

## Report

# Donald Trump: The Rise of Right-wing Politics in America

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Republican Presidential candidate, Donald Trump, speaking in January 2016 [GETTY IMAGES]

## Abstract

Most political elite and pundits in the United States have been bewildered by the growing popularity of Republican candidate Donald Trump despite his controversial statements about Mexican immigrants, Muslims, refugees, women, and other minorities. He remains a polarizing figure within the uncharted territory of Islamophobia, xenophobia, racism, and misogyny. This report showcases the socio-economic and cultural dynamics which have paved the way for the rise of Trump as he has outperformed 16 other Republican opponents. It makes six propositions about the driving force behind what can be coined as a new doctrine of Trumpism.

## Introduction

The 2016 presidential race has been exceptionally interesting with the deepening ideological gaps between the top three Republican and Democratic contenders: Donald Trump, Hillary Clinton, and Bernie Sanders amidst unprecedented divergence of their political philosophies. Trump's call for the restoration of white America's 'greatness' and Sanders's 'political revolution' have pulled the political discourse in opposite directions to extreme right and extreme left.

Subsequently, Clinton's centrist positions - as known during her previous campaign against Senator Barak Obama in 2008 - have shifted toward progressive liberalism under the impact of Sanders's popularity among the youth and his natural appeal in the television debates and campaign rallies. As a result, Trump and Sanders can be seen as "twin harbingers of a possible American apocalypse—signs of the beginning of the end for the American political tradition and way of life."<sup>(1)</sup>

**Table 1: Shifts of the presidential candidates’ political positions in 2016 [conceptualized by the author]**

Extreme Left	Moderate Left	Centre	Right	Extreme Right
Bernie Sanders	Hillary Clinton	-----	Ted Cruz	Donald Trump

The underlying hypothesis in the report is that there is a strong correlation between Trump, as a newcomer to presidential politics, and his right-wing followers protesting their socio-economic decline vis-à-vis the self-empowerment of some minorities and the electoral victory of the first black president in 2008. Trump and his followers, who make 40 percent of conservative voters, can be conceived as two sides to the same political coin. He has vowed “America First will be the major and overriding theme of my administration. But to chart our path forward, we must first briefly take a look back. We have a lot to be proud of.”(2)

By using the tools of critical discourse analysis, one can identify the ideological connection and claims of power between Trump and his followers. Critical Discourse Analysis can be defined as the uncovering of implicit ideologies in the texts as it unveils the underlying ideological prejudices and therefore the exercise of power in texts.”(3) From this perspective, one can deconstruct the appeal of Trumpism as a defense of the whiteness of America.

**Statesman or Showman?**

The rise of Trump represents two interrelated phenomena: one political with an ideological trajectory of protecting America and re-empowering the white majority; and the other is mediatised as he has capitalized on his TV fame and manipulated most broadcast and print media outlets.

His Democratic rival Bernie Sanders captured the irony of this media-driven Trumpism when he said "any stupid, absurd remark made by Donald Trump becomes the story of the week. Maybe, just maybe, we might want to have a serious discussion about the serious issues facing America.”(4)

According to a SMG Delta study, Trump benefited from nearly two-billion dollars of free advertisement. By mid-March 2016, his campaign kept the expenditure under \$10 million; whereas his rival Jeb Bush spent \$86 million and Marco Rubio allocated \$55 million. However, Bush and Rubio failed in their pursuit of destabilizing voters’ trust of Trump’s platform.

Media critics point to the construction of Candidate Trump in the public eye with no serious hard-ball follow-up questions. As the New York Times columnist Franc Bruni notices, "There are legitimate questions of proportion in regard to Trump coverage, and perhaps he has been accorded additional acres of news media real estate because he's so easy to talk and write about, a policy-free zone of quickly digested, succinctly rendered struts and slurs."<sup>(5)</sup>

### **The New 'Hero' of WASP**

The businessman-turned-politician Trump has positioned himself with the extreme right, evangelical, and White Anglo-Saxon Protestant (WASP) groups with the hope of "making America great again." He has vowed to restore the socio economic power of the white majority in the backdrop of American exceptionalism.

Trump characterizes his candidacy as a "working-class" rebellion movement against the Republican elite and the "failing" policies of the Obama administration. He argues that "the middle class is getting clobbered in this country. You know the middle class built this country, not the hedge fund guys, but I know people in hedge funds that pay almost nothing and it's ridiculous, OK?"<sup>(6)</sup>

His criticism of the Obama doctrine has been a cornerstone in his campaign. He accuses President Obama of "weakening our military by weakening our economy. He's crippled us with wasteful spending, massive debt, low growth, a huge trade deficit and open borders. Our manufacturing trade deficit with the world is now approaching \$1 trillion a year."<sup>(7)</sup>

According to recent YouGov polls, 20 percent of his supporters describe themselves as "liberal" or "moderate," with 65 percent saying they are "conservative" and only 13 percent labeling themselves as "very conservative." Less than a third of his followers say they are involved with the Tea Party movement. Their views put them on the right side of the American electorate, but they cover the Republican mainstream.<sup>(8)</sup>

Trump's support skewed male, white, and poor. The male-female gap was 19 percentage points (47 percent support among men versus 28 percent among women). He won a whopping 50 percent of voters making less than \$50,000, 18 percentage points ahead of his support with those who earned more than that amount.<sup>(9)</sup>

His attacks against certain minorities like Muslim Americans and Mexican immigrants have been fueled by his pursuit of defying political correctness and the traditional presidential appearance. Many Americans experience the reign of political correctness as a "form of dishonor or humiliation".<sup>(10)</sup>

Ironically, Clinton and Sanders became de facto defenders of the American values and the Constitution and the safeguards of the Melting Pot philosophy which has shaped America's history in the last three centuries. Clinton said Trump has made a name for himself in this election by "trafficking in prejudice and paranoia. At a time when America should be doing everything we can to fight radical jihadists, Mr. Trump is supplying them with new propaganda. He's playing right into their hands."<sup>(11)</sup>

Accordingly, Trumpism can be analyzed as a dialectical relationship between group identity formation and populist and protectionist leadership. According to the New York Times, the number of Americans who still believe in the American Dream has fallen to the lowest level in 20 years. More than half of all Americans under the age of 25 no longer believe that capitalism is the best of all economic systems.

A recent study conducted by RAND Corporation found that "this feeling of powerlessness and voicelessness was a much better predictor of Trump support than age, race, college attainment, income, attitudes towards Muslims, illegal immigrants, or Hispanic identity."<sup>(12)</sup>

Trump considers himself as a pragmatist power-driven leader and a hero of white America politics. He believes he can be an effective CEO at the White House after the November 8th election striking political deals in the same way he has built his real estate empire. Under a Trump administration, as he vowed, "No American citizen will ever again feel that their needs come second to the citizens of a foreign country."<sup>(13)</sup>

Within this nativist and nationalist mindset, there has been strong allegiance in both directions between Trump and his followers. Some analysts assert that "one common explanation of Trump's success is that his supporters are irrational. Many conservative commentators have observed that Trump's legions stick with him, even in the face of repeated explanations of his many deficiencies... There is, however, no reason for his supporters to be driven away from him even by his real imperfections if they find no other candidate addressing their concerns."<sup>(14)</sup>

### **Eight Pillars of Trumpism**

Trump has contested the status-quo politics of the Republican Party, and accused its leaders of betraying the middle class (a politically-correct reference to the "working class"). In less than ten months (September 2015-July 2016), Trump ignored the Republican Party's conventional legacy, and subsequently emerged as the de-facto Leader.

Still, the Republican leadership, either at the Congress or at the helm of state governorship, struggles with the unstoppable tide of Trumpism, which deviates from the

legacy of great Republicans like Abraham Lincoln (1861-1985), Theodore Roosevelt (1901-1909), and Ronald Reagan (1981-1989). As Carson Holloway explains, “many conservative intellectuals seem to have worked themselves into a state of indignation that makes it difficult to understand the Trump phenomenon. They have convinced themselves that a vote for Trump is necessarily and obviously an act of grave political irresponsibility. Yet Trump has won the votes of millions of ordinary, decent Americans.”(15)

**Trump’s political discourse has been shaped by eight main points:**

- 1) The need for building a firewall between the United States and Mexico as a preventive measure against illegal immigration and drug trafficking;
- 2) Protection of the U.S. national security from terrorism and banning the entry of Muslims to the United States to the extent that Trump has become the new advocate of Islamophobia;
- 3) Opposition of all humanitarian calls to welcome some of the Syrian refugees with the pretext that some of them could be ‘members’ of the Islamic State in Syria and Levant (ISIL), and the need for containing what he terms as ‘radical Islam’;
- 4) The advocacy of various controversial methods of torture and interrogation, including waterboarding, vis-à-vis suspected members of terrorist groups, farther than what was approved by the George Bush administration (2001 2009);
- 5) Aggressive development of the U.S. military capabilities and America’s hard power beyond the reach of other nations as a strategy of deterrence;
- 6) Penalization of U.S. companies for outsourcing their manufacturing operations overseas and imposing heavy fines and tariffs on Chinese and Japanese exports;
- 7) The characterization of the new nuclear accord with Iran as “weakness” in the Obama administration’s approach to negotiations; and
- 8) Revisiting the U.S. coverage of the national security costs for certain allies like Japan, South Korea, and the Arab Gulf states.

**Flirting with Neo-Fascism**

Trump’s public discourse has been synonyms to several controversies. He has developed the notoriety of being a “loose cannon” firing frequent attacks against Mexican immigrants, Muslims, refugees, women, and other minorities. Hillary Clinton argues that

“Trump’s ideas aren’t just different – they are dangerously incoherent. They’re not even really ideas – just a series of bizarre rants, personal feuds, and outright lies.”(16)

As a new complex political doctrine; Trumpism can be considered the product of the frustration, fear, and intolerance of most conservatives: It is also the nexus of white, extreme right wing, nativist, and isolationist politics. One of the most controversial statements was his call for a ban on the entry of Muslims to the United States in December 2015. This narrative implies a clash-of-civilizations interpretation of the terrorism dilemma. He reinforced his position three months later with another rejectionist narrative “Islam hates us”. His fellow candidates; both Democrats and Republican as shown in Table 2, criticized him for drifting towards demagoguery and authoritarianism.

**Table 2: Reactions of presidential candidates to Donald Trump’s call for banning the entry of Muslims into the United States [compiled by the author]**

<b>Democratic candidates</b>	
Hillary Clinton	“I think it’s prejudiced, I think it’s discriminatory. That has no place in our politics.”
Bernie Sanders	“A demagogue’ “We are a weak nation when we allow racism and xenophobia to divide us”.
Martin O’Malley	“He is running for President as a fascist demagogue”.
<b>Republican candidates (left the presidential race)</b>	
Ted Cruz	“This is not my policy”
Lindsey Graham	“Frankly dangerous”
John Kasich	“This is just more of the outrageous divisiveness that characterizes his every breath and another reason why he is entirely unsuited to lead the United States.”
Jeb Bush	“Trump is unhinged. His "policy" proposals are not serious.”
Marco Rubio	“His habit of making offensive and outlandish statements will not bring Americans together.”
Carli Fiorina	“An over exaggerated and dangerous statement.”

Trump’s Islamophobia, anti-immigration, and anti-refugees positions have revealed some fatigue of American democracy. Fascism scholar Robert Paxton notices that "the use of ethnic stereotypes and exploitation of fear of foreigners is directly out of the fascist's recipe book. A sense of victimhood is absolutely essential to the rise of fascism and that is very strong in America today, particularly among the white middle class.”(17)

Carl Bernstein veteran editor of the Washington Post argues that Trump is “a neo-fascist in the sense of his appeal and methodology that has to do with authoritarianism, nativism, and incitement, which we're seeing now.”(18) However, I argue that this

coziness with neo-fascism and tyranny implies the existence of some societal shifts which have served as a launching platform of Trumpism.

## Properties of Trumpism

The presidential campaigns of 2016 have shown an increasing shift toward extreme right-wing politics. Trump seems to claim some exaggerated credit for mobilizing the white middle class if we take into consideration his limited knowledge and experience in politics. Subsequently, the precursors of Trumpism can be summarized in six main points:

- 1. Nihilism:** Trump has often referred to a general economic, political, strategic, and military 'decline' of the United States despite President Obama's success in cutting the unemployment rate by half (nearly 10 percent in 2009 to 5 percent in early 2016) and initiating a new era in the U.S. international relations. Trump's isolationist stance translates into contesting the new nuclear accord with Iran, the new policy toward Cuba, and even Obamacare as one of Obama's signature reforms of domestic policies. Trump said his supporters want a leader who can "blow the existing system into hell."
- 2. Protectionism:** Trump's dark view of America and fear of the other has led to growing attachment to political and economic protectionism. Many American workers remain skeptical of several free trade agreements, including NAFTA with Mexico and Canada, and the trade imbalance with China, Japan, and Mexico. Trump has vowed to impose up to 45 percent tariffs on the U.S. outsourced products. His supporters applaud this policy despite its potential negative on the U.S. economy and their personal income.
- 3. Nativism:** The presidential rallies have shown clear differences of the ethnic traits among the candidates' supporters. Trump's followers in particular seem to be the whitest, with a dominant European ancestry, and the least representative of the multi-racial and colored America. They have been uncomfortable with the current demographic shift with one million new immigrants settling in America every year. They also remain concerned with the growth of the Latino communities as the new majority by 2025. This nativism was one of the precursors of the Tea Party which presented itself as a renewal movement of the Republican Party in 2009.
- 4. Populism or Defending the People?** Trump tends to use a simplified and fiery language beyond political correctness and the nuances of the public discourse. His communication strategy reveals two main tendencies: a) his limited political



knowledge which he derives from watching news programs on television, and b) the no-university educational background of most of his supporters. However, Trump's apparent populism is not innocent; it hides a deliberate ideological exploitation of the gap between the political elite in Washington and ordinary Americans. It is also an extension to his demagogy in playing the card of identity politics.

**5. Nationalism, not Patriotism:** Trump stands out as a 'national hero' in the eyes of his supporters seeking the protection of the national security and restoring the pride and standing of America in the world. However, this apparent patriotism hides a sinister framework of white American nationalism and supremacy politics. Accordingly, Trump's discourse seems to tap into the narcissism of his WASP base among the so-called "Me Generation". They are the young Americans of the seventies, who considered themselves to be the 'center' of the universe, revolting against tolerance, social integration, and political correctness.

**6. Trial of the Republican Party:** Trump's electoral popularity has not existed in a vacuum; but is energized by a negative sentiment vis-à-vis the Republican Party establishment. For the last twenty years, Republican leaders have sided with wealthy conservatives and Wall Street elite instead of formulating a pro-active strategy to help avoid the current rupture between the Party and the working class. Trump's popularity implies the failure of the Republican Party in containing the Tea Party as a rebellious movement against the elitist Republican policies.

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