

What liberals (still) get wrong about Trump's support

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Liberals and progressives are forever predicting Donald Trump's political demise.

After each purported outrage — Charlottesville, separating children from their immigrant parents, now Helsinki — they confidently contend that this latest event will finally force Trump's supporters to abandon him. Yet not only does this not happen, Trump's support has actually risen by 6 percent since late 2017. How do they keep getting it so wrong?

To quote Ronald Reagan: "The trouble with our liberal friends is not that they're ignorant; it's just that they know so much that isn't so." They presume that because Trump is so unconventional in style, his coalition must be equally unconventional. But it's not. The data clearly shows that Trump's political coalition is pretty much the traditional Republican coalition. And the often virulent behavior of anti-Trump partisans has made partisan Republicans especially unwilling to abandon their leader even when he stumbles.

The sheer ordinariness of Trump's coalition is impossible to overstate. Data from the Voter Study Group show that more than 80 percent of his votes came from men and women who voted for Republican nominee Mitt Romney just four years before. This group contains the usual suspects among American Republicans: tax-cut advocates, religious evangelicals and Catholics, gun rights supporters and business types eager for deregulation. Trump has made sure to give each faction what they most desire just like any good politician would. That keeps them in his camp even as the media flays him with each supposed transgression.

Evangelicals are a case in point. My work on Republican factions, contained in the book I co-authored with Professor Dante Scala, found that very conservative voters who highly value social issues comprise about 25 percent of the party. These voters today are very afraid that liberal and progressive judges will slowly circumscribe their ability to practice their religion in their daily lives. They tended not to support Trump during the primaries, instead backing the Texas Sen. Ted Cruz. Their support for Trump now is highly transactional: so long as he nominates the judges they think will protect their beliefs and way of life, they will overlook virtually anything else he says or does.

The recent nomination of Brett Kavanaugh to the supreme court thus solidified their support, as social conservatives believe he is much likelier to back their views than the man he is replacing, Anthony Kennedy. They might be troubled by other things he says or does, but so long as he keeps his end of the bargain on their priority they will swallow hard and stick with their man.

Nor are Trump's voters united by racism and sexism, as many on the left presume. Analysis by the libertarian Cato Institute's Emily Ekins found that Trump's general election support broke into five groups. Only one, the American Preservationists, contained a large number of voters who could be said to be generally hostile to racial and ethnic minorities per se. They were outnumbered by another group, the Free Marketeers, whose attitudes towards racial and ethnic minorities were as or more tolerant than the attitudes of Hillary Clinton supporters. Each faction's continued support for Trump is based upon how he acts on their priorities, not on one overarching theme.

That doesn't mean Trump backers are blind. Polls show an unusually high share of Republicans do not say they "strongly" approve of his performance; they are well aware of his many foibles and flaws. But in our bipartisan system, opposition to Trump means supporting the Democrats. Absent any indication that Democrats are open to Republicans' views, these voters, sometimes reluctantly, remain in Trump's camp.

Intense opposition to liberal views clearly impacted the 2016 election. Ekins found that each faction within Trump's coalition strongly disapproved of Hillary Clinton. For some this was not mere partisanship: many former Democrats who voted for Trump had reported favorable opinions of Clinton in 2012. For others their dislike of Clinton was the single largest factor behind their vote for Trump. More than half of the Free Marketeers, for example, said their vote was more against Clinton than for Trump, the only Trump faction that said this. Animus towards Democrats and their nominee was a very strong predictor of Trump support even among those who also strongly disliked Trump.

My own work confirms this. The 2016 exit poll showed that Trump won because he decisively beat Clinton among the 18 percent of Americans who did not like either candidate. These voters tended to be suburban, college-educated, Republican-leaning men. These "reluctant Trump voters" were undecided until the very end of the race, but ultimately decided that the devil whose policies they liked was better than the devil whose policies they didn't.

Democrats have done nothing since Trump's election to reduce these feelings. On issue after issue the Democratic party has moved to the left, catering to a progressive base outraged at Trump's election and seething at how the Democratic establishment foisted a fatally flawed candidate upon them. The latest progressive cause célèbre is for eliminating America's border enforcement agency, Immigration and Customs Enforcement or ICE. One can be outraged at how Trump is enforcing America's immigration laws without thinking that eliminating all border enforcement is a good idea. An idea like this keeps Republicans united in their support for Trump as it clearly shows how unacceptable the alternative is.

The news media's behavior also keeps Republicans in line. It is impossible to overstate the degree of daily vituperation visited upon the president in the media. Comics and actors use their non-political programs to attack him, often to the implicit applause of the press. Virtually all coverage outside the conservative Fox News and isolated conservative outlets is negative, often couched in highly hostile terms. Virtually all of the columnists at the New York Times and the Washington Post, America's two most respected dailies, despise Trump — and that includes

nearly all of the conservative, libertarian and Republican columnists too. Trump supporters who follow news at all cannot escape the daily blast of negativity.

This has, predictably, hardened the attitudes of many Trump supporters. As minor issues are blown up into major catastrophes, it's not surprising that potentially major issues like Trump's embarrassing and obsequious behavior towards Russian president Vladimir Putin in Helsinki get overlooked. It's "boy who cried wolf" syndrome writ large; when the media cries "wolf" at every passing shadow, many Trump backers simply don't believe them when they say that a wolf might actually be coming.

None of this is to say that Trump's support is fixed. His job approval went as low as 37 percent in 2017 over his failures to repeal Obamacare or address trade imbalances. Trump's current 43 percent approval rating rests upon a strong economy and continued work for his backers' priorities. Should the economy slow down or he goes back on something his fans value, his support could easily drop. But it is very unlikely to drop much based on the sort of revelations liberals and progressives often revel in.

For better or for worse, much of what Trump says and does is already baked into the cake. And that might not only keep him politically alive, it might serve to re-elect him against a strong progressive candidate two years hence.