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Power for the Powerless: How Donald Trump Used Voters' Anxieties to Win in 2016

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Abstract

Previous research has attempted to explain the results of the 2016 presidential election, and has concluded that a jaded and anxious electorate propelled Trump to the White House. The current research examines what psychological processes might have been at play. When people feel powerless in their day-to-day lives but are made to feel powerful it leads to behavior that goes against standard moral beliefs (e.g., supporting a presidential candidate who makes offensive comments that one might not explicitly endorse). I hypothesize that a feeling of powerfulness among a subset of the population used to feeling powerless will increase their support for Trump. Participants were randomly assigned to feel either powerful or powerless, and then took 'support for Trump' surveys. The hypothesis was partially confirmed. Men, but not women, who were felt powerless in their day-to-day lives, but were made to feel powerful in the context of the study were most likely to support President Trump. The research therefore provides evidence that some Trump voters were motivated to vote Trump based on how powerful he made them feel.

Power for the Powerless: How Donald Trump Used Voters' Anxieties to Win in 2016

The 2016 Presidential election sent shockwaves through America, and political pundits and scientists are still trying to figure out the how and why of Donald Trump's surprise victory. Part of the confusion stems from the fact that Trump was a very inexperienced candidate running against a highly experienced opponent who was heir to the incumbent political party during a good economy (Sides et al., 2017). Also, on the campaign trail, Trump made what many would consider many offensive and inappropriate comments (Glorioso, 2016). In addition to that, Trump made anti-immigrant sentiments a centerpiece of his campaign, and although most Americans do not view themselves as racist (Hopkins, 2019), many of them voted for Donald Trump, a man who 51% of the nation says is racist (Snow et al., 2019). What is going on here?

The present research examines potential psychological explanations for President Trump's election. The explanations require an understanding of the identity of his main supporters, what they like about his message, and the psychological processes at the heart of the 2016 election.

Trump Supporters: From Economic Insecurity to Xenophobia

Many pundits and scholars have identified President Trump's strong anti-immigration attitudes as a salient factor that appeals to much of his base (Burnett, 2016). According to Major et al. (2018), part of President Trump's base includes white Americans who are anxious about race relations. Major et al. found that reminding white people who are high in ethnic identification (i.e., who frequently think of their ethnic identity) that they will soon be a minority group led them to become more concerned about the waning status and influence of white Americans. These people then self-reported identifying greatly with Trump and anti-immigration policies.

In line with these findings, Darwish et al. (2017) analyzed President Trump's tweets, and found that some of the most popular ones were immigration related. In particular, his tweets about building the wall on the American-Mexican border received a lot of positive attention from his supporters.

Why is immigration so important to his supporters? A possible reason is suggested by system justification theory (SJT; e.g., Jost et al., 2011). SJT essentially states that when people feel anxious, they look to the status quo (e.g., the economic system of a country) for reassurance. People like to believe that the system they live in is fair, just, and legitimate. This assuages anxiety because when people know that they live in a universe that has a sense of justice and order, then they are able to make accurate predictions about the environment, and thus act in a way that is beneficial to their goals (Furnham, 2003). Therefore, when people feel uncertain and anxious they rely on something that is fair, just, and legitimate to assure them that everything is good. Hennes et al. (2012) found that when there was high anxiety, people showed more support for the Tea Party (a conservative group focused on affirming traditional American values) and lower support for the Occupy Wall Street movement (a liberal group concerned with changing America's economic culture). Similarly, Van der Toorn and colleagues (2015) found that when people feel powerless, they become motivated to view the (traditional) economic system as legitimate, indicating that they look to the system in order to feel a sense of stability.

These findings seem to mirror the dynamics of the 2016 election, in that Trump's supporters were feeling helpless to maintain their higher status in society, and Trump represented a return to the status quo. For example, many Americans were feeling the effects of economic globalization (Dodo, 2016). People were losing their jobs to places overseas, and because of that many Americans felt that America had lost its status as a dominant power. This has led to people

yearning for the ‘good old days’ when they had jobs and America was the ‘best country’. This, coupled with the fear that many dangerous immigrants were coming to America (and changing the country), had many people wishing for a time before immigration was such a large specter of fear.

Indeed, Donald Trump was very open about his love for the American status quo (e.g., his campaign slogan was “Make America Great Again”; Darwish et al., 2017). For instance, he has frequently advocated for the restriction of non-white immigration. That was made clear when he said how he did not want immigrants from “shithole countries” (i.e. Latin American and African countries; Dawsey, 2018). These are areas that are having many people immigrate to America, a relatively new trend. President Obama, a black progressive man, and his political heir, 2016 Democratic Presidential nominee Hillary Clinton, a woman, also represented a change in American society, a change that many people felt threatened by (hence the rise of groups such as the Tea Party; Sides et al., 2017).

In general, Trump supporters might have been feeling anxious about their position in society. They might have felt that their traditional position at the top of society was being threatened. Trump addressed their concerns by implying that he would protect their position at the top of society by keeping out immigrants (e.g., by building a wall on the border and creating a travel ban against Muslims) and enacting protectionist trade policies. In this way, Trump’s immigration policy and economic rhetoric promised to restore the earlier status quo, and provided a scapegoat for Trump supporters’ feelings of anxiety. Trump would protect his supporters’ position in society.

Psychological Process and Power

At a mechanistic level, the construct of psychological power (and conversely,

powerlessness) seems central to the sense of anxiety about one's position in society. Ultimately, Trump's supporters could have been feeling that their levels of power in society were waning, and they wanted someone who was going to address that.

In social psychology, power is a person's perception of how well he or she can influence others (Anderson et al., 2012). Anderson et al. (2012) describe power as control over resources (such as money or food) or a product of a person's social role (i.e. the leader of the clan). More recently, power has been defined as something much more complex than control and social roles; it is also a psychological state of being. For instance, some people view themselves as chronically powerless, which can be true even among people who are actually powerful.

The present research focuses on this dichotomy between *chronic power* and *acute power*. Williams et al. (2017) define chronic power as the amount of power one feels in daily life (e.g., by virtue of being a CEO vs. an intern), whereas acute power refers to the power one feels in a transient context (e.g., being randomly assigned to feel powerful or powerless in an experiment). They found that people with low chronic power, but high acute power, act the worst in moral judgement scenarios. For example, in an unrequited love situation, the low chronic, but high acute power participants mentioned how they would keep pursuing their love interest even after being rejected. This was also shown in the unrequited workplace love scenario. Those same individuals said that they would sabotage a performance review of his or her crush in order to prevent him or her from being promoted. They did that in order to keep their crush in the same department as them, which shows just how intense power can be, it can drastically change someone even with only a superficial manipulation. This particular combination leads to the morally worst behavior because they are experiencing a rare opportunity to enjoy power. They have an opportunity to indulge the self's desires, something that they do not typically get during

their day to day life. The experiment allows those people to enjoy that sense of power through dominating another individual.

Psychological Process and Narcissism

The combination of low chronic and high acute power seems similar to the personality trait of narcissism, which entails a sense of dominance and social boldness (Wink, 1991) that theoretically masks and compensates for chronic feelings of inferiority. The main features of narcissism include a disregard for others, grandiosity, fragile self-esteem, and a belief that one deserves special treatment. Applying this to an electoral context, is it possible that narcissism can be experienced collectively, for example, among a segment of the population who feel chronically insecure about their position of society, and who therefore crave superiority?

Golec de Zavala et al. (2017) examined how collective narcissism (believing that one's group is superior) could play a role in out-group discrimination. Specifically, they found that collective narcissism in Britain was positively correlated with fear of immigrants, and thus related to the Brexit referendum vote. This indicates that some individuals' concept of a country's greatness comes from having a strong and relatively homogeneous sense of cultural identity. As stated before, in recent years, white Americans have seen that America's complexion is changing, and Trump represented a force that would keep outsiders away and thus make America "great again."

The Present Study

White Americans began to feel an intense amount of insecurity and anxiety due to the economic and the social landscape of the nation (Sides et al., 2017). Specifically, White Americans are feeling that they no longer have the societal power that they once had. Thus, they presumably want to regain their lost power. Candidate Trump may have given them a taste of

what this return to power would feel like. Research from Williams et al. (2017) suggests high acute power among individuals with a chronic sense of lower power (or lost power) has a corrupting influence, leading to behavior that goes against standard moral beliefs (e.g., supporting a presidential candidate who makes sexist, racist, or otherwise offensive comments that one might not explicitly endorse). As Wink (1991) implies, narcissism ought to work the same way, and a sense of powerlessness should lead to a narcissist wanting to regain that power. To regain that power, they may support a presidential candidate who reaffirms the status quo (Jost et al., 2011). In the context of 2016, this may have manifested itself with a presidential candidate with strong anti-immigration policies. This has led me to hypothesize that a feeling of powerlessness among a subset of the population used to feeling powerful will increase their support for Donald Trump. If confirmed, this result would support a popular theory about the broader electoral dynamics involved in the 2016 US presidential election.

Method

Participants

This survey used 276 online participants from Amazon.com's MTurk platform. Twenty-three participants were not used as they were flagged as being robots. After the 23 participants were excluded, there were 173 men and 103 women in the final sample.

Materials and Procedure

First, dispositional ("chronic") feelings of power were measured using the scale from Anderson et al. (2012). Statements such as "I can get others to listen to what I say" and "My wishes do not carry much weight" were answered on a 7-point scale (1 = "strongly disagree" and 7 = "strongly agree"). Next, narcissism was measured using the NPI-16 (Ames et al., 2006). Participants indicated which statement they felt described them the best. For example,

participants could choose either “I know that I am good because everybody keeps telling me so” or “When people compliment me I sometimes get embarrassed.”

Then, people were randomly assigned to either feel powerless or powerful. This was done by having people write about an experience that either made them feel powerful or powerless (Magee et al., 2007). The prompts were “Please recall a particular incident in which you had power over another individual or individuals. By power, I mean a situation in which you controlled the ability of another person or persons to get something they wanted, or were in a position to evaluate those individuals. Please describe this situation in which you had power—what happened, how you felt, etc.” and “Please recall a particular incident in which someone else had power over you. By power, I mean a situation in which someone had control over your ability to get something you wanted, or was in a position to evaluate you. Please describe this situation in which you did not have power—what happened, how you felt, etc.”

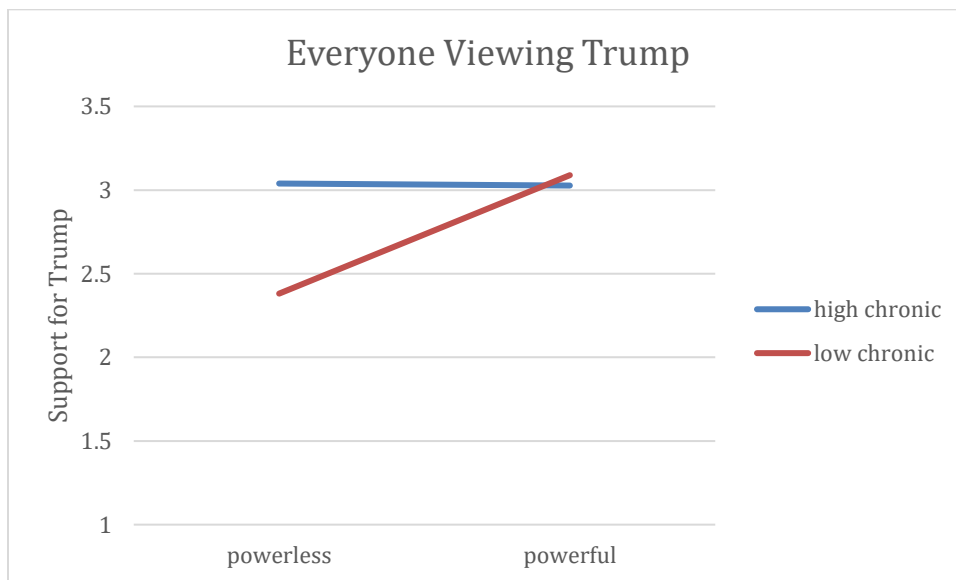
Next, participants reported their immigration attitudes on a measure adapted from Schneider (2008). The language of the questions was modified slightly to make them relevant to the United States, as some of the questions were Eurocentric. For instance, the participants were asked how much they agreed with statements such as “America shouldn't allow people of a different race or ethnic group to come and live here.” The participants used a 7-point scale (1 = “strongly disagree” and 7 = “strongly agree”) to indicate their attitudes. Then participants took a poll from Marist College rating President Trump’s job performance (Marist). Typical polling questions such as “I think President Trump is doing a good job with the economy” and “I think that President Trump is an overall good president” were asked using a 7-point scale (1 = “strongly disagree” and 7 = “strongly agree”). Finally, the participants were asked what their political orientation was (1= “extremely liberal” and 9= “extremely conservative”), then general

demographic questions. The participants were then thanked and paid \$1.50 for their participation.

Results

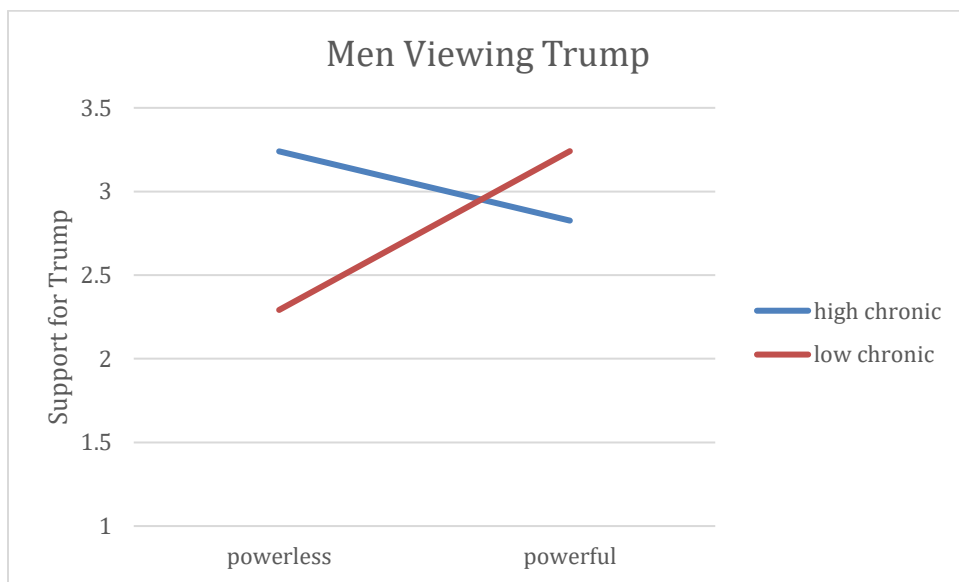
A regression analysis was conducted to predict support for President Trump as a function of acute and chronic power. A dummy variable was computed for power condition (0 = powerless, or low acute power; 1 = powerful, or high acute power) and chronic power and narcissism scores were standardized in all analyses. I had hypothesized that people with low chronic power, but high acute power would show the most support for Donald Trump. Results were generally consistent with the hypothesis in that there was a marginally significant interaction between chronic and acute power, $\beta = -.13$ and $p = .12$. As shown in Figure 1, those who feel powerless in their day-to-day lives, and were made to feel powerful in the context of the study were more likely to support President Trump than their counterparts in the control condition.

Figure 1



On an exploratory basis, I conducted this same analysis separately for men and women. On the campaign trail it seemed that Donald Trump had a particular appeal among men, suggesting it was appropriate to do an analysis that was separated by gender (Dignam et al., 2019). There were no effects for women, $\beta = .06, p = .64$, but among men, there was a significant interaction between chronic and acute power, $\beta = -.25, p = .02$. As shown in Figure 2, men who reported low chronic power, but were in the high acute power condition, were more likely to support President Trump than their counterparts in the low-power condition.

Figure 2



I had also hypothesized that those high in narcissism would support President Trump and his anti-immigration policies. Higher narcissism was indeed associated with greater support for Donald Trump, $r = .14, p = .02$.

A regression analysis was also conducted to see if parallel effects occurred for immigration views as for Trump support. I had hypothesized that people with low chronic power, but high acute power, as well as narcissists, would be most likely to agree with anti-immigration

statements. Results were not consistent with the hypothesis in that there was a nonsignificant interaction between chronic and acute power, $\beta = -.03, p = .56$.

As for Trump support, I conducted this same analysis separately for men and women. There were no effects for either men, $\beta = -.07, p = .37$, or women, $\beta = .01, p = .88$.

Also, there was a negative correlation between narcissism and anti-immigration attitudes, $r = -.17, p = .004$. A gender split analysis showed that there was an association for men, $r = -.22, p = .003$. However, there was no correlation for women, $r = -.10, p = .31$.

Discussion

The 2016 election was a historic event which led to many questions about the psychological workings of the American electorate. Political scientists and pundits alike have noted that a subset of the American population were anxious about the changing racial, ethnic, and economic landscape of the country and their economic future (Sides et al., 2017). In a broader sense, it seems as if this group of Americans felt that they were losing their power in society, which made them anxious. This anxiety may have led these individuals to want to return to an earlier status quo (Jost et al., 2011), represented by candidate Trump's "Make America Great Again" campaign message.

The current research provided a test case for this theory by examining whether psychological power could predict support for President Trump. Specifically, I hypothesized that those with low power in their day-to-day lives (chronic low power) and made to feel powerful through the study (acute power) would be most likely to like President Trump. Results supported this hypothesis among men, but not among women.

Why were there no effects of power on immigration attitudes? Assessing why someone

likes a certain political candidate is extremely complicated and involves many different factors. It could very well mean that some people were not drawn to Trump because of his anti-immigration attitudes (even though it was a large aspect of his campaign), but for other reasons (as discussed in this paper). In fact, the correlation between immigration attitudes and Trump support was surprisingly small ($r = .xx$). Future studies ought to more systematically examine the role that Trump's immigration rhetoric plays, among other variables, in support for his presidency.

Implications

The present research suggests an answer to the question of why people were attracted to such an unusual (and by conventional standards, flawed) political candidate. In that sense, it shows what future candidates may want to focus on while campaigning. For example, the current analysis suggests that those who felt powerless, but were then made to feel powerful were more likely to support President Trump. Thus, future candidates who want to earn the support of voters whose social status is marginal or declining may want to focus on appealing to voters' status in society, and offer solutions for improving that status. This research also implies that some people are willing to go to extraordinary lengths to feel powerful. In a time of crisis, people might be willing to go against their usual moral judgments to support someone that makes them feel powerful. This psychological perspective could thus potentially explain other political phenomena throughout history like the rise of the Nazis in Germany. That historical moment involved a group of people (i.e., Germans) who were worried about their level of power in society, and a group with a leader (i.e., the Nazi Party and Hitler) who promised to and make them feel strong again (Gurian, 1945).

Limitations

However, just because this study found a significant interaction it does not mean it is infallible. One limitation is that this study does not have a true control group. Since there is not a true control group, there is not a baseline for how people would act when not under the influence of the manipulation, and therefore it is tough to tell which manipulation (the powerful or powerless) had an effect, because there was no baseline for how people behave normally. For instance, it could be the case that the high chronic power condition was the true baseline, and the powerless manipulation had the effect. In this case, the results would imply that when people low in chronic power are made to feel acutely powerless, they express reduced liking for Trump. If so, one explanation could be that under conditions of extreme low psychological power (i.e., chronic and acute), people feel less willing to express their positive feelings toward Trump. Alternatively, it could be that Trump's strong-man persona truly repels chronically powerless people who are also feeling acutely powerless. A future replication should include a true control group so that there could be more certainty on which experimental group is having an effect.

Another limitation is that the current research used self-reported data. This poses an issue because the participants' responses cannot be independently verified as accurate. The responses could potentially be reflecting what the participants view as socially acceptable answers. As stated above, 51% of the nation thinks that Trump is racist (Snow et al., 2019). Thus some people may not feel comfortable saying that they support him (a silent majority effect). Essentially, people in the high acute power group could have *temporarily* felt freer to state their support for Trump. People in the chronic low and acute high power group might have felt compelled towards Trump, but because it is self-report they may still have felt uncomfortable reporting how much they support Trump (so they only showed mild support). This is an issue because the results that were trending towards significance could possibly have been significant if people

were not nervous about showing their true opinion on the matter. The results thus would have been stronger without this limitation. A way to potentially overcome this issue is by doing an implicit association test (IAT; Greenwald et al., 1998), which would circumvent the social desirability issue.

Directions for Future Research

A possible avenue for future research is to do a cross-cultural study assessing why other populist, right wing groups (i.e. The National Front in France) garner support. If similar patterns of human behavior were observed across cultures, it would extend the generalizability of the present theoretical analysis and potentially even help people predict the rise of extreme groups, leaders, or political movements.

Another possible direction would be to do multiple case studies (as opposed to an experimental study). Conducting one-on-one interviews with Trump supporters to see why they voted for him would give insight into whether the present results could be observed by, say, coding participants' open-ended responses justifying their attitudes toward the president. It may even be that Trump supporters are explicitly aware of the psychological processes associated with supporting him.

Conclusion

The 2016 election was objectively very unusual, and created a real sense of confusion on the state of the republic. The current study may help explain why some Americans were drawn to Donald Trump. The findings are consistent with the explanation that some people voted for Trump because he made people feel less anxious by promising to restore their power. More generally, this contributes to understanding why some people support candidates that they might not have normally supported.

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