

Social psychology sheds light on Trump's appeal

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The surprising election of Donald Trump prompted a widespread desire to understand the factors at play in his unexpected victory, with various analyses attributing his win to strong support among economically deprived voters.

However, a recent analysis suggests that five social-psychological factors helped power the reality-star candidate to victory: authoritarianism, social dominance orientation, prejudice, relative deprivation, and intergroup contact.

In a [commentary](#) published in the Journal of Social and Political Psychology, research professor Thomas Pettigrew of the University of California, Santa Cruz, writes that these five social-psychological phenomena combined with political factors to produce the unprecedented outcome.

Authoritarianism and social dominance orientation

Authoritarianism as a syndrome is characterized by deference to authority, aggression toward outgroups, a rigidly hierarchical view of the world, and resistance to new experiences, according to Pettigrew, an expert on racism and intergroup relations whose scholarship has led the field of social psychology for more than five decades.

"Authoritarianism is typically triggered by threat and fear, and

authoritarians tend to view the world as a very dangerous and threatening place," writes Pettigrew, adding that it typically begins early in life as an aspect of personality and leads to some form of right-wing political ideology.

Social dominance orientation is marked by a preference for social hierarchy and domination over lower-status groups. People who exhibit this preference tend to be driven, disagreeable, and relatively uncaring seekers of power. They describe themselves as motivated by self-interest and self-indulgence.

While polling of voters by political parties and news organizations focuses on which candidates are in the lead, surveys by social scientists dive deeper in an effort to identify the factors that prompt voters to support one candidate over another. Pettigrew's analysis is based on the review of numerous such surveys, including one conducted eight months before the election by Matthew MacWilliams, who predicted that election surveys were underestimating Trump's support, and one by Stanley Feldman, professor of political science at Stony Brook University, who found a positive correlation between authoritarianism and support for Trump among Republicans.

In the United States and throughout the world, authoritarianism is more common among the political right than the left. Republicans in the U.S. began averaging higher on authoritarianism than Democrats before Trump's candidacy, but "it remained for Trump to break the unwritten rules of American politics and appeal directly and openly to authoritarians and those who score high on social dominance orientation," writes Pettigrew.

Trump uses terms such as "losers" and "complete disasters," which are classic authoritarian statements, says Pettigrew, citing recent studies that reveal that Trump supporters tend to score especially high on measures

of authoritarianism and social dominance orientation. The power of these two factors to predict far-right voting behavior has also been documented in Belgium, France, the Netherlands, Italy, Germany, and the United Kingdom, notes Pettigrew.

Prejudice

Trump supporters are also characterized by prejudice—racial prejudice as well as prejudice against immigrants and outgroups in general. Trump's blatant use of prejudice against "dangerous" Muslims and Mexican "rapists" is a departure from the Republican Party's previous more subtle appeals to bigotry—and his dedicated followers loved it, says Pettigrew.

"Breaking with so-called 'political correctness,' (Trump) blared openly what they had been saying privately," he writes.

Intergroup contact

Pettigrew cites growing evidence that Trump's white supporters have far less contact with minorities than other Americans, and he notes research that found that Trump's regional support increased with greater distance from the Mexican border.

"Throughout the world, intergroup contact has been shown typically to diminish prejudice by reducing intergroup fear and inducing empathy," writes Pettigrew.

Relative deprivation

Pettigrew challenges the widely reported idea that Trump voters were economically deprived, unemployed, angry working-class voters, citing

evidence that the median annual income of Trump supporters was nearly \$82,000.

Rather than a lack of social mobility, Trump voters suffer from "relative deprivation," which Pettigrew explains is the result of disappointing comparisons—whether those impressions are based in fact or not.

"Trump adherents feel deprived relative to what they expected to possess at this point in their lives and relative to what they erroneously perceive other 'less deserving' groups have acquired," writes Pettigrew.

Relative deprivation among Trump supporters is fed by financial stresses, including the rapidly rising cost of housing, prescription drugs, and college tuition; diminished savings that may not allow the ideal retirement; and anxiety that their children may not achieve more than they have.

"Trump voters are typically not personally economically destitute, but they often feel deprived relative to their hopes and expectations," explains Pettigrew.

Trump exploited that sense of relative deprivation brilliantly, using language that appealed to his target audience and unifying his supporters against the common "enemies": the media, immigrants, and the so-called "elite." Pettigrew notes that Trump's slogan "Make America great again" harkens back to an era when the country was led by white men, when immigration was restricted, racial segregation was in place, and the government's affirmative action programs—such as the G.I. Bill and federal housing loans—largely benefited white men.

Capitalizing on real and imagined threats

These five phenomena make people feel vulnerable to real and perceived

threats, but Trump is far from the first authoritarian leader to attract followers by exploiting the perception of threats—and offering simple solutions.

Pettigrew notes similarities between the Trump insurgency and previous movements, including the Tea Party movement, the Wallace movement in the 1960s, and the Know Nothing movement in the 1850s. Pettigrew also noted parallels with contemporary far-right movements in Austria, Belgium, France, Germany, and the Netherlands that are fueled by white male nationalists and populists who are less educated than the general population.

Genuine threats, including terrorism, conflict, and the recent Great Recession, combine with imagined threats—Trump's false claims of massive voter fraud, out-of-control crime, and unvetted immigration—to foster unease among those who have seen great change in their communities.

Pettigrew cites the Brexit vote to highlight the "delicate balance between threat and contact—the dual effects of diversity." The greatest support for Brexit was concentrated in areas where immigrant populations had grown by more than 200 percent between 2000 and 2015; a stunning 94 percent of voters in those regions opted to leave the European Union. Residents of London and other big cities had become comfortable with immigrants over time, whereas residents of small towns that had experienced a sudden influx of immigrants perceived the demographic shift as a threat and lacked sufficient intergroup contact to allay their fears. A similar phenomenon emerged in the Trump election in small Midwestern towns.

Social psychology and politics

Pettigrew emphasizes that it was the interplay of social-psychological

phenomena and politics that generated the unexpected election outcome. Neither element can be overlooked in the quest to understand Trump's ascent to the presidency.

"Politics and social-psychological factors aren't in conflict; they work at different levels," explains Pettigrew. The biggest political factors are structural: party loyalty and the structure of the American political system. "Some voters will automatically vote Republican out of party loyalty—even if they voted against Trump in the primary," he adds.

For those who wonder how the country could elect its first African American president in 2008 followed by Trump, Pettigrew points out that about 58 percent of whites voted against Barack Obama in 2008—and 59 percent of whites voted for Trump in 2016.

About one-fifth of American voters are dedicated to the authoritarian outlook marked by prejudice and relative deprivation, "and Trump plays them like a harp," says Pettigrew. "They're not going to change much."

Pettigrew says the political landscape is in the hands of young voters. "All of these social-psychological factors are phenomena of later middle age and older people, and we're dying off," the 86-year-old says with a wink. "The new generation that's coming on, even in the South, really is different."

Moreover, Trump may shape the lifelong voting habits of today's young people, adds Pettigrew, citing research that shows many voters' political allegiances are forged as they come of age. "Young people who came of age under Roosevelt were lifelong Democrats, while Reagan had an enormous effect on young Republican voters," says Pettigrew. "I'm hoping the cohort coming on now won't forget Trump until their dying day."

More information: Pettigrew, T. Social Psychological Perspectives on Trump Supporters. *Journal of Social and Political Psychology*, 5, mar. 2017. jspp.psychopen.eu/article/view/750

Provided by University of California - Santa Cruz

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