

What I Heard From Trump Supporters

After the election, I decided to talk to 100 Trump voters from around the country. I went to the middle of the country, the middle of the state, and talked to many online.

This was a surprisingly interesting and helpful experience—I highly recommend it. With three exceptions, I found something to like about everyone I talked to (though I strongly disagreed with many of the things they said). Although it shouldn't have surprised me given the voting data, I was definitely surprised by the diversity of the people I spoke to—I did not expect to talk to so many Muslims, Mexicans, Black people, and women in the course of this project.

Almost everyone I asked was willing to talk to me, but almost none of them wanted me to use their names—even people from very red states were worried about getting “targeted by those people in Silicon Valley if they knew I voted for him”. One person in Silicon Valley even asked me to sign a confidentiality agreement before she would talk to me, as she worried she'd lose her job if people at her company knew she was a strong Trump supporter.

I wanted to understand what Trump voters liked and didn't like about the president, what they were nervous about, what they thought about the left's response so far, and most importantly, what would convince them not to vote for him in the future.

Obviously, this is not a poll, and not 'data'. But I think narratives are really important.

Here's what I heard.

The TL;DR quote is this:

"You all can defeat Trump next time, but not if you keep mocking us, refusing to listen to us, and cutting us out. It's Republicans, not Democrats, who will take Trump down."

What do you like about Trump?

"He is not politically correct." *Note: This sentiment came up a lot, probably in at least a third of the conversations I had.*

"He says true but unpopular things. If you can't talk about problems, you can't fix them."

"I'm a Jewish libertarian who's [sic] grandparents were Holocaust survivors. Over the last few years the mainstream left has resorted to name-calling and character assassination, instead of debate, any time their positions are questioned. This atmosphere became extremely oppressive and threatening to people, like myself, who disagreed with many of Obama's policies over the past several years. Intelligent debate has become rare."

"It's a lot like political discussion was in Soviet Union, actually. I think the inability to acknowledge obvious truths, and the ever-increasing scope of these restrictions makes it particularly frustrating. And personally, for whatever reason, I find inability to have more subtle discussion very frustrating--things are not white or black, but you can't talk about greys since the politically correct answer is white."

"He is anti-abortion." *Note: This sentiment came up a lot. A number of people I spoke to said they didn't care about anything else he did and would always vote for whichever candidate was more anti-abortion.*

"I like that he puts the interests of Americans first. American policy needs to

be made from a position of how Americans benefit from it, as that is the role of government."

"He is anti-immigration." Note: This sentiment came up a lot. The most surprising takeaway for me how little it seemed to be driven by economic concerns, and how much it was driven by fears about "losing our culture", "safety", "community", and a general Us-vs.-Them mentality.

"He will preserve our culture. Preservation of culture is considered good in most cases. What's wrong with preserving the good parts of American culture?"

"He's not Hillary Clinton."

"I'm Mexican. I support the wall. The people who have stayed have destroyed Mexico, and now they want to get out and cause damage here. We need to protect our borders, but now any policy is like that is called racist. Trump was the first person willing to say that out loud."

"I am socially very liberal. I am fiscally very conservative. I don't feel I have a party--never have. I grew up in a more socially conservative time and picked the "lesser of two evils" during elections. Now, the more socially liberal side supports bigger governments, more aid and support and that money has to come from somewhere. I see what's deducted from my check each week. I'm OK with never being rich but I'd like more security and that doesn't come from more government spending."

"We need borders at every level of our society."

"I'm willing to postpone some further social justice progress, which doesn't really result in loss of life, in favor of less foreign policy involvement, the opposite of which does."

"Brown people are always the out-crowd. I think subconsciously, part of the reason I supported him was a way to be in the in-crowd for once."

What don't you like about him?

"The way he talks about women is despicable."

"Everything about his style. We only voted for him because this election was too important to worry about style."

"I don't like most things about him. The way it worked is we got to choose one of two terrible options."

"I think our nation needs Trumpism to survive long term, and to me that supersedes almost every other reservation I have. My issue is with Trump himself--I think he's the wrong vessel for his movement, but he's all we've got so I'm behind him."

"I think the rollout of the immigration executive order is emblematic of a clusterfuck, to be completely frank."

"I now believe the Muslim ban actually makes us less safe."

"Isolationism and protectionism at this point is insane. We've done that before."

"I, too, worry about the dishonesty. His relationship with Russia, his relationship with women. His relationship with questionable financial matters. These all worry me and were they to continue I would lose all respect."

"He continually plays into a character that he has created to rile his fan base."

Accepting anti-semitism, white nationalism, or hate emanating unnecessarily, creates a vacuum of fear on social media, on television, and around the dinner table. Even though the policies may be similar to that of any recent Republican President, the behavior to act so immaturely sets a bad example for children and undercuts many cultural norms, which more than anything causes disruption to our sociological foundations."

"I hate that he discredits the press all the time. That seems to forebode great evil."

What are you nervous about with Trump as president?

"The thing I'm most worried about is war, and that he could destroy the whole world. I think I may have underestimated that risk, because he is more of an alpha strongman that I realized when I voted for him. Otherwise I still like him." *Note: Most people weren't that worried about war. More frequent comments were along these lines:*

"I know he's taking strong positions on certain foreign issues, but I feel in negotiations you need to do things to move the needle and when a whole country is watching its hard to keep a poker face, but at least his business track record overall gives us reason to believe ultimately stability will prevail."

and

"He's crazy, but it's a tactic to get other nations not to mess with us."

"I worry he will drive us apart as a nation. I believed him when he said that would stop with the campaign, but I haven't seen signs of it so far."

"I am nervous that his mental health is actually bad."

"I worry he is actually going to roll back social change we've fought so hard for. But I hope not."

What do you think about the left's response so far?

"You need to give us an opportunity to admit we may have been wrong without saying we're bad people. I am already thinking I made a mistake, but I feel ostracized from my community."

"The left is more intolerant than the right." *Note: This concept came up a lot, with real animosity in otherwise pleasant conversations.*

"Stop calling us racists. Stop calling us idiots. We aren't. Listen to us when we try to tell you why we aren't. Oh, and stop making fun of us."

"I'd love to see one-tenth of the outrage about the state of our lives out here that you have for Muslims from another country. You have no idea what our lives are like."

"I'm so tired of hearing about white privilege. I'm white, but way less privileged than a black person from your world. I have no hope my life will ever get any better."

"I am tired of feeling silenced and demonized. We have mostly the same goals, and different opinions about how to get there. Maybe I'm wrong, maybe you're wrong. But enough with calling all of us the devil for wanting to try Trump. I hate Hillary and think she wants to destroy the country of us but I don't demonize her supporters."

"I'm angry that they're so outraged now, but were never outraged over an existing terrible system."

"The attacks against Trump have taught me something about myself. I have

defended him and said things I really didn't believe or support because I was put in a defensive position. Protesters may have pushed many people in this direction BUT it is ultimately our responsibility and must stop."

"I'd like to also add that the demonization of Trump by calling him and his supporters: Nazis, KKK, white supremacists, fascists, etc. works very well in entrenching Trump supporters on his side. These attacks are counter-factual and in my opinion very helpful to Trump."

"So far his election has driven our nation apart. So far I see most of the divisiveness coming from the left. Shame on them. I don't see it quite as bad as during Nixon's era but we are truly headed in that direction. I could not speak with my parents during that time because political division would intrude. This Thanksgiving and holiday season were as close as I've felt to that in 40 years. We are increasingly polarized. It doesn't seem to be strictly generational, though that exists. There is an east coast-west coast, rural vs. urban, racial, and gender division forming now. It has the potential to be devastating."

"The amount of violent attacks and economic attacks perpetrated by the left are troublesome. My wife and I recently moved to the Bay Area. I was expecting a place which was a welcoming meritocracy of ideas. Instead, I found a place where everyone constantly watches everyone else for any thoughtcrime."

"Silicon Valley is incredibly unwelcoming to alternative points of view. Your curiosity, if it is sincere, is the very rare exception to the rule."

"There is something hypocritical about the left saying they are uniters not dividers, they are inclusive and then excluding half the population with comments on intelligence and irrelevance in the modern world."

What would convince you not to vote for him again?

"War would be unforgivable."

"If the Russia thing were true, I'd turn against him. Why don't y'all focus on that instead of his tweets?"

"Give us a better option, and we'll be happy. But it needs to be a moderate—Sanders won't win."

"I'll happily vote for someone else. There's a lot I hate about Trump. But our lives are basically destroyed, and he was the first person to talk about fixing that."

"Generally hard to say. Extreme corruption would do it."

Second person in the same conversation: "I don't care if he's corrupt. Y'all voted for Hillary and she was the most corrupt candidate of all time."

"Another worry is an escalation of overreaches between him and the left that culminates in the breakdown of our system of law. I'd hold him responsible for that."

"If he were to get the US involved in a major military conflict (I think the odds of this have actually decreased versus Hillary, but I'm willing to be proven wrong). If he were to substantially increase the cost of doing business (by increasing regulation or taxes for instance)."

"I'm socially very liberal. If he were to do something like restart a war on drugs, try to restrict rights of LGBT, or make first trimester abortions difficult or dangerous, I'd rethink my position. I think these type of things are

extremely unlikely though, especially with an election a few years away the country as a whole becoming more socially liberal."

"I think if 2008 happened again (further into Trump's tenure, so that causation can be shown, hypothetically), the base would evaporate."

"Based on Trump's history before politics I don't believe he is racist, sexist, homophobic or bigoted. If that were true it would supersede everything else since it would be even worse for individual liberty and freedom than any freedom of speech restrictions or increases in government size proposed by the Democratic Party."