

# The psychological puzzle of Donald Trump: Eye-opening findings from 20 studies

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Donald Trump's [political](#) rise in 2016 was as unexpected as it was controversial, shaking the American political landscape to its core. Emerging from a background steeped not in politics but in real estate and reality television, Trump's ascent to the presidency defied all conventional wisdom. His brash rhetoric, unfiltered communication style, and populist appeal captivated millions, while simultaneously alienating millions of others.

The phenomenon of Trump's support has since become a focal point for psychologists, sociologists, and political scientists alike, eager to understand what drives such fervent loyalty in his base. What psychological factors contribute to the unwavering support for a leader who has consistently broken political norms? Here, we explore some of the research that has attempted to answer these questions.

Trump's journey to the White House was anything but typical. Traditionally, U.S. presidents have cut their teeth in politics or the military before making a run for the highest office. Trump, however, had neither. His experience lay in business and entertainment, making his leap to the presidency unconventional and unprecedented.

Trump's fame as a real estate mogul and reality TV star provided him with an unparalleled level of name recognition, which he leveraged masterfully in his campaign. He eschewed traditional political strategies, relying instead on large rallies, extensive media coverage, and a powerful social media presence.

Furthermore, Trump's populist rhetoric, which included promises to "drain the swamp" and put "America First," resonated with a significant portion of the electorate. His approach was highly polarizing, often disregarding political norms and taking a combative stance against the political establishment. His rise defied the expectations of political analysts and pollsters alike, making his eventual victory in the 2016 election all the more remarkable.

The surprising nature of Trump's ascent led to a surge in research aimed at understanding his appeal and the broader implications of his presidency. Scholars have since explored a wide array of psychological and social factors that may explain the fervent support Trump enjoys among his base. Below, are 20 studies that offer insights into the psychology of Trump supporters and the impact of Trump's political ascent.

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## 1. [Heightened Moral Division and Support for Strong Leaders](#)

A study published in *Political Psychology* found that perceptions of moral division in society intensify support for authoritarian leaders. Researchers surveyed participants in the U.S., U.K., and Australia, finding that those who perceived a breakdown in societal morals were more likely to support leaders like Donald Trump, who they believed could restore order. The study suggests that the perception of moral polarization leads people to favor strong, rule-breaking leaders who promise to challenge the status quo.

## **2. Authoritarian Aggression and Group-Based Dominance Among Trump Supporters**

Research published in *Social Psychological and Personality Science* analyzed the psychological traits of Trump supporters during the 2016 primaries. The study found that while general right-wing [authoritarianism](#) did not distinguish Trump supporters from other Republican candidates, Trump supporters were uniquely characterized by authoritarian aggression and a preference for group-based dominance. These traits manifested in a greater acceptance of hierarchy and the use of aggressive measures to maintain it. The findings suggest that Trump's appeal was partly rooted in these authoritarian and dominance-oriented dispositions.

## **3. Masculine Insecurity and Aggressive Politics**

Research in the *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* revealed a link between masculine insecurity and support for aggressive political policies, including those endorsed by Trump. The study found that men who feel their masculinity is threatened are more likely to endorse aggressive policies and support leaders like Trump who project a dominant and unyielding persona. This phenomenon is partly explained by the concept of precarious manhood, where men strive to reaffirm their masculinity through aggressive political stances.

## **4. The Trump Presidency's Impact on Prejudice**

A series of 13 studies involving over 10,000 participants, published in *Nature Human Behavior*, examined changes in [racial and religious prejudice](#) among Americans during Trump's presidency. The researchers found that explicit prejudice increased among Trump supporters, while it decreased among those who opposed him. This suggests that Trump's rhetoric may have reshaped social norms, making expressions of prejudice more acceptable among his supporters.

## **5. Simplicity and Happiness Among Trump Supporters**

A study in *Social Psychological and Personality Science* found that Trump supporters tended to use more positive language and exhibit less cognitive complexity compared to Biden supporters. The research suggests that Trump's supporters may engage in more simplistic and categorical thinking, which could be linked to higher levels of happiness and satisfaction with their political choices.

## **6. Cognitive Rigidity and Interpersonal Warmth**

Published in the *Journal of Social and Political Psychology*, this study found that Trump supporters tend to be more cognitively rigid and less interpersonally warm compared to

supporters of Democratic candidates. Even among extreme liberals, the research found that cognitive rigidity was less pronounced than among Trump supporters, suggesting a unique psychological profile among his base.

## **7. Ambivalence Towards Trump**

Research in *PLOS One* highlighted the ambivalence many people feel towards Trump. The study found that about 40% of college students displayed ambivalence in their attitudes towards Trump, indicating that political opinion polls may often overlook the complexity of voter attitudes. This ambivalence could have played a role in the unexpected outcome of the 2016 election.

## **8. Perceptions of Trump's Personality Disorders**

A study in *Clinical Psychological Science* revealed that American voters, regardless of their political leanings, perceived Donald Trump as having traits associated with sadistic and [narcissistic personality disorders](#). Both Trump supporters and detractors rated him as highly disordered, with only a difference in the degree of perceived dysfunction. The research highlighted that voters were not necessarily divided on Trump's personality traits but rather on how these traits influenced their judgment of his suitability as a leader.

## **9. Narcissism and Support for Trump**

A study in the *Journal of Social Psychology* explored the relationship between narcissism and support for Trump. The researchers found that narcissism was linked to increased support for Trump, mediated by anti-immigrant attitudes and right-wing authoritarian beliefs. The findings suggest that Trump's appeal may be partly rooted in his alignment with the narcissistic tendencies of some of his supporters.

## **10. Narcissistic Traits Among Trump Supporters**

Likewise, a study published in *PLOS One* found that Trump supporters tend to exhibit narcissistic traits similar to those displayed by Trump himself. The research identified antagonism and indifference to others as key narcissistic traits that predicted support for Trump in the 2020 election, suggesting that his supporters may be drawn to his grandiose and aggressive personality.

## **11. Racial Attitudes and Polarization**

A study published in *Political Psychology* found that Trump's 2016 campaign had a polarizing effect on the racial attitudes of white Americans. Those who supported Trump were more likely to dehumanize Black people after the election, while those who opposed him became more empathetic. This polarization highlights the deepening racial divide that has been exacerbated by Trump's rhetoric.

## **12. Moral Congruence and Political Support**

Research in *Political Psychology* found that voters tend to adjust their moral views to align with those of their preferred candidates. The study found that Trump supporters, in particular, were likely to revise their moral beliefs to reduce inconsistencies with Trump's positions. This suggests that political leadership can significantly influence the moral beliefs of voters.

### **13. The Effectiveness of Trump's Nicknaming Strategy**

A study in the *Journal of Political Marketing* examined the effectiveness of Trump's use of nicknames for his political rivals, such as "Sleepy Joe" for Joe Biden. The research found that while many people remembered the nicknames, they were not necessarily more likely to believe the negative connotations associated with them. The study highlights the limitations of this campaign strategy in swaying voter opinions.

### **14. Religious Beliefs and Support for Trump**

Published in *Politics and Religion*, this study found that white evangelical Christians who view themselves as a religious minority are more likely to believe that Trump's election was part of God's plan. The research suggests that feelings of [religious identity](#) threat may have played a significant role in the unwavering support for Trump among white evangelicals.

### **15. Populism and Criminal Behavior**

A study in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* found that individuals with strong populist beliefs, particularly those aligned with Trump's "America First" agenda, were more likely to have been arrested in their lifetime. The research suggests a link between populist views, socioeconomic frustration, and criminal behavior, highlighting the complex relationship between political beliefs and personal conduct.

### **16. MAGA Republicans and Political Violence**

Research published in *PLOS One* found that MAGA Republicans, a faction of Trump supporters, are more likely than other groups to endorse political violence. The study revealed that this group holds distinct beliefs on race and democracy, which set them apart from other Republicans and non-Republicans. However, the willingness to engage in violence personally remained low across all groups.

### **17. Victimhood and Support for Trump**

A study in *Political Behavior* found that Trump supporters who scored high on measures of egocentric victimhood were more likely to feel warmly towards him. In contrast, those who felt a sense of systemic victimhood were more hostile towards Trump. The research suggests that feelings of personal victimhood may play a significant role in shaping political preferences.

### **18. The Rise of Political Authoritarianism and Identity Fusion**

A study published in *Political Psychology* investigated the rise of political authoritarianism in the U.S., particularly surrounding the January 6, 2021, insurrection. The researchers found that Trump supporters who felt a deep personal connection to him (identity fusion) were more likely to perceive Democrats as existential threats and endorse authoritarian actions against them. However, those who fused their identity more with the broader concept of “America” were less likely to support such extreme measures.

#### **19. Anti-Vaccination Engagement on Twitter**

A study published in *PLOS One* found that anti-vaccination profiles on Twitter, which were often influenced by Donald Trump, were more engaged and interconnected than pro-vaccination counterparts. The anti-vaccination group was more active, generated more emotional and [conspiracy-laden content](#), and formed a tightly-knit network that amplified misinformation. Trump, despite not overtly promoting anti-vaccination as president, was identified as a key influencer in this network, linking vaccination with autism in past tweets.

#### **20. Trump’s Influence on Media Preferences**

Research published in *Public Opinion Quarterly* explored how Donald Trump’s tweets influenced perceptions of Fox News and alternative media outlets like OANN. Trump’s increasing criticism of Fox News on Twitter correlated with a decline in the network’s ratings among Republicans, who began to show a greater willingness to consume more extreme alternatives such as OANN. Interestingly, Democrats viewed Fox News more favorably following Trump’s attacks, suggesting a shift in their perception of the network. The study highlights the powerful role of political elites in shaping media consumption preferences through their rhetoric.