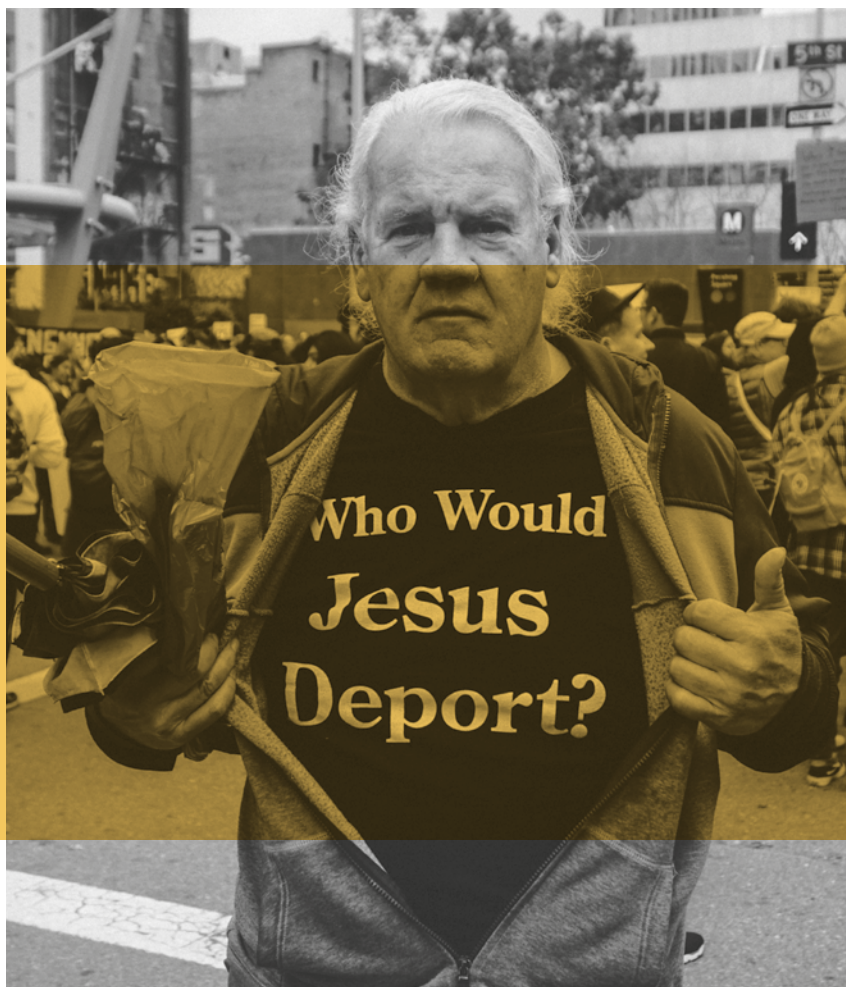


USA

The rise of Trump in a changing America



Emily Ekens



compared to traditional Republicans. Surveys have found that Trump's base is about 20 to 30 points more likely than other Republican voters to favor restricting legal immigration "across the board," building a border wall, deporting unauthorized immigrants residing in the US, and temporarily banning Muslim immigrants.¹³ When it comes to their values, they tend to care more about social cohesion and being loyal to a community and less about being compassionate.¹⁴

Next, data on "party switchers," or voters who voted for Obama in 2012 and Trump in 2016, again point to immigration attitudes being paramount. A Democracy Fund Voter Report finds both sets of party switchers largely differed from their party's candidate's attitudes toward immigrants. For instance, 64% of Obama-to-Trump voters want to make it harder to legally immigrate to the US, compared to 25% of Obama-to-Clinton voters. Romney-to-Clinton voters hold immigration views closer to Clinton voters than Trump voters. Furthermore, statistical models find that support for restricting immigration and opposition to providing citizenship to unauthorized immigrants were most predictive of being an Obama voter who later cast a ballot for Trump.

The political class has been looking for a silver bullet to solve what appears to have become an unsolvable puzzle—what's behind the surprising rise of Donald Trump? Explanations have tended toward the condescending with theories of authoritarianism, collective narcissism, racism, populism, nativism, and economic anxieties as motivators of Trump support. New empirical research finds, however, that complex attitudes toward immigration, with unclear underlying motivations, are what made the 2016 election distinctive.

To understand the rise of Trump, one must look to the voters who were pivotal in catapulting him to the presidency:

1) His early core primary supporters, a minority of Republican voters¹² 2) and general election voters who switched from voting for Obama in 2012 to Trump in 2016. Without these voters, Trump would not be in the White House today. Concerns about immigration, in all their complexity, are what make these pivotal voters unique.

Data on Trump's core primary supporters reveal a distinctive edge

Why immigration? Why now?

The United States has experienced a sharp increase in immigration in recent decades, approaching its historic highs from over 100 years ago. US Census data reports that between 13-14%¹⁵

of the US population is foreign-born, double that from 1990.¹⁶ Although the US had practically open borders and high immigration in the 19th century, Congress sought to halt it in the 1920s with strict immigration restrictions and quotas. For the next 50 years, Americans were far less likely to know and interact with immigrants. Times have changed, and legal and illegal immigration flows have brought the US foreign-born population back to where it was at its historic height in 1890.

Americans' feelings about immigration are complex, and thus reactions to immigration and demographic change have not been monolithic. Research from the forthcoming Democracy Fund Voter Report suggests that several different reasons may motivate immigration concerns.

Immigration offers immense benefits—benefits that outweigh the costs. But there are costs. Change is hard. Different cultures with different traditions, holidays, language, and social norms can be difficult to first understand and then become accustomed to. For those particularly attuned to social cohesion and community, especially Trump's core constituency, immigration presents new challenges. These voters are worried that immigrants may not assimilate into American society. For instance, core Trump supporters are 20 points more likely than other Republicans to be bothered "a lot" by immigrants who don't speak English.¹⁷

Economic pessimism and fears over competition for jobs further compound these immigration concerns, particularly among Trump's early core supporters. The Democracy Fund Voter Report finds that financially hard-pressed voters in 2011 were significantly more likely in 2016 to say legal immigration should be further restricted. Why? Perhaps because, as the report finds, Trump's core supporters feel

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In addition to these, there are certainly other factors driving concerns over immigration, including security fears, fairness concerns, as well as blatant ethno-nationalism.

Political elites have long avoided talking about the potential costs of immigration—and for understandable

reasons too. Many fear the risk that acknowledging potential costs might magnify them. However, ignoring the feelings and fears that many Americans have allowed such feelings to fester unchecked and untested. By failing to address these concerns productively, a golden-haired billionaire came along and blew the lid off the frustration without sophistication or nuance—and often

without facts. Trump lanced the boils, and it stung. But now these feelings are out in the light where we can talk about them, and hopefully more constructively.

America will likely continue on a path toward greater globalization, diversity, and cultural change. As the forces of tolerance grow so too may the forces of fear. To avoid repeating the mistakes of the past, we need to be willing to engage in a dialogue about people's concerns and fears.

Some say there's no point. That the emotions and feelings surrounding immigration are too entrenched. However, an emerging body of research

is finding that people can and do change their minds, even about controversial subjects, when presented with information.¹⁸ But only if they actually hear the information—and are willing to listen in the first place.

Only if we bring assumptions, concerns, and fears into the light can they be addressed, challenged, and potentially changed. And only if we meet people with understanding and empathy, might they be willing to listen.

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