

What Donald Trump's Most Loyal Followers May Have in Common

Research on the former president's supporters finds high levels of conscientiousness.

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Key points

- It has been suggested that Donald Trump has built a cult of personality around himself.
- Trump's core followers may have distinct characteristics, as compared to less-enthusiastic supporters.
- New research suggests Trump's most loyal followers score high on measures of conscientiousness.



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A *cult of [personality](#)* refers to glorification and excessive devotion to a [charismatic](#) leader. Personality cults are usually produced by dictators or authoritarian regimes to manipulate public opinion and maintain power. Historical examples include Adolf Hitler, Joseph Stalin, and Chairman Mao. Donald Trump has also been accused of fostering a [cult](#) of personality, with the assassination attempt he recently survived making him more of a martyr for his cause and adding to his apparent messianic appeal.

But the U.S. is a democracy and not an authoritarian state in which the state-controlled educational system and mass media can be used to spread propaganda. So how do we explain why so many Americans idolize Trump, despite his apparent flaws and transgressions?

Perhaps the answer has as much to do with personality as it does with [politics](#). That is what a recent study by Goldsmith and Moen has found. Published in *Political Psychology*, their paper [examines](#) the personality characteristics of Trump's most loyal supporters.

The data used in this investigation came from two studies. One was the 2016 American National Election Study, and the other was a 2021 online survey of 1,038 American adults.

The 2021 survey assessed [social dominance orientation](#), right-wing authoritarianism, and the "Big Five" personality traits: [openness to experience](#), [neuroticism](#), [extraversion](#), [conscientiousness](#), and [agreeableness](#).

Some items also evaluated participants' perceptions of Trump's and Joe Biden's presidencies (e.g., the legitimacy of the 2020 presidential election and the Jan. 6 Capitol riot).

The authors used the label "Trump Followers" for participants who showed "extreme loyalty" to him. In the 2021 survey, this label applied to individuals who:

- Voted for Trump in 2020.
- Strongly approved of Trump's performance as president.
- Strongly approved of how he handled the [coronavirus](#) pandemic.
- Felt Trump will be remembered as an "outstanding" or at least "above average" president.
- Believed Trump acted responsibly after the 2020 election.
- Believed Republican leaders should follow Trump's [leadership](#).
- Strongly agreed with the view that the media had treated Trump unfairly.

Data showed that 10% of respondents were categorized as Trump Followers; this included 33% of Republicans, 0.6% of Democrats, and 5% of Independents.

Similar criteria were used in the 2016 study, in which. "Trump Followers" were identified as those who:

- Voted for or intended to vote for Trump in the 2016 election.
- Had a strong preference for Trump tied to their vote.
- Found nothing to dislike about Trump.
- Rated Trump, on a 0–100 feeling thermometer, 90 or higher.
- Said Trump makes them feel hopeful either "most of the time" or "always."

About 6% of this sample were Trump Followers: 13% of Republicans, 0.8% of Democrats, and 3% of Independents.

Conscientious Trump followers?

Even though the two investigations were conducted four years apart, a finding common to both was that the most loyal supporters of Donald Trump were likely to score high on the trait of [conscientiousness](#). Conscientiousness, one of the Big Five personality traits, is defined as a tendency to control one's impulses, be persistent, act dutifully, and live up to one's obligations to others.

Conscientiousness has been linked to a variety of positive traits and behaviors, such as responsibility, dependability, hard work, goal orientation, [self-control](#), and [leadership](#). Some conscientious people, however, happen to be dogmatic, inflexible, unquestioningly obedient, and intolerant of uncertainty (i.e., they tend to see things in [black-and-white](#)).

The fact that the strongest Trump supporters received high scores on conscientiousness is not surprising. After all, a leader who demands loyalty requires his base to show high self-discipline and do what he expects, no matter the cost. This mindset is even more likely when a leader's most loyal supporters see him as perfect.

Supporters' psychological needs

In essence, what this recent study suggests is that Trump's appeal may not be purely or even primarily political. Yes, voters who hold right-wing, [anti-immigrant](#), anti-free trade, or anti-elitist views may prefer to vote for Trump. But for his most ardent followers, the former president's appeal has a lot to do with how his leadership style meets their psychological needs.

An illustrative example of this comes from his speech at the 2016 Republican convention, when he said "I am your voice," and "I alone can fix it. I will restore law and order." Or last year, when he told a crowd in Maryland that in addition to being their voice, "Today, I add: I am your warrior. I am your justice. And for those who have been wronged and betrayed, I am your retribution."

As historian Yoni Appelbaum [noted](#) in 2016, Trump did not "appeal to prayer, or to God. He did not ask Americans to measure him against their values, or to hold him responsible for living up to them. He did not ask for their help." Trump only "asked them to place their faith in him."

This kind of leader-follower relationship is characteristic of personality cults. Goldsmith and Moen suggest, "Trump's call for loyalty and claim that he 'alone can fix it' ... appeal to a desire for discipline by giving a cause individuals can (and must) fully commit to." Importantly, the level of commitment Trump demands surpasses what a leader in a democratic system typically demands: "He denigrates not only ideological and electoral opponents but also those who might share power or authority within his ideological and political cohort." In a sense, Trump is a "[jealous](#) political leader and does not brook divided or shared loyalty."

Voters who are both aware of this and also happen to have high levels of consciousness, it appears, "find the allure of Trump's leadership appealing because it meets a basic need making them susceptible to personalistic, loyalty-demanding leaders."