence of the Trump base. Trump voters, as both theorists and the SDVS found, tend to hold the populist belief that their movement is the only truly patriotic movement with American interests at heart. Opponents, they insist, are anti-American and corrupted by liberal and media indoctrination. Any attempt to push back against the Trumpians is the work of "cancel culture" and a violation of first amendment rights. One of the most telling findings of the SDVS is that Trump voters continue to believe Trump's misinformation and lies even after his departure. While Trump led the movement for a time, it was not derived from Trump and is fully capable of existing without him. The blind loyalty and groupthink of the loudest and most active Trump supporters will not dwindle, thought it may latch onto a new candidate. For four years they were encouraged speak aloud the racism that existed quietly for decades; little suggests that the electoral defeat has reversed this trend. Even in mid-April of 2021, controversial Representative Marjorie Taylor Greene is planning to start the "America First Caucus[14]" along with fellow conservative members Matt Gaetz, Paul Gosar, Louie Gohmert, and Barry Moore (Diaz et al., 2021; *Punchbowl News*, 2021). A leaked flier about the new group includes a summary of its position on immigration: "History has shown that societal trust and political unity are threatened when foreign citizens are imported *en-masse* into a country . . .the long-term existential future of America . . .being put at unnecessary risk is something our leaders can afford to ignore no longer" (2021). The nativism inherent in this document and the caucus behind it is concerning. The departure of Donald Trump has not signaled the retreat of white supremacy, American exceptionalism, or xenophobia into the shadows of society; rather, it has triggered the rearrangement of the leadership of the

[14] In the days after this story was leaked by *Punchbowl*, Greene walked back her plans to launch the caucus. At the time of this article's publishing, she inn longer planning the launch (Diaz, 2021).

movement to return these ideas to the mainstream. The incorporation of (white) America First rhetoric into the GOP identity represents a permanent effect of Trumpism.

Right-wing media has also shown increasingly high tolerance for nativist rhetoric in the days *after* Donald Trump left office. *Fox News* primetime host Tucker Carlson demonstrated his willingness to publicly express his concern about immigrants of color in a series of monologues in mid-April 2021. Carlson expounded on what is known as the "Great Replacement," a white supremacist theory that, with the support of Jews and other elites in power, immigrant people of color are going to replace white Europeans in society. Here are some recent excerpts from *Tucker Carlson Tonight,* America's most watched news program (Joyella, 2021):

> "The Democratic party is trying to replace the current electorate, the voters now casting ballots, with new people, more obedient voters, from the Third World" (8 April 2021).
>
> "If you're over 40, you may have trouble recognizing your own country; it's just too unfamiliar. . .you cannot inflict relentless social change and expect your society to survive; things will fall apart if you do that . . .they're changing everything . . .a brand new national population" (14 April 2021).
>
> "Middle-class Americans become less powerful every year. They have less economic power. And thanks to mass immigration, they now have less political power" (12 April 2021). (qtd. in Slisco, 2021).

Carlson and those like him are paid, first and foremost, to maximize viewership. It can be reasonably inferred, therefore, that the constantly high ratings of shows like Carlson's or *Hannity* indicate widespread support for the ideas that the right-wing hosts discuss among some sector of the American public. Likewise, the hosts encourage the proliferation of nativism among their viewers. Thus, the relationship between Trumpism and right wing media becomes a self-

escalating echo chamber in which shared right wing beliefs become louder and more extreme as they travel back and forth between like-minded people. If the identity of Trumpism was not enough to guarantee its longevity, the consistent white supremacist and protectionist noise provided by *Fox News* will help to maintain the new status quo of the GOP.

Importantly, while it is true that polarization is the name of the game and that Democrats are also engaged in identity politics, the outcome of the Democratic party's response to Trumpism was a moderate president. Yes, there is a progressive and left wing side to the Democratic party and the party as a whole has moved to the left in recent years, but the party continues to exist as a compromise between center-left and progressive. While Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez dominates the right wing news cycle's stories about Democrats, centrist Senator Joe Manchin wields significantly more power in Washington than his progressive co-partisan from the lower chamber. Democrats represent a base far more diverse than that of Republicans, and, for that reason, are prevented from embracing extreme views or positions of the far left.

That being said, the SDVS turned up some interesting and unexpected finding about Biden voters. Respondents who voted for Biden were far more likely to self-report hostile feelings towards the other side than Trump voters. While this finding certainly calls for deeper investigation, it suggests a profoundness to the Democratic identity that existing theory fails to predict. Everything in the literature and the common understanding of the current political binary signal that Trump voters are hostile populists while Biden voters are policy-oriented and, in some cases, scared. The SDVS may be a preliminary indication that liberal identity is just as established–if not more so–than Trumpism. Alternatively, it may mean that Trump aversion and the alliance built around the 'resistance' was fueled by a resentment greater than that felt by rural Americans for the elite. The SDVS data, as it currently exists, only allows me to speculate as to

the reason for Biden voter hostility towards Trump voters, but it certainly has the potential to change the way political scientists differentiate between the two voter groups. I urge further investigation into this phenomenon.

Partisan Prescriptions and Areas for Further Inquiry

The last five years of political life have been an absolute roller coaster. We went from a relatively moderate though somewhat polarizing president in Barack Obama to a populist outsider who constantly threatened the very core of American democracy for four years, and then back to the near-centrist vice president from the immediately preceding administration. The way the parties respond to this moment in American history is critical to their success in the coming years.

The Republican party is at a difficult crossroads. Donald Trump has a strong grip on fundraising and the attitudes of the right. While he has been de-platformed, he still has the ability to pick up a phone and dial into *Fox and Friends* any time he wishes. Further, the 45th president has yet to rule out another run at the presidency in 2024. It is difficult, at this point, to imagine anyone beating him out in a primary contest. This puts the few Republicans who have distanced themselves from Trump in a complicated position. If the party begins to signal to the Trump base that it wants to move away from Trumpism only to have Trump announce his candidacy, the rift in the party will be driven even deeper than it already is. Because the base still see itself as Trump's base, the party must either decide to take a painful loss as it attempts to realign away from nativism or embrace Trumpism in full. But remember, the Republican base is not aligned on policy, it is aligned on social identity. In the absence of Trump himself, the elites in the party should, theoretically, be able to ostracize Trumpism from the party ranks without losing major support. Social identity is tied to shared social, religious, ethnic, and geographic traits, not a

politician. However, the Republican party has shown no ability to make an organized play at the socially conservative base that is independent of Trump. Thus, he remains the greatest wildcard and most powerful player in Republican electoral politics. Further research into Trump voters feelings toward Republicans who have distanced themselves from Trump would help determine whether voters are likely to accept a moderate Republican candidate–or, for that matter, anyone other than Trump.

The Democrats face a different set of circumstances. They are coming off of two relatively successful election cycles: the 2018 midterms and the 2020 presidential. Both elections were defined by intense dissatisfaction with the status quo. Massive grassroots organizing efforts to turnout the vote and oust Donald Trump have lit the Democratic path for the past four years (Williamson & Memfis, 2020). Heading into 2022, the Democrats must find a way to channel the momentum of anti-Trump voter excitement in the absence of the common enemy. The SDVS showed the Biden voters were disturbed by the groupthink and nativist beliefs of Trump supporters. If they want to maintain the movement evoked by fear of the alt-right, Democrats must continue to emphasize the rising tide of the populist right even as they emphasize popular policy positions. They should emphasize the changes that the GOP is undergoing. In races where Republicans run Trumpist candidates who continue to engage in Trumpian rhetoric, this will be easily done. Democrats will need to adopt new strategies than they have used in recent years if Republicans make a move to the center. Party higher-ups from both sides should pay close attention to races involving Trump-distanced Republicans in 2022. Democrats will likely have to simultaneously run against Republicanism and Trumpism. Here, full length interviews with Democratic voters would offer insight into voter behavior. Was anti-Trump voting what made the marginal difference in 2020 or did Biden key in on something deeper in his campaign? Can

the energy of the Democratic base be maintained without the enemy that motivates it? These questions and more need to be addressed by future research.

Globally, the American political system is at a dangerous crossroads. Polarization is at an all-time high and political violence, whether in the form of insurrection at the capitol or protests against police brutality,[15] is constantly in the news. This moment calls for academic investigation into the motivation of insurrectionists and those of leftist political protestors; there is much that differentiates these groups, but they may have more in common than was previously thought. Understanding the loud minorities at the extremes of either party might help the field to understand the whole.

Cramer's study (2016) has told us that rural Americans feel left behind by elite America. The success of Donald Trump and the results of the SDVS have proved her right. Lilliana Mason's (2018) book told us that social sorting threatens to drive polarization to yet unrealized heights. The SDVS found high hostility between voter groups and high loyalty to in-group candidates. It is easy to imagine how both of these trends could continue, but they do not have to. Mason implores us to make those cross-cutting relationships by getting to know people who think and look differently than us.

One of the most polarizing, echo-chamber encouraging problems in politics is social media. On Twitter and Facebook, politically active people cultivate timelines of like-minded others, engaging in virtual social sorting wherein those cross-cutting accounts can be easily blocked or unfollowed. Eitan Hersh[16] (2020), a scholar of online political activity, refers to these

[15] The insurrection at the capitol was a treasonous assault on the United States Government. The protests in the wake of police killings of unarmed black men and children are justified demonstrations against a broken system of enforcement. They are compared here not as a gesture of equivalence but simply to note the unrest that exists among both the left and the right.

[16] If you find yourself doom scrolling nightly or frustrated at election results but feeling powerless to change anything, go read Hersh's book. It is a sympathetic yet motivating call to action that a lot of us need to hear.

people as “political hobbyists” (p. 3). For them, almost all of their interaction with politics is online or on the television. Hersh has a simple recommendation: stop spending time on political hobbyism and go make actual change in the world. Join the local Republican or Democratic party, volunteer for a campaign, or simply talk to your neighbors who vote differently than you (p. 216). 2020 and the first half of 2021 have been scarred by the pandemic. Americans were forced to interact online and over the internet. As we begin to come out of our homes and see each other once more, take some time away from Twitter rants and online political contributions and go talk to that neighbor who you know always votes the opposite way as you. Talk to your like-minded friends about getting involved in politics in real life and making a real difference. What do Trumpism and political hostility mean about America’s future? That is up to each and every one of us to decide.

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Appendix A

Full Midwestern Swing District Voter Survey Questionnaire Text

Start of Block: Screener 1

S1 In which state do you currently reside?

▼ Alabama (1) ... I do not reside in the United States (53)

---

*

S2 What is your zip code?

_____

S3 Did you vote in the 2020 presidential election?

1. Yes (1)
2. No (2)

End of Block: Screener 1

Start of Block: Consent

R1 Congratulations! We'd like to invite you to participate in this research study. Please read and accept the below acknowledgment to proceed to the survey. I hereby acknowledge and agree that: - I understand that I am a participant in a research project.

- I understand that I will be asked about recent political events and my reactions to those events.

- I understand that my responses to this research will be confidential and that after the discussion today, no parties will re-contact me about the topics discussed today, or ask me to change my voting or other behavior based on this information.

- I certify and represent that I have read this Release, fully understand its meaning and effect, and agree to participate. Click "Yes" to agree to participate or click "No" to decline to participate.

3. Yes (1)

4. No (2)

End of Block: Consent

Start of Block: Voting history

V100 Who did you vote for in the 2020 election?

5. Donald Trump (1)

6. Joe Biden (2)

7. Other (please specify) (3) _____

End of Block: Voting history

Start of Block: Main body

Txt1 We are going to ask you some questions about your **political beliefs and your political identity**. We appreciate open and honest answers and are looking for rich and detailed

answers.

Q25 Please tell us why you voted for ${V100/ChoiceGroup/SelectedChoicesTextEntry}

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

Q30 In this survey, we are interested in hearing from real people about how they see themselves and the issues that matter to them. To start, how would you **describe yourself to someone you had never met before**? Please answer in a couple sentences.

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

Q40 What do you think are the most important issues **facing people like you**? Please answer in two or more sentences.

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

Q45 Please rate following political issues based on how important they are to you.

	Not at all important (1)	Slightly important (2)	Moderately important (3)	Very important (4)	Extremely important (5)
Economy (1)	8.	9.	10.	11.	12.
Healthcare (2)	13.	14.	15.	16.	17.
Supreme Court Appointments (3)	18.	19.	20.	21.	22.
The Coronavirus Outbreak (4)	23.	24.	25.	26.	27.
Violent Crime (5)	28.	29.	30.	31.	32.
Foreign Policy (6)	33.	34.	35.	36.	37.
Gun Policy (7)	38.	39.	40.	41.	42.
Race and Ethnic Inequality (8)	43.	44.	45.	46.	47.
Immigration (9)	48.	49.	50.	51.	52.
Economic Inequality (10)	53.	54.	55.	56.	57.
Climate Change (11)	58.	59.	60.	61.	62.
Abortion (12)	63.	64.	65.	66.	67.

Display This Question:

If Who did you vote for in the 2020 election? = Donald Trump

Q55 (Q50=Trump) We live in a polarized time in which people have disagreements with each other. How do **you** feel about Joe Biden's supporters? (Please answer in two sentences or more)

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

Display This Question:

If Who did you vote for in the 2020 election? != Donald Trump

Q55 (Q50≠Trump) We live in a polarized time in which people have disagreements with each other. How do **you** feel about Donald Trump's supporters? (Please answer in two sentences or more)

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

Q60 In general, do you believe that **mainstream media** is more conservative or more liberal?

68. Liberal (1)

69. Somewhat Liberal (2)

70. Neutral (3)

71. Somewhat conservative (4)

72. Conservative (5)

Q65 To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement: **Donald Trump won the 2020 presidential election, not Joe Biden.**

73. Strongly Disagree (1)

74. Somewhat Disagree (2)

75. Neither Agree nor Disagree (3)

76. Somewhat Agree (4)

77. Strongly Agree (5)

Display This Question:

If To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement: Donald Trump won the 2020 p... = Somewhat Agree

Or To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement: Donald Trump won the 2020 p... = Strongly Agree

Q66 Why do you think so many people believe that Joe Biden won the 2020 election fairly?

_____

Q70 Do you agree or disagree with the following statement:

${V100/ChoiceGroup/SelectedChoicesTextEntry} cares about people like me?

78. Strongly disagree (1)
79. Somewhat disagree (2)
80. Neither agree nor disagree (3)
81. Somewhat agree (4)
82. Strongly agree (5)

Q80 Do you approve or disapprove of the way Donald Trump handled his job as president?

83. Strongly Disapprove (1)

84. Disapprove (2)

85. No Opinion (3)

86. Approve (4)

87. Strongly Approve (5)

Q90 Who did you vote for in the **2016** presidential election?

88. Donald Trump (1)

89. Hillary Clinton (2)

90. Other (3) _____

91. I did not vote (4)

Display This Question:

If Who did you vote for in the 2020 election? = Donald Trump

And Who did you vote for in the 2016 presidential election? != Donald Trump

Q100 (Swing to Trump What made you vote for Donald Trump in 2020 even though you did not vote for him in 2016?

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

Display This Question:

If Who did you vote for in the 2016 presidential election? = Donald Trump

And Who did you vote for in the 2020 election? != Donald Trump

Q100 (Swing from Tru You voted for Donald Trump in 2016 but did not in 2020. Please explain why:

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

End of Block: Main body

Start of Block: Demographics

Q27 How old are you?

_____

D10 Which political party do you most closely identify with?

92. Democrat (1)

93. Republican (2)

94. Independent (3)

95. Other (4) _____

D20 What is your gender?

96. Male (1)

97. Female (2)

98. Prefer not to say (3)

99. Other (4) _____

D30 If you were asked to use one of four names for your social class, which would you say you belong in: the **lower class**, the **working class**, the **middle class**, or the **upper class**?

100. Lower class (4)
101. Working Class (5)
102. Middle Class (6)
103. Upper Class (7)
104. Don't Know (8)

D40 What is the highest level of education or degree that you have completed?

105. High school, No Diploma (1)
106. High School Graduate (2)
107. Some College (3)
108. Associate's Degree (AA, AS) (4)
109. Bachelor's Degree (BA, BS) (5)
110. Master's Degree (MA, MS, etc.) (6)
111. Professional Degree beyond a Bachelor's Degree (MD, DDS, DVM, JD, etc.) (7)
112. Doctorate Degree (PhD, EdD, etc.) (8)

D50 What was your 2019 total household income (we're looking for typical income, though we understand that the pandemic has caused changes in 2020 income for many people)?

113. $0-$24,999 (1)

114. $25,000-$49,999 (2)

115. $50,000-$74,999 (3)

116. $75,000-$99,999 (4)

117. $100,000-$124,999 (5)

118. $125,000 or more (6)

D60 What is your racial or ethnic identity? (select as many as apply)

1. American Indian or Alaskan Native (1)
2. Asian/Pacific Islander (2)
3. Black or African American (3)
4. Hispanic American (4)
5. White/Caucasian (5)
6. Other/Multiple identities (please specify) (6)

_____

End of Block: Demographics

Appendix B

SDVS Respondent Summary

Table 2: SDVS Respondents

V100: Who did you vote for in 2020?
Base: All respondents

		2020 Vote		State		Race		Gender	
	Total	Biden Voter	Trump Voter	Iowa	Minnesota	White	Non-white	Male	Female
Total	**82**	**43**	**39**	**41**	**41**	**77**	**5**	**31**	**51**
Trump	39	0	39	18	21	37	2	16	23
Biden	43	43	0	23	20	40	3	15	28

Table 2: Self-Reported Social Class by 2020 voter group, homes state, and gender

D30: If you were asked to use one of four names for your social class, which would you say you belong in: the lower class, the working class, the middle class, or the upper class?

Base: All respondents

		2020 Vote		State		Gender	
	Total	Biden Voter	Trump Voter	Iowa	Minnesota	Male	Female
Total	**82**	**43**	**39**	**41**	**41**	**31**	**51**
Upper Class	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
Middle Class	49	24	25	23	26	23	26
	60%	56%	64%	56%	63%	74%	51%
Working Class	30	17	13	17	13	6	24
	37%	40%	33%	41%	32%	19%	47%
Lower Class	3	2	1	1	2	2	1
	4%	5%	3%	2%	5%	6%	2%

Table 3: Education by voter group, home state, and gender

QD40: What is the highest level of education or degree that you have completed?
Base: All respondents

		2020 Vote		State		Gender	
	Total	Biden Voter	Trump Voter	Iowa	Minnesota	Male	Female
Total	**82**	**43**	**39**	**41**	**41**	**31**	**51**
HS no diploma	1	1	0	1	0	0	1
	1%	2%	0%	2%	0%	0%	2%
HS Graduate	11	4	7	10	1	5	6
	13%	9%	18%	24%	2%	16%	12%
Some College	20	11	9	7	13	7	13
	24%	26%	23%	17%	32%	23%	25%
Associate's Degree	11	3	8	5	6	2	9
	13%	7%	21%	12%	15%	6%	18%
BA or BS	31	18	13	14	17	14	17
	38%	42%	33%	34%	41%	45%	33%
Master's Degree	5	4	1	2	3	3	2
	6%	9%	3%	5%	7%	10%	4%
Professional degree (MD,	2	1	1	2	0	0	2
	2%	2%	3%	5%	0%	0%	4%
Doctorate degree	1	1	0	0	1	0	1
	1%	2%	0%	0%	2%	0%	2%
High School or Less	12	5	7	11	1	5	7
	15%	12%	18%	27%	2%	16%	14%
Post-secondary Experience	62	32	30	26	36	23	39
	76%	74%	77%	63%	88%	74%	76%
Graduate	8	6	2	4	4	3	5
	10%	14%	5%	10%	10%	10%	10%