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The Obama-Trump Voters Are Real. Here's What They Think.

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The story of the 2016 presidential election is simple. Donald J. Trump made huge gains among white voters without a college degree. His gains were large enough to cancel out considerable losses among well-educated white voters and a decade of demographic shifts.

There are questions and details still up for debate: whether Democrats can win back these voters, and how to think about and frame the decline in black turnout. But postelection surveys, pre-election surveys, voter file data and the actual results all support the main story: The voters who switched from President Obama to Mr. Trump were decisive.

Yet some still remain skeptical. A recent article in The Washington Post by Dana Milbank, “There’s No Such Thing as a Trump Democrat,” is the latest example. It argues, based on data from the Democracy Fund Voter Study Group, that there wasn’t an unusual defection of Democratic voters in 2016. The study found that 9.2 percent of Obama voters flipped to support Mr. Trump — a hair lower than the estimates from other surveys.

But the study also supports the conclusion about the pivotal nature of the Obama-Trump vote.

Mr. Milbank’s choice to use nationwide figures obscures the degree of the defection of white working-class voters from the Democrats to Mr. Trump. That shouldn’t be too surprising. After all, the national results would seem to make the 2016 election one of the least interesting in history. Hillary Clinton would be the president if the national tallies counted, and the shift from Mr. Obama’s 51.9 percent of the two-party popular vote to Mrs. Clinton’s 51.1 percent was the smallest change in major party vote share since 1888.

But the national vote doesn’t count, and Mrs. Clinton is not the president. She lost primarily because of the narrow but deep swing among white working-class voters who were overrepresented in decisive battleground states.

Just 74 percent of white Obama voters with a high school diploma or less backed Mrs. Clinton in the voter study group cited by Mr. Milbank.

Similarly, the Cooperative Congressional Election Study found that Mrs. Clinton won just 78 percent of white Obama voters without a bachelor’s degree. The figure was even lower in the key Rust Belt battlegrounds.

A separate analysis from the voter study group found that many of these voters are Republicans whom the Democrats can't win back. That question — whether the Democrats can lure these Obama voters back — is the important one.

The data from these surveys sends a mixed message. Strong evidence suggests a lot of these voters will lean Republican for the foreseeable future, and certainly will lean toward Mr. Trump. But Democrats can still win a meaningful and potentially decisive share of these voters, many of whom probably voted Democratic down-ballot in 2016.

Here's what one survey, the C.C.E.S., says about these voters:

SOURING ON OBAMA Just 29 percent of white, no-college Obama-Trump voters approved of Mr. Obama's performance, and 69 percent disapproved. Similarly, 75 percent said they would repeal the Affordable Care Act. Only 15 percent believed the economy had improved over the last year, and just 23 percent said their income had increased over the last four years.

SUPPORT FOR TRUMP'S AGENDA The Obama-Trump voters generally support Mr. Trump's key campaign pledges on immigration, police, infrastructure spending, trade and the environment. This isn't too surprising: Surveys conducted long before the 2016 election showed that a large share of white working-class Democratic-leaning voters backed the conservative-populist position on these issues.

FAIRLY STEADY SUPPORT Among those who voted in the 2016 primary (65 percent of the Obama-Trump vote), 54 percent of Obama-Trump voters reported backing Mr. Trump in the Republican presidential primary, according to the C.C.E.S., a sign that many of them are pretty strong and consistent supporters of Mr. Trump. Only 9 percent supported another Republican, less than the share that supported Mrs. Clinton or Bernie Sanders.

Taken together, the data indicates that Mr. Trump had considerable and possibly unique appeal to an important slice of Democratic-leaning voters. Mr. Trump adopted a platform tailored to white working-class Democrats. In doing so, he neutralized many traditional Democratic lines of attack against typical Republicans like Mitt Romney. Many of these voters backed him in the primary and seemed to prefer his brand of populism, suggesting they probably would have backed Mr. Trump no matter which Democrat he faced.

LEANING REPUBLICAN A Pew Research Center panel study found that fully 18 percent of white working-class voters who leaned Democratic as late as December 2015 reported leaning Republican by December 2016. That timing is significant: It implies that these voters continued to tilt toward the Democrats all the way until the 2016 campaign.

Similarly, the C.C.E.S. found that 45 percent of Obama-Trump voters identified as Republican-leaning in their postelection study.

The voters who both voted for Mr. Trump and say they lean Republican have probably taken a big step toward becoming consistent Republican voters. They seem relatively difficult for Democrats to lure back.

RACIAL RESENTMENT Using this and other data, political scientists have argued that racial resentment is the strongest predictor of whether voters flipped from Mr. Obama to Mr. Trump, and the biggest driver of Trump support among these voters.

Yes, racial resentment is the strongest predictor of the Obama-Trump vote in this survey data. White, working-class Obama voters with racially conservative views were very likely to flip to the Republicans. For example, Mrs. Clinton won just 47 percent of white Obama voters without a college degree who disagreed with the idea that “white people in the U.S. have certain advantages because of the color of their skin.” In contrast, she retained 88 percent of white Obama voters without a college degree who agreed that white people have certain advantages.

Nonetheless, voters with high racial resentment did not necessarily represent the preponderance of the Obama-Trump vote, because Mr. Obama had already lost nearly all such voters by 2012. To take the prior example: 49 percent of white, no-college Obama-Trump supporters at least somewhat disagreed with the notion that white people had certain advantages.

MANY REMAIN PERSUADABLE The C.C.E.S. found that 26 percent of Obama-Trump voters identified as Democrats in their postelection study, while 35 percent were Republicans and 37 percent were independents. Including those independents who lean toward a party, Republicans led by a wider margin of 45 percent to 30 percent. Even so, that’s a significant share who continue to identify with the Democratic Party despite voting for Mr. Trump.

Democrats were probably still winning a lot of these voters in 2016. The results speak for themselves to some extent. Jason Kander lost his Senate race in Missouri by just three percentage points, even as Mrs. Clinton lost by 20 points. Even Democrats who didn’t run ahead of Mrs. Clinton over all — like Tammy Duckworth in Illinois, Russ Feingold in Wisconsin or Katie McGinty in Pennsylvania — nonetheless ran far ahead of Mrs. Clinton in traditionally Democratic, white working-class areas.

Mrs. Duckworth’s performance is probably the most telling. She won Illinois’s 12th Congressional District — a downstate, working-class district now held by Republican Mike Bost — by nine points. Mr. Trump won it by 12 points.

Mr. Bost might seem like a fairly safe Republican for re-election, if you judge the partisanship of his district strictly by his party’s performance in the last presidential election. He certainly would be safe if Democrats wrote off Obama-Trump voters. But the willingness of these voters to support a Democrat for federal office against an incumbent Republican in a fairly decent year for Republicans suggests that at least these Obama-Trump voters remain in play, and Mr. Bost is more vulnerable than it might initially seem.

More generally, there is reason to think these voters are likelier to vote for a Democrat against a more traditional Republican who hasn’t developed a message to match Mr. Trump’s appeal to white working-class Democrats. These voters, for instance, tend to support abortion rights and same-sex marriage. They support a higher minimum wage.

All considered, it does seem likely that at least a portion of the Obama-Trump vote can be lured back to the Democrats — especially against traditional Republican candidates who emphasize small government, free markets and social conservatism.

Whether that means it should be the crux of the Democrats' path to power is another question. But it will most likely be a part of it, and will probably need to be for Democrats to secure parts of the Rust Belt that continue to play an outsize role in American elections.