

Why did so many people vote for Trump? Like it or not, he is a 'safe space' for millions

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The only surprise was that we were shocked.

Donald Trump had long signalled his intention to both pre-emptively claim victory, and to denounce the election as a fraudulent, corrupted process, just as soon as it looked like he would lose it.

Yet still, it was shocking to see the leader of the free world make baseless claims that undermined the democracy he claims to champion. It was shocking to see his supporters marching on polling venues with a chant, not just of “Stop the count”, but in some cases, “Stop the vote”.

The situation was so changeable that much of what I read this week contained the caveat “at the time of writing”. Now I need to deploy it myself - at the time of writing, Trump had resoundingly lost the popular vote and it was virtually impossible for him to win the electoral college vote. Which turns the transfer of power into a game of chicken.

It is impossible to conceive of Trump giving a concession speech, and so it will be a matter of waiting to see when he blinks, and what that might look like. He might bluster or tantrum his way out of the White House in a nasty but relatively peaceable manner. He may foment violence and refuse to go. Anything seems possible.

While the world watches and waits, the half of Americans who didn't vote for Trump are trying to understand why the other half doubled down on their support of him, and why he was able to improve his vote by about seven million votes from 2016.

It was also confounding, not to mention saddening, to many progressives to learn Trump made incursions into voter bases the Democrats have traditionally owned - black men, Latino people, and Asian people.

Given his open mendacity, corruption and contempt for democratic norms, Trump's mass appeal remains incomprehensible to many, particularly to those of us outside the United States.

American philosopher and author Sam Harris addressed this very mystery in an episode of his podcast *Making Sense*, recorded just before the vote.

“I've been struggling for years to understand how it is possible that nearly half of American society admires or supports Trump,” he said.

Trump's secret, Harris opined, is that no matter how boastful and narcissistic he is, "he is never actually communicating that he is better than you, more enlightened, more decent, because he's not, and everyone knows it".

"Because he is never really judging you ... he offers a truly safe space for human frailty and hypocrisy and self doubt," said Harris. "His personal shamelessness is a spiritual balm."

This appeal makes sense, Harris reckons, when you juxtapose it with the moral superiority, judgment and sanctimony that many of Trump's supporters (and others) associate with the left.

There seem to be two divergent theories when it comes to explaining Trump's appeal. One is economic - his supporters see him as strong on the economy, tough on economic "rivals" like China, and a booster for the blue collar workers whose socio-economic status is threatened by globalisation.

The other theory cleaves close to Harris' - that Trumpism is an identity marker, a protest against the social forces of liberalism. It is about identity and feeling, having little to do with rational economic forces.

Joe Biden has character – he has devoted his life to public service and it is generally agreed he is a man of decency and integrity. But Trump has something better, in the eyes of his supporters – he has style.

It is a style they enjoy watching – bombastic, iconoclastic, a f--k you to the morals and niceties of the liberal middle class. In Freudian terms, Trump is the ultimate id – all instinct and impulse, unchecked by any real controls.

It is mesmerising to watch, and perhaps many millions of people who are happy for him to be that way, because they feel they can't be that way themselves. Research this year from the Cato Institute found 62 per cent of Americans felt the contemporary political climate prevented them from saying things they believe because others might find them offensive. The fear was stronger in Republicans than others.

When you remember Trump's route to the White House was via the yellow brick road of American celebrity, the passionate support of his followers makes even more sense. We need our celebrities to live large and be outrageous, and we forgive them everything if we like their style.

We don't need them to be perfect, on the contrary, we actively want them to be kind-of terrible. When Mariah Carey demands a room-full of puppies on her show rider, it reinforces the essence of her Mariah-ness. If you accept who Trump is, and don't take everything he says terribly seriously, you might find his blustering messages on the "Chinese flu" pleasing, and enjoy it when he denounces progressive elites.

It is performative, and perhaps you believe that, putting aside the showmanship, he gets the major calls right – the economy has done well (exit polls show 76 per cent of Trump voters think the economy is "excellent or good", while 81 per cent of Biden voters think it's "not so good or poor"). He has also "stood up to China", and been "tough" on borders – an appeal Australian voters know well.

The only upside of Trump's enormous personal celebrity appeal is it will be impossible to recapture when he goes. But his indelible mark on American democracy means plenty of others will try, both in the United States and abroad.