

The Views of Populists:
What Trump Voters' Perspectives and
Perceptions of Trump Voters
Tell Us About U.S. Democracy

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Abstract: What does the current populist moment tell us about contemporary democracy? In particular, what does it tell us about civic identity? I look in close at the views that people have of the civic competency of their political opponents, in order to consider the potential for democratic innovation in the service of including greater voice in governance for a wide range of people. I draw on a decade of observations of conversations of people who eventually supported Trump in the 2016 presidential election in communities across Wisconsin, as well as analysis of correspondence from people reacting to their views. My findings speak to the nature of contemporary American democratic identity, and suggest a significant barrier to improving the health of democracy is an inconsistent emphasis on individual agency as a target of blame.

1. The potential for the project of democracy

The election of Donald Trump to the presidency in 2016 made it clear that the United States, and arguably Western industrialized democracy, is in a populist moment (Galston 2016). A great deal of energy has been spent trying to understand and diagnose the ills among people who have voted for recent populist candidates. I take the opportunity to instead examine and perhaps diagnose what is wrong with democracy.

Voters who support populist candidates using populist rhetoric buy into the notion that “the people” deserve more power (Mudde 2007; Laclau 2005; Oliver and Rahn 2016). Previous work has investigated how such voters view government, elites, and “others” such as immigrants. But how are they viewing the capacity of “the people” to have more say?

Nearly three quarters of the United States public perceives that they are unrepresented by their federal government (Oliver and Rahn 1996, 194-196). What is the potential for an “inclusive populism” that incorporates people across social divisions to improve representation (McKean 2016)? Racism and anti-immigrant sentiments get in the way of people treating each other as part of the same democratic project (e.g. Alesina and Glaeser 2004; Lipsitz 2006; Roediger 2007; Abrajano and Hajnal 2015; Milner 2017; Tesler 2012, 2016; Parker and Barreto 2013). But how do people view others in terms of their potential to participate in the project of democracy?

This memo covers what I have learned about the perceptions of civic competence of political opponents among white working-class rural residents who voted for Donald Trump in the U.S. presidential election of 2016, and in turn, understandings among left-leaning residents who are reacting to their perspectives.

The data I draw on are transcripts and fieldnotes from an ethnographic public opinion study, and email correspondence from members of the public reacting to the views presented in that study. The ethnographic work is a study I have conducted with rural voters in the upper Midwestern U.S. state of Wisconsin since 2007 (Cramer Walsh 2012; Cramer 2016). Starting in 2007, I invited myself into the conversations of people meeting regularly in gathering places such as diners, gas stations and cafes in 39 groups in 27 communities that I had sampled across the state to represent a range of places varying in political, social, and economic indicators.¹ I visited most of these groups repeatedly through the presidential election of 2012, and have returned to listen to groups meeting in rural places in the campaign and aftermath of the 2016 presidential election.²

¹ Extensive details on the methods used for this work are available in Cramer 2016.

² Please see Appendix A for details on the groups I draw from heavily for this paper.

The emails I analyze are from people who have written to me since the 2016 presidential election about my work on the politics of resentment and rural Wisconsinites. I include in this analysis 163 emails that commented on the portrayals of rural residents' views.³

2. Critiques of Clinton voters

My fieldwork has revealed a variety of critiques of Clinton voters, Democrats, and left-leaning urban dwellers that bear a striking resemblance to common critiques of Trump voters. First, the Trump supporters I have spent time with in rural Wisconsin have had plenty to say about how people who voted for Clinton are being fooled, are not smart, and are not reasoning carefully. For example, at the end of January 2017, one of the men in a group that calls itself the Downtown Athletic Club, which meets in the morning in a warehouse in a rural Central Wisconsin town (without a downtown) had this to say (Group 1).

Ben⁴: I guess what bothers me is I only know about 4 or 5 Democrats, but I'm just surprised how, Republicans are probably the same way, how they can see the country going to hell and still vote. One guy told me, if Hitler ran for president, if he was a Democrat they'd vote for him. He doesn't care how the country is going, he'd still vote for another Democrat.

This is just one example of the many complaints I heard across the years of my fieldwork, about the lack of rationality among left-leaning voters. People regularly told me that urbanites have little common sense despite their high levels of education. Such comments that city dwellers do not reason well was typically aimed at white elites.

During 2008, 2012, as well as 2016 campaign seasons, I regularly heard right-leaning voters criticize Obama and Clinton voters for relying solely on identity politics. On policy issues, these Trump supporters argued that Clinton supporters have their basic facts wrong. Their allegations were that people on the opposite side of the political spectrum were paying attention to biased news sources, or were being fooled by the Democrats.

Many of the people in the groups I have spent time with found Trump's message of a need for change appealing. They perceived that whatever government is doing, it is not benefiting people like them. Some had a hard time understanding why people voted for Obama, especially for a second term, because they perceived his first term brought little change in politics as usual. They think the need for change is

³ I excluded emails that consisted of questions solely about my research methods or what literature to consult for further reading. I use the content of the emails to categorize people as pro- or anti-Trump. Of the 163 writers, I personally knew 23 of them, and 29 of them self-identified as academics.

⁴ All names in the quoted discussions are pseudonyms.

significant and is not outweighed by reasons such as a desire to elect the first female president.

The resistance to Clinton and Clinton voters is not simply an aversion to government or government-as-usual, however. Racism and nativism play a role, too, as we can see in the way these rural Trump supporters criticize people for voting for Democrats mainly because of a desire to receive “handouts,” or support from government programs. For example, Lou in the Downtown Athletic Club (Group 1) explained to me three days after the election that people vote for Democrats because they are reluctant to “bite the hand that feeds them.” He went on,

I think the voter base is messed up now. It won't get straightened out until, there's too many people on the government team now, which has screwed up the voter base. They expect all the working people to pay for all these people that don't work, and that's basically the Democratic voter base, is all these give away programs, and all these aid programs.

When people talk about handouts and “giveaways” the implication is that the people who receive them are not deserving of this support. They are often talking about white recipients of these programs, but racial considerations enter in through notions of deservingness. Throughout my fieldwork, as other scholars have noted, individuals' assessments of deservingness are linked to ideas of who works hard (Soss and Schram 2007). Racial stereotypes in the United States often equate industriousness with whiteness and laziness with people of color (Winter 2008, 2006).

The Trump supporters I have spent time with I have applied the criteria of personal initiative inconsistently. The Downtown Athletic Club critiqued African-Americans for too little initiative in the realm of employment, but too much in the realm of protest politics (cf. Hochschild 1981).

John: The reason the economy is an issue with me is because if you get the economy rolling many of the people that are not working are going to be working. Consequently, that should take some of the agony away from those people. Everybody will be happier. The idleness of it all right now, I think no jobs, and whatnot. I think people get disgusted. I'm talking about those people in Milwaukee, Madison, Racine, Kenosha. I'm not talking about rural America so much as I'm talking about the riots...Those are the people that I'm concerned with. The ones--The Ferguson people.

Ben: We've got to get our safety back. Obama let it just ... We're back in the sixties with the Black relationship. [other: oh yeah] He's got to get that back. I'm not going to Milwaukee.

Joe: Race relations are worse than ever with him in there.

Ben: Madison, though. All those cities. We've got to get that safety back. It's all we see are the shooting and shootings. Barack, he just let the Blacks, tried to give them so much, and now they think they've got a voice. This is going to tear the world--we're a minority – that's why he [Trump] won the election, won the election.

They had similar criticism of protest politics among women. Reflections on the Women's March the day after the presidential inauguration, in January 2017, Lou said, "What do the women *expect* out of this protest? What do they expect?...I think they're *dumb*. Wasting their time and money, they're not going to change anything. They won't change anything." The group members were puzzled by the tactic of protest in general, and wondered aloud about why people would think it would make a difference and wondering how anyone could carve out time to participate.

A women's group meeting for lunch in a town 90 miles west of the Downtown Athletic Club had similar questions about protests (Group 11c). Dolores said, "All these young people they are complaining and demonstrating and doing crazy things. We tell them they should get a job. Even if it's a minimum paying job, it's something, it's training. They can go from there to the next job...I think they're spoiled."

These rural Trump voters at times expressed a basic faith in democracy. However, in the various ways I have just detailed, we can see that they have extensive doubts about the decision-making and the tactics of their political opponents.

They also voiced criticism of the level of tolerance among Clinton voters. For example, the women in the lunch group in central west Wisconsin talked about the impossibility of discussing politics with people who opposed Trump (Group 11c, January). Gladys said, "This is why I don't discuss politics because I'm not going to get scolded for how I think. 'Who do you think you are telling me that I'm wrong and you're right?'" Lack of tolerance is a complaint commonly lodged by left-leaning voters and pundits at right-leaning voters.⁵ The similarity in critique from these Trump supporters is a reminder that improving the civility of discourse, or even the existence of discourse, across political divides is difficult in the contemporary era of contentiousness (Wells et al. 2017).

3. Reactions to rural resentment

The left-leaning people who have sent emails in response to the rural resentment I have observed are likewise critical of their political opponents, and also reveal inconsistency in the emphasis people put on the agency or initiative of their opponents.

⁵ Surveys of voting-age U.S. residents show this perceptions among left-leaning voters (<http://www.latimes.com/politics/la-na-pol-polarized-voters-20160622-snap-story.html>) (Parton 2016).

Most of the correspondence I have received has been expressions of gratitude for helping people understand the nature of support for Trump.⁶ But I focus here on messages from people who have been compelled to explain to me that the real problem is that there is something wrong with Trump supporters (28 of the 163 writers). Many have suggested that these rural residents ignore facts, are uninformed, and ignorant or pay attention to the wrong news sources. “Apparently the news sources for many folks are from their own corner of the universe” one former state legislator remarked, acknowledging that many people choose news this way. “Our fragmented information sources do not show signs of changing,” he wrote.⁷ Some of them worried about ignorance on particular issues. “Was there not a recognition in rural agricultural Wisconsin that Federal programs supporting dairy product price supports, crop insurance and other price support programs helped?” wrote one man.⁸ Another wondered whether these residents recognize the contributions that Hispanic immigrants are making to their communities, especially through dairy farming.⁹

Others questioned the legitimacy of the rural residents’ grievances in more direct ways. One man argued that in fact rural and exurban areas have not had less but disproportionately more than their fair share of power in Congress and that “increased power has legitimized a sense of grievance and desire for more power.”¹⁰ Others questioned the nature and extent of their political participation. For example, one man wrote,

I suspect if you drill down the most disenchanted are also the most disconnected. That is, if they participate at all in politics it is to vote and even then, sporadically. I suspect that feeling of disrespect you document brought out the unengaged who voted their anger and resentment. Ok, fine. But they sent back to Congress and the legislatures the same cast of characters that gave them, and all of us, what we have. And they expect change?¹¹

Some said, in one form or another, “Pull yourselves up by your bootstraps. I did it. You can, too.” One man wrote about a generations-long selection process at work, in which

Who leaves and who stays [in these rural communities] is not random....When rural people complain about east coast elites, I bring it to their attention that many of those ‘elites’ are their own children who left to go where the opportunities are...Who stayed behind? Those shy of taking

⁶ Of the 163 emails included in this analysis, 140 contained expressions of gratitude.

⁷ Writer ID #166.

⁸ Writer ID #170.

⁹ Writer ID #171.

¹⁰ Writer ID #163.

¹¹ Writer ID #164.

risks, those with conservative personality profiles....Those left behind find comfort in their own resentment of urban success.¹²

He went on to argue that the “abandonment of rural towns, businesses, homes and schools” was not a failure as rural people see it but instead a success. “It was the shedding of unsustainable infrastructure so that the rest of the population could survive.”

Many of the people questioning the choices, reasoning and perspective of rural folks exhibiting resentment toward the cities had personal experience living in a rural area themselves. They acknowledged the resentment, but questioned its legitimacy. One man disagreed with these residents’ perceptions that they have not been listened to. He wrote that he grew up in a small Wisconsin town, but had moved to a city in the state and now he and his family are “the embodiment of the urban elite your article talks about.”¹³

You are certainly correct about the resentment that simmers in rural Wisconsin (and I’m assuming the rest of the country). I have seen it myself...But I have to push back a bit regarding a part of the article....It’s the idea that they have not been listened to by ‘elites.’ What doesn’t ever seem to get discussed in the various “think-pieces” is that many of us so-called elites they resent actually came from hotbeds of resentment....We then left those towns to go to college – something our families were happy about and wanted us to do. We went, and we learned. And we came home and listened to our rural friends and families more.... Rarely were we listened to at all. They were stubbornly uninterested.....It gets tiresome to be branded the villains...simply for understanding the changing dynamics of the country and its economy and acting accordingly....When will their resentment be assuaged?.... When myself and my wife and our friends finally have our lives ruined by their resentments? When we all acquiesce to their retrograde and (largely) false presumptions about the world they live in? Honestly, when?¹⁴

There is an expectation in these emails that rural Trump voters ought to fix their circumstances through individual initiative. This is striking because it is left-leaning political ideologies that we expect to be more attentive to structural concerns. For example, racial justice activism regularly draws attention to the ways racial oppression operates at a deeper level than interpersonal discrimination through laws and policies that institutionalize racism. But in the views I have just characterized, we see a call to pay more attention to the individual-level flaws of the attitudes and behavior of people, namely rural white working-class counterparts who have supported Donald Trump.

¹² Writer ID #58.

¹³ This is a reference to (Cramer 2016b).

¹⁴ Writer #168. I have corrected small typos in the original.

The resistance to acknowledging structural causes of individuals' behavior and attitudes is not limited to right-leaning members of the public, but may be better characterized as a function of group identity. This group-serving bias in attributions of responsibility (Hewstone 1989) is well documented in the realm of politics (Conover 1988; Rudolph 2003). When considering people we think are like ourselves, we are more likely to notice external challenges, not character flaws, but the opposite is true when we are considering "others." We recognize the tendency of populist supporters to attribute blame to racial and ethnic others, as a way of shifting responsibility from themselves (Oliver and Rahn 2016, 192), but this behavior is not restricted to people of a particular political leaning.

4. Conclusion: Focusing on the flaws of individuals

Throughout the views I have presented here—of both the rural Trump supporters and the left-leaning email writers—there are claims about which voices deserve to be listened to and which voices are worthy of attention and recognition. These views are not necessarily representative of a cross-section of any population. But it is striking how rare it is in the fieldwork or in the email correspondence for people to remark that perhaps the problem is not the character, knowledge, news habits or political tactics of this or that population, but instead the fact that so many people feel unheard.

If we return to the question of how do we increase the health of democracy, the views presented in this paper suggest that we have long way to go. The group consciousness literature suggests that people are most likely to engage politically on behalf of their social identities when these identities are infused with a sense of systematic injustice (Miller et al. 1981). But the resentful rural residents and the critics of rural resentment whose thoughts I analyze here seem a long way off from either sharing a common identity and even farther off from perceiving that the members of a common group are recipients of shared systematic injustice. By drawing attention to the flaws of individual people, we draw attention away from the broader forces that resist justice and equality.

Perhaps these conversations are reason to rethink the notion that the democratic innovation that would be most effective or most feasible can occur at the level of the ordinary citizen. The people I have encountered in my fieldwork have been telling me for nearly a decade that their opinions do not matter, that they are overlooked and ignored by the political process. They are not entirely wrong (Bartels 2013; Gilens 2013; Gilens and Page 2014). Perhaps our desire for democratic innovation should not focus on perspectives and preferences among ordinary members of publics, but should instead focus on the powerful elite who actually influence the shape of our institutions. What if, rather than expecting ordinary citizens to exercise empathy for people on the other side of political and social divides, we expected elites to debate public policy by presenting arguments about how well it will promote the public good? In other words, should our examination of this populist moment focus on the flaws of voters? Or should it perhaps focus on the flaws of

those who develop the rhetoric that taps into the divisive us vs. them categorizations we find among members of the public?

In the recent Chris Achen and Larry Bartels book, *Democracy for Realists* (2016), the authors describe the folk theorem of democracy in which “good citizens would engage in thoughtful monitoring of their government...[d]emocratic norms would be enforced by the shared values of an enlightened populace...and [a] government derives its just powers not merely from the *consent* of the governed, but from their political *judgments*” (297). In detail, they provide evidence that this folk theorem does not capture actual human behavior in democracies, and that it is not possible for even the most sophisticated and politically aware to achieve this ideal .

That heavily empirically supported conclusion is itself sobering. But perhaps most troubling is this claim:

Especially at the state level, proponents of mind-numbing clichés about giving power to ordinary people bear considerable responsibility for the domination of government by narrowly self-interested groups. In reforming government, good intentions and high-sounding rhetoric are not enough. In the end, it is the folk theory that props up elite rule, and it is unrepresentative elites that most profit from convenient justifications it provides for their activities. (327)

We have seen in this paper that people in the public have the folk theorem in mind when they judge their fellow citizens. They expect others to be well-informed, and expect that government operates on the basis of judgments made among members of the public. Their disdain for others is not assisted by using this folk theorem as a standard. Trump supporters and Clinton supporters deem each other to be incompetent and unworthy of empathy. The folk theorem gives people justification for turning away from those they disagree with, and tuning out from paying close attention, and in the end enables those with the reins to continue to pass policy that does little to improve their lives.

Appendix A: Description of Groups in Fieldwork¹⁵

Group Number	Municipality Description	Group Type	Municipality Population (2015)	Median Household Income (2015)	2016 Republican Presidential Vote (%)	Dates of Site Visits (Month/Year) <i>Since 2016</i>
1	Central hamlet	Daily morning coffee klatch, local gas station (employed, unemployed, and retired men)	600	55,000	45	11/16
6	Northwestern village	Daily morning coffee klatch, local gas station (employed, unemployed, and retired men)	700	32,000	45	11/16, 7/17
8	Southwestern village	Daily morning coffee klatch, local gas station (employed, unemployed, and retired men)	1500	39,000	50	6/17
9	North-central village	Daily morning breakfast group, dinner (employed and retired, mixed gender)	2,000	53,000	55	6/17
11b	Central-west village	Daily morning coffee klatch, local gas station (employed, unemployed, and retired men)	2000	39,000	65	7/17
11c	Central-west village	Weekly lunch group of women at restaurant (employed and retired)	2000	39,000	65	1/17, 7/17

¹⁵ Source for population and household income is US Census American Community Survey 5-year estimate. Numbers for these figures and vote outcomes have been rounded to protect identity of the communities.

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