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Study: Views on immigration, Muslims drove white voters to Trump

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A new study suggests that voters' economic anxiety and cultural attitudes may be linked to a greater degree than previously reported — and that it potentially determined their votes in last year's presidential elections.

Democrats have struggled to understand what drove some voters — particularly white voters without a college education — who supported then-President Barack Obama in 2012 to back Donald Trump four years later. Was it anxiety about their economic situations, or negative feelings about immigration and racial and ethnic minorities?

The debate has raged in some circles since Trump defeated Hillary Clinton. A study by the [Voter Study Group](#) — comprising 20 conservative, progressive and independent academics and professional survey researchers — on Tuesday offers some potential answers. The group released a trove of polling data that tracks Americans' views back to December 2011.

The main takeaways: While most voters stuck with their party in last year's election, white voters who switched from Obama in 2012 to Trump in 2016 were motivated by their views on immigration, blacks and Muslims — and, to a lesser extent, by their views of the economy and their own financial circumstances.

Trump cobbled together an electoral coalition comprising voters who hold disparate views on economic issues, according to the study, while Democratic voters agree on most policies.

“Voters who experienced increased or continued economic stress were inclined to have become more negative about immigration and terrorism, demonstrating how economic pressures coincided with cultural concerns to produce an outcome that surprised most of us,” said Henry Olsen, the project director for the Voter Study Group and a senior fellow at the Ethics and Public Policy Center.

One paper accompanying the research, written by George Washington University professor John Sides, explores a number of potential factors and the probability of voting for Trump in 2016. Because participants in the poll were also questioned four years prior, it's possible to compare which issues were more salient factors in how voters made their choices in 2012 or 2016. (Sides

used this same 2012 data in the post-campaign book he co-authored with Lynn Vavreck, “The Gamble.”)

First, what didn’t matter: Sides finds that, despite Trump’s deviation from GOP orthodoxy on trade, there wasn’t a “statistically significant relationship between trade attitudes and vote choice in either election.” And while Trump voters had more negative perceptions of the economy, that had about the same impact on voters’ decisions as in 2012.

“What stands out most, however, is the attitudes that became more strongly related to the vote in 2016: attitudes about immigration, feelings toward black people and feelings toward Muslims,” Sides writes in his essay. “This pattern fits the prevailing discourse of the two campaigns and the increased attention to issues involving ethnic, racial and religious minorities in 2016.”

Looking back at 2012, the path for Trump to convert some Obama voters on these issues was clear. Among whites who voted for Obama four years ago, about a third already held views on these cultural attitudes that align more with Trump’s rhetoric. Thirty-seven percent of white Obama voters had a negative view of Muslims and 33 percent said illegal immigrants were “mostly a drain” on society.

The effect was present among all white voters, but it was particularly strong among those without a college degree, Sides writes. Trump’s Electoral College victory hinged on flipping a number of states Obama won twice with large percentages of less-educated white voters: Iowa, Michigan, Ohio, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin.

Another paper, authored by progressive analysts Robert Griffin and Ruy Teixeira, takes the analysis a step further. While the data show the economy wasn’t a more significant factor in 2016 than in 2012, voters’ perceptions of the economy may have helped Trump push voters toward these cultural views.

“[T]hose who expressed negative economic attitudes in 2012 were more likely to express key negative cultural attitudes in 2016 even taking into account their earlier answers to these same cultural questions,” Griffin and Teixeira write. “White respondents who thought the economy was getting worse [in 2012] were more likely in 2016 to say immigration should be made harder, no matter what their answer was to the same question in 2012. ... White respondents who believed the economy was getting worse were more likely to rate Muslims negatively in 2016, no matter how they rated Muslims earlier.”

A third paper from Emily Ekins, a research fellow and polling director at the libertarian Cato Institute, uses post-election survey data to create a political typology of Trump voters: Staunch Conservatives (31 percent), Free Marketeers (25 percent), Americans Preservationists (20 percent), Anti-Elites (19 percent) and The Disengaged (5 percent).

“There is no such thing as ‘one kind of Trump voter’ who voted for him for one particular reason,” Ekins writes.

The study's underpinning is a post-election survey of 8,000 Americans, conducted by the online pollster YouGov, that had been previously interviewed in 2011, 2012 and July 2016.