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Trump Voters Expect Drastic Change and Jobs. Unity? Not so Much



As the professional political class continues to debate the reasons for Donald Trump's victory, those who voted for him are very clear on why he won and what they expect from him once he's in office. This was a vote for "drastic change". They don't want Trump to act more "presidential" (well, they'd like him to stop tweeting so much). But, overall the message and the messenger are one in the same. Only a "bull-in-the-china-shop" type candidate is capable of breaking up the dysfunction and "corruption" they see in Washington. Most important, his voters aren't holding him to each and every promise he made on the trail – even his most high-profile ones. What they do expect is an improved economy, more jobs and the end of Obamacare.

This is the takeaway I got from attending a focus group this week of twelve Cleveland-area voters who supported Trump. The group was conducted by preeminent pollster Peter Hart for the Annenberg Public Policy Center at the University of Pennsylvania. Although all the participants in the group supported Trump, not all of them were die-hard GOPers. Seven had voted for either President Obama or President Clinton at one point in their lives. Three voted for Obama in 2012. What they did share in common was a frustration with the status quo and a desire to show the folks in DC that things need to be shaken up.

Of course, these 12 voters aren't representative of all Trump supporters. That's not the point. What they can do is to give us a more nuanced understanding of the kinds of issues, agendas and attitudes that Trump voters hold. They can also provide us with an important window into understanding the challenges Trump may have with those who supported him. Given the deep polarization in the country, and the fact that Clinton won the popular vote, Trump's hold on his base is going to be more important than ever. If he loses them, he has no net to catch him.

So, what does his base think – and what do they want?

Even Trump supporters viewed the campaign negatively. Despite the fact that their guy won, most of the 12 voters in the room described the 2016 election in negative terms. It was "brutal," "embarrassing," "ruthless" and "unprofessional." Just two described it in positive terms: "entertaining" and "exciting."

When asked the kind of taste 2016 left in their mouth, almost all said a bad one: "awful," "sour" and "bitter" were the most popular descriptions.

They voted for change.... When asked why they supported him, almost all said they wanted someone who was going to challenge the status quo. Here are some of the reasons given for why they supported Trump:

- "I want something different. Good or bad or whether I like it or not"
- "to turn things around, it's been the same old, same old for so long. It's time for change"

- “to not do the same thing over and over again.”
- “we don’t need another politician running things down the toilet.”

...But “change” isn’t about specifics as much as a change in attitude. These voters don’t really expect that he’ll “build the wall.” Just three voters said that he needed to follow through on this promise. Nor do they expect their personal income taxes lowered (though they want to see corporate taxes cut to help spur economic growth). They want to “drain the swamp,” but even there, there’s little specificity in what that means beyond a vague call to “end corruption.”

What they do like are his style, his swagger and his negotiating skills and they expect him to use those to their benefit. They’d like him to tweet less, but otherwise, don’t see a need for him to throttle back from the person they saw on the campaign trail.

It’s all about the economy. When asked the top issue Trump should address, all picked the economy. Jobs was seen as more important to these Ohio voters than: energy, “morals/values issues,” immigration or the budget deficit. Moreover, the economy is the one (and maybe only) measuring stick by which they are going to grade Trump. If things aren’t going well two years from now, asked Hart, why would that be? Almost all said that it was because the economy was in bad shape and/or “Trump didn’t bring more jobs back to America.”

After jobs, they expect Trump to get rid of Obamacare: Like many voters, these folks aren’t quite sure if they want to completely repeal Obamacare or just fix it and call it something else. Their overall frustration about health care was affordability. Getting rid of Obamacare will be easy. Replacing it with an affordable alternative is going to be much harder.

They worry Trump isn’t taking security briefings seriously, but aren’t worried about Russian hacking. When asked which of five different issues bothered them most about Trump – everything from not releasing his tax returns to using Twitter to comment on news of the day – almost all thought that “not attending daily intelligence briefs” was the most problematic. They also were concerned that he would “allow his family to review national security issues.”

“He’s inexperienced, said one man,” he needs to know this.” Another said, “it’s hard to make decisions if you don’t know what’s going on.” As for the security protocol, another participant argued that “certain things are meant for certain people.”

But, when it comes to worries that this election was influenced by Russians, most of these voters shrug it off. “Nonsense,” said Derek, a 39-year-old “strong Republican.” Others thought this was simply the media blowing things out of proportion or “twisting” the facts. And, when it comes to Russia and Vladimir Putin himself, most were cautious but not immediately dismissive of either. One asked of Russia: “are they an ally or an adversary?” When asked to describe Putin, two called him a “leader,” another called him “intense” and a “bad ass”. Just three described him negatively as a “liar”, “devious,” and “manipulator.”

Trump’s indifference to security briefings upsets them more than his potential business conflicts of interests. When asked if they were upset by the possibility that Trump would not put his “financial affairs into a

blind trust like other presidents,” most shrugged. “He’s a wealthy guy who has already made his money”, said one. There’s a feeling that he’s too rich to be bought and as such won’t be subject to the same corrupting influences that other “swamp dwellers” in DC are.

They don’t think he will be able to unite Americans or bridge the racial divide. When asked about his weaknesses in office, almost all agreed that he’ll have a hard time “uniting the country” and “dealing with race relations. Even so, it wasn’t a deal breaker for most of these 12, white voters. Many thought that an improving economy was the best answer to improving the divides in the country. Almost all of these voters thought that partisan gridlock would improve over the next two years. If it doesn’t, they don’t think it will be Trump’s fault.

Their message to wavering Congressional GOPers - get over it. He won and it’s time for you to get on board. Some had harsh words for Paul Ryan, with one calling him “untrustworthy” and another calling him a “weasel.”

Bottom Line: These voters are giving Trump the benefit of the doubt and lots of running room. They expect him to “shake things up,” but aren’t holding him to each and every promise made on the campaign trail. And, while they don’t see Trump as a “unifier,” they also don’t see this as a big problem for him going forward. That, of course, could be wishful thinking given the deep-seeded distrust and dislike of Trump from Democrats. The most **recent Marist poll** found that 72 percent of voters, believe the nation is “more divided now than it was before the presidential election... While Democrats (88%), and independents (73%), are more likely to perceive a post-election schism, even a majority of Republicans (54%), have this view. Moreover, most Democrats, (64 percent) see Trump as “initiating the wrong kind of change”, while 85 percent of Republicans see him bringing about the “right kind of change.”

There is a breaking point for these Trump supporters, however. If the economy tanks - or the jobs don’t appear - they will be less forgiving of their “change maker-in-Chief.”