



Trump Supporters Were Hiding In Plain Sight In Online Comment Sections

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The most reported story of the century started in 2015 and went something like this: Donald Trump will drop out after he gets bored. Donald Trump isn't real. Donald Trump has a ceiling. Donald Trump might win the ideology-driven primaries, but the electorate will reject him. Donald Trump, unlike his much more experienced opponent Hillary Clinton, isn't qualified to be president.

Now Donald Trump is the upset winner, the "Dewey Defeats Truman" headliner of 2016, and one postmortem after another has sought to explain this shocking turn of events. One compelling line of argument was that Trump's supporters were lurking in plain sight. These individuals were crying and screaming for attention in online forums such as Facebook, Reddit, and 4chan. Were their rebel yells, then, an early indication of the apparent wave of voter enthusiasm that would propel Trump to victory?

"Absolutely yes, because we were around working counter-signals and red-pilling members of those J.D. Vance hillbilly enclaves way before any of you in the mainstream media caught up," said Ohio native Metacom Berg, an alt-right supporter I had previously profiled during the Republican National Convention. "This was a long, immersive experience, as I and others like me were embedded with alt-right social media groups that had tens of thousands of members, mostly college-age people who had never voted before but would vote in an election where the margins were, what—fifty thousand votes in a couple Rust Belt states?"

Berg may not have been shocked by this turn of events, but Susie Meister, a researcher who studies modern evangelical religion in the context of social media, most assuredly was. Meister, who hosts The Brain Candy Podcast and has a PhD in religious studies, admits she was stunned to learn how literally evangelicals took oft-repeated terms such as "holy war" and "savior."

“For years, I saw these words appearing in online comments and heard them used in everyday conversation, which made sense because their leaders were constantly telling them Christians were being persecuted,” she told Motherboard. “What I didn’t account for is that after our nation’s economic collapse and even more profoundly after the legalization of gay marriage, they now had concrete evidence that their ‘religious freedom,’ as they see it, was being revoked and compromised, so they got scared in a way they hadn’t before.”

That fear, Meister believes, led them to throw their support behind an unsavory candidate who promised that he would undo these radical changes, his angry rhetoric echoing language they had heard for decades in regard to the marginalization of Christianity. “It didn’t matter to them that he didn’t reflect their values as long as he promised to protect them from liberalism,” she added.

Anthony Comegna, a historian at the Cato Institute, urges caution before rushing to label Trump’s victory as unprecedented or revolutionary. “We’re a proud and blustery people, but we aren’t the revolutionaries we like to think we are because we don’t have the stomach for it,” he wrote in an e-mail. “People still love to grumble and rumble, which we saw plenty of in the 19th century, too. Americans have always been convinced that their New Israel is under constant threat, so they have to cling to their guns, their private property domains, and their divinely-inspired Constitution.”

Comegna, who studies radical classical liberalism in the 19th century, takes a longer view and sees nothing exceptional about Trump’s victory in 2016. “I think we got the nominees we did—two crony-capitalist elites we could barely even choose between—because people have been so complacent for so long, comfortable in having secured democracy the world over. Of course, in reality the US is just another lumbering statist empire shielded by nationalist mysticism. Maybe the ‘alts’ have convinced enough people that they should be upset with how things are going, but I doubt it.”

Whitney Phillips, an assistant professor at Mercer University and author of *This is Why We Can’t Have Nice Things: Mapping the Relationship Between Online Trolling and Mainstream Culture*, is also hesitant to accord any pride of place for Trump’s victory to the ‘alt-right’ or other angry online commenters. “It might be tempting to say that the enthusiasm we thought was trolling was actual enthusiasm, but who knows? There’s no data either way, as Slate noted recently, and without that there’s no way to know what was real and what was not,” she said.

Phillips cautioned against making blanket statements, as many pundits already have, about how online commenters somehow “caused” Trump, because no two online forums are alike. “Platform affordances matter; assessing these behaviors on Facebook is different than assessing them on 4chan [because] the norms of the group in question, coupled with where they are communicating, are major pieces of the puzzle.”

Journalist Carl Beijer analyzed Edison exit polling data and concluded that, contrary to the notion that Trump was propelled to victory by a wave of enthusiasm, the election of 2016 was actually marked by extreme levels of voter apathy. Trump, he wrote on his blog, prevailed because he “managed to stem his losses among men, the poor, and millennials—and among boomers and voters of color he actually improved the GOP’s numbers” while Hillary Clinton “lost voters in every demographic across the board.”

But for Trump's most fervent supporters, such nuanced explanations are unavailing. "Trump found those extra votes that he needed, and he found them right where he needed them," Metacom Berg said. "I was networked with hundreds of thousands of people, and he got those extra votes—and you're going to tell me we didn't help make that narrow difference?"