

# Explaining the Trump Phenomenon

Since the days of Richard Nixon's "Southern Strategy," the Republican Party has played to the grievances of angry white men (and some women), in effect creating a ready audience for a hot-headed and quick-witted showman like Donald Trump, a classic case of reaping what is sown, as Lawrence Davidson explains.

By Lawrence Davidson

It is really not too hard to figure out Donald Trump. The man is having fun.

What we have witnessed so far is a demonstration of how a billionaire megalomaniac and narcissist has fun: having secured a national stage, he runs around and says whatever he pleases, even if it is blatantly obnoxious. If he gets positive feedback, he does it all the louder. If he gets negative feedback, he turns into a bully, which he also sees as fun.

If his alliance with Fox "News" doesn't work out, maybe he will buy his own network. If the Republican Party spurns him, he will no doubt start his own political party. He can afford it and, again, it's a lot of fun. By the way, while Trump is having fun many of the rest of us don't find him funny at all. Indeed, it's a serious question whether Mr. Trump's good time will, in the end, encourage him to become a dangerous demagogue.

If explaining Donald Trump isn't all that difficult, explaining why millions of people applaud him is more of a challenge. And it is, after all, millions. There are roughly 219 million Americans who are qualified to vote, but only approximately 146 million are registered to do so. Of those registered, 29 percent are signed up as Republicans, or about 42 million people. According to a [Aug. 4 CBS poll](#), Trump has a favorable rating among 24 percent of that number, or about 10 million people. We can assume that this is a low number, given it only counts presently registered Republicans and not independents.

There is a lot of speculation over why these people like Trump. Here are the typical reasons given:

, "[Trump has found support](#) from Republican voters looking for a successful businessman to jumpstart an economic renaissance." This sort of sentiment is seconded by the opinion that, because he is a rich businessman, he must know how to "generate jobs." Of course, this is an illusion. Most businesspeople operate within economic pockets and know little about "the economy" as a whole. Many of them get rich not by creating jobs but by eliminating them through mergers and downsizing operations.

,He is not a Washington insider, he has never worked in Washington or been “stained by political life.” This is a very questionable asset. Government is a bureaucratic system with well-established rules. The notion that Mr. Trump can come into such a system and “revolutionize” it without causing chaos is fantasy.

,Trump “is a fighter” and “people want a fighter.” He tells it like it is and has no time for “political correctness,” of which most people are allegedly “deathly tired.” In other words, there is a subset of the population who don’t like minority groups or their demand for respect. They don’t like feminists and their concerns about women’s rights. They don’t like immigrants and the notion that the government should treat them like human beings. Trump has become their champion because he says what they believe, which, of course, passes for an assumed truth: all of this “political correctness” is an anti-American attack on traditional values.

Many of these Trump supporters are oblivious to the fact that they themselves are descended from both legal and illegal immigrants who had to fight the prejudiced sentiments of people just like them to become accepted citizens. That presents an almost laughable picture, except their sentiments are also very scary.

### **The Permanently Disaffected**

These sentiments are really the surface emanations of a crowd phenomenon that has deeper meaning and persistent historical roots. In all societies, one finds the chronically disaffected, frustrated and resentful. Their numbers may go up or down according to economic and social circumstances, but they never go to zero.

In the U.S., this statistically permanent set of disaffected citizens seems to find itself most comfortable amidst the ultra-conservative right, with its hatred of “big” government and its resentment of just about any taxation. All of this is melded to national chauvinism and exceptionalism. Of late this minority has become quasi-organized in what is known as the Tea Party movement.

A Gallup poll conducted in October 2014 suggested that 11 percent of voting-age Americans are “strong supporters” of the Tea Party movement. If we use the 219 million figure given above, that comes to 24 million Americans. There is certainly an overlap here with the 10 million avid followers of Donald Trump.

What this means is that Trump, in his narcissistic pursuit of recognition, has tapped into a subgroup of the population that includes the permanently dissatisfied. He can rally them and perhaps bring them together into a bigger

movement of, say, 20 to 25 percent of the population. But he can never satisfy that element's essentially nihilistic grumbling.

In other words, Trump is playing with fire and at some point he will have to wake up to just what sort of monster he has by the tail. Then he will have to decide: is he just out for fun or does he want to go the route of the demagogue?

The American people are not immune to demagoguery. In fact Fox "News," on the air 24/7, has made a lot of money showcasing demagogues of one sort or another. Bill O'Reilly might be the most well known of the lot.

These people have had their predecessors, particularly during the Great Depression, such as Father Charles Coughlin, a Detroit-based Catholic priest who ended up supporting fascist principles. His radio broadcasts had tens of millions of listeners. And then there is Joe McCarthy, etc.

Donald Trump certainly has the qualifications to join the long list of history's demagogues: good speech-making abilities, no problem with playing fast and loose with the facts, and an affinity for the crowd, which energizes him. For him it also seems to be a lot of fun. For the rest of us it is just another aspect of living under the old curse of interesting times.

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