



## The Cognitive and Emotional Sources of Trump Support: The Case of Low-Information Voters

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### ABSTRACT

This article provides empirical evidence for the hypothesis that Donald Trump distinctively attracted unprecedented levels of support from “low-information voters.” The findings suggest that his campaign exploited a void of facts and reasoning among these voters that made them more vulnerable to relying on emotions about Mexican immigrants, Muslim refugees, and African-American citizens, as well as their disdain for the first African-American President Barack Obama. As a result, these Trump supporters were less in a position to want or be able to question Trump’s seemingly unprecedented campaign of misstatements, untruths, and lies. The article discusses the implications for US politics in the Trump era and beyond.

### Introduction

Donald J. Trump’s 2016 successful presidential campaign proved to be historic in many ways. A widely known television celebrity, he used an aggressively hyped-up reputation as a wealthy real estate developer and successful businessman to ride a tide of support from voters (most white and disproportionately male) who wanted an “outsider” to come in and shake-up the political system to address their mounting anxieties post the Great Recession about various international and domestic threats. In the face of these concerns, some more legitimate than others, Trump’s campaign slogan to “Make America Great Again” resonated with many people, white people most especially.

Trump was able to garner support from the very beginning by conducting a historically unprecedented campaign in demonization of “out groups.” The campaign featured blatant appeals to people’s fears about immigrants (especially, Mexicans and others from Central and South America), refugees (especially, Muslims fleeing terrorism in the Middle East), non-whites (living in the “inner cities”), women (rising up in the labor force and the political system), and sundry other groups. They all were made out to be people who could be seen as threatening to Trump’s base of supporters among white middle-class citizens (men in particular). Further, Trump’s distinctive speaking style, especially his use of enthymeme,

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where meaning is implied but never stated<sup>1</sup>, allowed him to set new precedents in masking his xenophobic, racist and sexist appeals, making him an expert at what others have labeled “dog-whistling.”<sup>2</sup> In addition, once he rose in the polls, Trump’s dog-whistling was matched with more explicit demonizations.<sup>3</sup>

Yet, his self-proclaimed lack of experience in politics, his demonstrated lack of knowledge about governing, his evident lack of any moral compass (especially regarding women), and his checkered history as a businessman who consistently skirted the law each cast a long shadow on his candidacy, leading him to get approximately three million fewer votes than his opponent Hillary Clinton. Still, his many shortcomings did not stop him from winning the Electoral College, with narrow margins in the Rust-Belt states of Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin allowing him to ride a wave of right-wing populist resentment into the White House.

The combination of Trump’s personal deficiencies and the questionable nature of the way he conducted his campaign produced an indictment of Trump’s candidacy that in retrospect raises the pressing question: why did so many people support him? This question has captured the imagination of political scientists, political commentators, and ordinary citizens alike.

Yet, the ongoing debate about the sources of Trump support has been freighted with a variety of extra-empirical concerns about how to characterize supporters. One major fear is that should you criticize his supporters as uninformed or misinformed, as racist or xenophobic, sexist or just hostile to social change more generally, you risk being called out as one of the elitists who looks down on ordinary people, thereby justifying the rage Trump supporters have against the establishment. This is exactly what happened to Clinton, when speaking at a New York City LGBTQ gala right after Labor Day she said half his supporters could be put in a “basket of deplorables.”<sup>4</sup> Clinton may have been furtively gesturing to survey research that indicated about half of Trump’s supporters did harbor high levels of racial resentment, feared Muslim immigrants as potentially violent and thought President Barack Obama was actually himself Muslim.<sup>5</sup> Yet, it proved to be a tone-deaf statement that reinforced the idea that Clinton was part of the “Washington Cartel” of political elites who looked down on ordinary people, did not understand their problems and had no interest in changing public policies to address their concerns. Clinton subsequently apologized for her statement.<sup>6</sup> In fact, it may be a mistake to focus only on the cognitive and emotional limitations of a segment of Trump supporters when it is the political elites who prey upon people’s vulnerabilities who should be scrutinized.

These are valid concerns. Many people in all likelihood supported Trump for legitimate reasons of public policy (irrespective of whether the candidate himself deemphasized

<sup>1</sup>Emily Flitter, “Trump is a \_\_\_\_: White House Hopeful Plays Fill-in-the-Blanks with Voters,” *Reuters*, (February 16, 2016), available online at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-election-trump-language-idUSKCN0VQ035>.

<sup>2</sup>Ian Haney, *Dog Whistle Politics: How Coded Racial Appeals Have Reinvented Racism and Wrecked the Middle Class* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2015), pp. 3–4.

<sup>3</sup>Xaxnar, “This Is Way Beyond Dog-Whistling. This Is Trump-eting. Heckuva Job GOP,” *Daily Kos*, (August 9, 2016), available online at: <https://www.dailykos.com/story/2016/8/9/1558523/-This-Is-Way-Beyond-Dog-Whistling-This-Is-Trump-eting-Heckuva-Job-GOP>.

<sup>4</sup>Angie Drobnic Holan, “In Context: Hillary Clinton and the ‘Basket of Deplorables,’” *Politifact*, (September 11, 2016), available online at: <https://www.politifact.com/truth-o-meter/article/2016/sep/11/context-hillary-clinton-basket-deplorables/>.

<sup>5</sup>For instance, see Philip Klinkner, “The Easiest Way to Guess if Someone Supports Trump? Ask if Obama is a Muslim,” *Vox*, (June 2, 2016), available online at: <https://www.vox.com/2016/6/2/11833548/donald-trump-support-race-religion-economy>.

<sup>6</sup>Holan, “In Context: Hillary Clinton and the ‘Basket of Deplorables’”.

providing detailed specifics regarding his policy proposals). Others very likely supported Trump on the basis of their loyalty to the Republican Party. Ideological commitments to have a conservative in the White House may have influenced people to support Trump (even if he deviated from mainstream conservatism on a number of issues). Further, even if people were uninformed, misinformed or supporting Trump on the basis of questionable emotions regarding fears and anxieties about immigrants, refugees, non-whites, and others, it could be that people had been manipulated by disinformation campaigns and emotional manipulation by the campaign and other sources in the mass media. People were not deplorable as much as the strategies used to exploit their vulnerabilities.

Nonetheless, the question remains: why did so many people support Trump? Was there a significant block of Trump supporters who were particularly vulnerable to being exploited based on what they thought and felt about politics? The following analysis examines the under-appreciated role of what we call “low-information voters” in creating a distinctive block of Trump’s largely white supporters. Our research indicates that there are low-information voters in all demographic groups, whites and non-whites alike. Non-whites were for the most part not attracted to Trump’s candidacy, but among whites something distinctive happened in 2016 – low-information white voters had come to be disproportionately concentrated in the Trump constituency. In fact, the findings suggest that Trump was able to attract low-information white voters using emotional appeals to people’s racial and ethnic anxieties, making his reliance on these voters much greater than 2012 Republican presidential nominee Mitt Romney. Analyzing data from the January 2016 American National Election Study Pilot Survey (ANES), we find evidence for the argument that Trump’s white support was comprised disproportionately of low-information voters, whose lack of basic facts about politics (and also lack of interest in thinking about ideas more generally) made them vulnerable to relying more on their emotional fears and resentments about immigrants, Muslims, and blacks (and less their anxieties about the economy).

In what follows, first we frame our analysis by reviewing the recent analyses of Trump support. Next, we introduce the issue of low-information Trump voters distinguishing it from the issue of low-educated voters. We then present our data analysis, discuss the findings and offer conclusions about the importance of this analysis for understanding the Trump’s electoral success and implications for politics in the Trump era and beyond.

### Research on Trump Supporters: Deplorables and Others

Initial research on who supported Trump pointed to a wide variety of factors. Beyond the common factors of party and ideology there were other issues associated with Trump’s distinctive campaign. There was for instance research that indicated that authoritarianism led to support for Trump as a strong leader who would impose needed solutions on society.<sup>7</sup> Other research indicated that sexism played a role among Trump supporters.<sup>8</sup> Yet, relatively

<sup>7</sup>Matthew McWilliams, “The Best Predictor of Trump Support Isn’t Income, Education, or Age. It’s Authoritarianism,” *Vox*, (February 23, 2016), available online at: <https://www.vox.com/2016/2/23/11099644/trump-support-authoritarianism>; and Amanda Taub, “The Rise of American Authoritarianism: A Niche Group of Political Scientists May have Uncovered What’s Driving Donald Trump’s Ascent. What They Found Has Implications That Go Well Beyond 2016,” *Vox*, (March 1, 2016), available online at: <https://www.vox.com/2016/3/1/11127424/trump-authoritarianism>.

<sup>8</sup>Carly Wayne, Nicholas Valentino and Marzia Ocen, “How Sexism Drives Support for Donald Trump,” *The Monkey Cage*, (October 23, 2016), available online at: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2016/10/23/how-sexism-drives-support-for-donald-trump/>.

quickly debate set in as to whether race or class was the more important factor in energizing support for Trump.<sup>9</sup> Thomas Edsall suggested that the Trump constituency represented a historic “democratic inversion” where Trump’s candidacy acted as a magnet for low-educated voters who swung away from the Democratic to the Republican Party.<sup>10</sup> Yet, other research cast doubt on the idea that there were many so-called “Trump Democrats.”<sup>11</sup> Still other research indicated that economic anxiety, while pervasive in the general public post-Great Recession, was not as significant a predictor of Trump support compared to racial and ethnic anxieties.<sup>12</sup> Further, while Trump support drew heavily from selected segments of the white working class, research indicates that Trump supporters had slightly higher incomes than that of the Nation as a whole and many of his supporters came from the middle and upper classes, as has been the case with prior Republican presidential nominees.<sup>13</sup> In other words, the research generally showed that Trump support stemmed more from social-cultural anxieties, especially associated with antipathy to foreigners and nonwhites.<sup>14</sup>

The issue of whether racial or economic concerns were more significant can be misleading. These factors can be inter-related. Ronald Inglehart and Pippa Norris have presented evidence supporting that argument that objective economic conditions and subjective anxieties about one’s economic prospects can be an important cauldron heightening anxieties about cultural and demographic changes that lead to opposition to various “out groups” like Mexican immigrants, Muslim refugees, and resident non-whites.<sup>15</sup> A related question raised by Inglehart and Norris is the extent to which Trump’s support is a continuation of pre-existing trends related to the rise of right-wing populist movements in the US over time and around the developed world. They wrote:

The evidence examined in this study suggests that the rise of populist parties reflects, above all, a reaction against a wide range of rapid cultural changes that seem to be eroding the basic values and customs of Western societies. Long-term processes of generational change during the late twentieth century have catalyzed culture wars, for these changes are particularly alarming to the less educated and older groups in these countries. It is not an either/or story, for the two sets of changes may reinforce each other in part – but the evidence in this study suggests that it would be a mistake to attribute the rise of populism directly to economic inequality alone. Psychological factors seem to play a more important role. Older birth cohorts and less-educated groups support populist parties and leaders that defend traditional cultural values and emphasize nationalistic and xenophobia appeals, rejecting outsiders, and upholding

<sup>9</sup>John Sides, “Race, Religion, and Immigration in 2016: How the Debate over American Identity Shaped the Election and What It Means for a Trump Presidency,” *Democratic Fund: Voter Study Group*, (June, 2017), available online at: <https://www.voterstudygroup.org/reports/2016-elections/race-religion-immigration-2016>.

<sup>10</sup>Thomas Edsall, “The Great Democratic Inversion,” *New York Times*, (October 27, 2016), available online at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/27/opinion/campaign-stops/the-great-democratic-inversion.html>.

<sup>11</sup>See Dana Millbank, “There’s No Such Thing as a Trump Democrat,” *Washington Post*, (August 5, 2017), available online at: [https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/theres-no-such-thing-as-a-trump-democrat/2017/08/04/0d5d06bc-7920-11e7-8f39-eeb7d3a2d304\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.800b79e67895](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/theres-no-such-thing-as-a-trump-democrat/2017/08/04/0d5d06bc-7920-11e7-8f39-eeb7d3a2d304_story.html?utm_term=.800b79e67895).

<sup>12</sup>Zack Beauchamp, “White Riot: How Racism and Immigration Gave Us Trump, Brexit, and a Whole New Kind of Politics,” *Vox*, (September 19, 2016), available online at: <https://www.vox.com/2016/9/19/12933072/far-right-white-riot-trump-brexit>.

<sup>13</sup>Nate Silver, “The Mythology of Trump’s Working-Class Support,” *FiveThirtyEight*, (May 3, 2016), available online at: <https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/the-mythology-of-trumps-working-class-support/>.

<sup>14</sup>Beauchamp, “White Riot,” and Klinkner, “The Easiest Way to Guess if Someone Supports Trump?”

<sup>15</sup>Ronald Inglehart and Pippa Norris, *Trump, Brexit, and the Rise of Populism: Economic Have-Nots and Cultural Backlash*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Kennedy School of Government, Working Paper #RWP16–026, (August, 2016), available online at: <https://research.hks.harvard.edu/publications/getFile.aspx?id=1401>.

old-fashioned gender roles. Populists support charismatic leaders, reflecting a deep mistrust of the 'establishment' and mainstream parties who are led nowadays by educated elites with progressive cultural views on moral issues.<sup>16</sup>

While Inglehart and Norris are speaking more generally, their characterization of populist supporters reacting to defend traditional cultural values from the threat of out groups resonates with prominent understandings emerging in the empirical research about who supported Trump.

### **Low-Information Voters, the Need for Cognition and the Emotional Basis for Trump Support**

One as yet understudied topic concerns the extent to which Trump's base was so loyal to him during and after the campaign in spite of his profligate lying, reliance on outlandish conspiracy theories, constant name-calling and demonizing of his opponents, and his continual smearing of various "out groups" who he sought to denigrate for political effect. What explains the high levels of tolerance many of his supporters exhibited to the arguably unprecedented levels of mendacity in his campaign? It is possible that partisan, ideological and public policy commitments, say over abortion, tax cuts, deregulation and other standard conservative positions as well as growing outrage with the failures of mainstream politics, could lead people to bend over backwards to tolerate the underside of Trump's candidacy by screening out his willingness to fan the flames of xenophobia, racism and sexism. There is undoubtedly a need to consider this possibility seriously and it is likely this explains a fair amount of why some Trump supporters stayed with him regardless of what he did.

Yet, it is also true that as his campaign progressed he lost support among establishment Republicans, conservative intellectuals and public policy experts who normally sided with the Republican Party. There is a need to consider the possibility that a non-trivial portion of Trump's support came about by adding new members to the traditional Republican coalition and that both those who remained with him from that coalition and those who newly joined were comprised disproportionately of people who lacked the cognitive and emotional bases to be disgusted by Trump's antics.

Trump drew from outside the Republican Party, especially among the less educated.<sup>17</sup> Whereas Romney won the college-educated vote, Trump trailed among college-educated throughout the campaign (increasingly so), while winning the non-college educated vote. The issue of education points to the larger question of how knowledgeable Trump supporters are about politics and how much interest they have in relying on ideas for making their political choices.

Back in 1991, Samuel Popkin coined the term "low-information rationality" as an important social science term for understanding how a sizeable portion of the electorate relies on limited information nonetheless to make rational choices in the polling booth.<sup>18</sup> But more recently, right-wing, hate-radio commentator Rush Limbaugh used the term to hammer away at the idea that Democrats won elections by preying upon the lack of knowledge of vulnerable "low-information voters" who do not consider all the relevant news sources

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., 30.

<sup>17</sup>Edsall, "The Great Democratic Inversion".

<sup>18</sup>Samuel Popkin, *The Reasoning Voter: Communication and Persuasion in Presidential Campaigns* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1991), p. 7.

(especially, his radio show). For Limbaugh, these liberal voters remain in the dark about the major political issues. Limbaugh was no doubt blowing a dog-whistle about non-whites.<sup>19</sup> Limbaugh essentially inverted Popkin's term for his own political purposes.

Available survey data indicate that a larger percentage of African-Americans and Latinos score low in political knowledge, compared to whites; nonetheless, there is a sizeable contingent of white survey respondents who could be similarly categorized.<sup>20</sup> In any case, it could very well be that Trump disproportionately drew support from whites with relatively low-levels of political information (regardless of their education). In fact, low-information voters may have been a significant part of the aforementioned movement that has led to people coming in from outside the Republican Party to support Trump. When joined with other low-information whites already in the Republican Party, they can combine to create a sizeable base of supporters who have less information to challenge Trump's factual mis-statements and distortions.

Further, there is reason to think that people with low levels of political knowledge may also have what social psychologists call a low Need for Cognition.<sup>21</sup> Low levels of political knowledge may well be associated with disinterest in relying on ideas and critical thinking skills to process reasons for deciding to support a candidate. In lieu of a Need for Cognition, such voters may lean on a Need for Affect to make their candidate choices. Absent a Need for Cognition and possessing a paucity of political knowledge, voters then become vulnerable to relying on how they feel about the prevailing political climate, various political controversies and other emotional reactions in deciding whom to support. A lack of political knowledge and a de-emphasis on cognitive processing create an opening for emotions to predominate in the decision-making process.

Contra Popkin, low-information voters may be more vulnerable to making less than rational vote choices. And contra Limbaugh, low-information white voters may now be more likely to be supporting the Republican rather than the Democratic candidate. Further, under these circumstances, relying on emotions makes voters more vulnerable to having those emotions manipulated by candidates and others by preying on people's fears and anxieties, even their hate and their rage regarding various demonized groups, like Mexican immigrants, Muslims refugees, non-white citizens, the first African-American president, and others who can be characterized as threatening. With a lack of information, and especially when that is coupled with a lack of interest in relying on cognitive processing, various groups and individuals can be depicted as threatening in ways that can prompt emotional reactions.

Given the foregoing, it is distinctly possible that Trump attracted a relatively high number of low-information white voters compared to his opponent Hillary Clinton and his predecessor as the Republican nominee, Mitt Romney. Further, given their lack of information and low levels of reliance on cognitive processing, these voters relied more on emotions in their vote decision, making them more vulnerable to acting on fears and anxieties regarding Mexican immigrants, Muslim refugees, African-Americans, and even President Obama. And

<sup>19</sup>Rush Limbaugh, "Colbert King's Low-Information Definition of the Term 'Low-Information Voter'", *The Rush Limbaugh Show*, (March 25, 2013), available online at: [https://www.rushlimbaugh.com/daily/2013/03/25/colbert\\_king\\_s\\_low\\_information\\_definition\\_of\\_the\\_term\\_low\\_information\\_voter](https://www.rushlimbaugh.com/daily/2013/03/25/colbert_king_s_low_information_definition_of_the_term_low_information_voter).

<sup>20</sup>American National Election Studies Pilot Study (ANES). (2016), available online at: [https://www.electionstudies.org/study pages/anes\\_pilot\\_2016/anes\\_pilot\\_2016.htm](https://www.electionstudies.org/study pages/anes_pilot_2016/anes_pilot_2016.htm).

<sup>21</sup>Kevin Arceneaux and Ryan J. Vander Wielen, "The Effects of Need for Cognition and Need for Affect on Partisan Evaluations," *Political Psychology* 34:1 (2013): pp.23–42; and John T. Cacioppo and Richard E. Petty, "The Need for Cognition," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 42:1 (1982): pp.116–31.

with emotions replacing facts and reasoning, this base of supporters for Trump may well have been more willing to ignore his deficiencies as a candidate and find themselves vulnerable to not being able to challenge his consistent misstatements, untruths and outright lies. We turn to survey data to examine the extent to which the data support this specific hypothesis.

## Data Analysis

The data for our analysis comes from the 2016 American National Election Studies Pilot Study (ANES), which was conducted by researchers at Stanford University in late January, 2016. The sample consists of 1200 adults who were chosen in a manner that provided a nationally representative sample based on age, race, gender, and education. Our primary interest lies in examining the relationship between an individual's Need for Cognition, their level of political knowledge, and support for Trump. The survey allows us to measure all three of these variables.

John Cacioppo and Richard Petty first introduced the Need for Cognition (NFC) scale in 1982. The purpose of the scale, according to Cacioppo and Perry, is to provide a deeper understanding of how individuals "derive meaning, adopt positions, and solve problems" in their attempt to make sense of the world.<sup>22</sup> Those with a high need for cognition naturally seek and reflect on information when evaluating stimuli and events in the world. They have a positive attitude toward tasks that require reasoning and effortful thinking, and are therefore more likely to invest the time and resources to do so when evaluating complex issues. Those with a low need for cognition, on the other hand, find little reward in the collection and evaluation of new information when it comes to problem solving and the consideration of competing issue positions. They are more likely to rely on cognitive shortcuts, such as "experts" or "celebrities" (such as candidate Donald Trump) for cues.

The 2016 ANES contains two items from the NFC scale that have been found to be reliable indicators of NFC. For each item, respondents were asked if they: "(1) strongly agree," "(2) agree," "(3) neither agree nor disagree," "(4) disagree," or "(5) strongly disagree" with the following statements:

Item 1: "Thinking is not my idea of fun."

Item 2: "I would rather do something that requires little thought than something that is sure to challenge my thinking abilities."

We summed the scores (1–5) from these two indicators to create a version (albeit limited) of the NFC scale for our analysis of Trump support. The final index ranges from 2 to 10. To simplify our presentation below, we code respondents into three categories, based on their NFC score (low, medium and high).<sup>23</sup>

Because those with high NFC enjoy the process of gathering and evaluating information, we would naturally expect that they display a higher level of political knowledge than those with low NFC. We can test this proposition by constructing a simple political knowledge scale from the following two items asked of all respondents in the 2016 ANES:

<sup>22</sup>Cacioppo and Petty, "The Need for Cognition," p. 118.

<sup>23</sup>"High NFC" respondents were coded as those who scored 9–10 on the NFC scale (25% of all respondents). "Medium NFC" respondents were as those who scored 7–8 on the NFC scale (39% of all respondents) and "low NFC" respondents were coded as those who scored below 7 (34% of all respondents).

Item 1: “For how many years is a United States Senator elected – that is, how many years are there in one full term of office for a US Senator?” [Correct answer: 6]

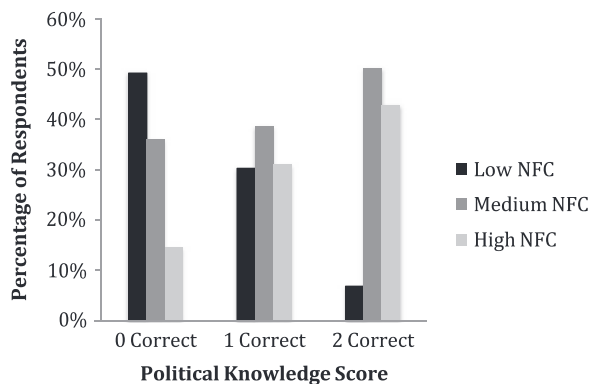
Item 2: On which of the following does the US federal government currently spend the least?

- ☐ Foreign aid [Correct answer]
- ☐ Medicare
- ☐ National defense
- ☐ Social Security

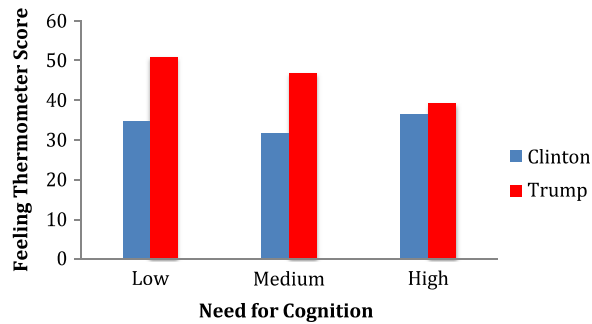
For each respondent, our political knowledge scale was constructed by summing the number of correct answers across the two items. Approximately 46 percent of the sample received a score of 0 (both answers incorrect), 33 percent received a score of 1, and 22 percent a score of 2 (both answers correct). As we would expect, it turns out that NFC and political knowledge are strongly correlated. This is evident in the figure. Figure 1 displays the percentage of high-, medium-, and low-NFC respondents within each category of the political knowledge scale.

Among those who scored a 0 on the political knowledge scale (that is, answered both questions incorrectly), approximately half scored in the lowest range of the NFC scale, while only 15 percent were classified as high-NFC respondents. In contrast, only 7 percent of those who scored a 2 on the political knowledge scale (that is, answered both questions correctly) were classified as having a low NFC, while 93 percent scored in the medium or high range of the NFC scale. Thus, it seems that this basic disposition, one’s need for cognition, has a lot to do with one’s level of political knowledge.

What does this have to do with the election? To answer this question, we examined two “feeling thermometer” measures of support for Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton. We limit our analysis to whites for two reasons. First, whites represent nearly all of Trump’s supporters in the sample. Indeed, in the 2016 ANES Pilot Study, only 2.8 percent of those who responded that Trump was their preferred Republican candidate were black. Second, whites were the primary target of Trump’s most controversial campaign themes related to race and immigration. For each candidate, respondents were asked to rate the candidate on a 0–100 scale, where 100 reflects a “very warm or favorable feeling,” 50 indicates “no feeling at all,” and a value of 0 reflects a “very cold or unfavorable feeling.” We examined the relationship between



**Figure 1.** The distribution of high-, medium-, and low-NFC respondents by political knowledge score. Source: The sample for this analysis consists of all respondents ( $N = 1071$ ).



**Figure 2.** Predicted warmth toward Clinton and Trump by level of need for cognition. Source: This sample includes white respondents only ( $N = 763$ ).

each of the feeling thermometer scores and the NFC and political knowledge scales. We estimated these relationships using multiple regression analysis, which allowed us to control for several demographic variables, including the respondent's level of education, party identification (seven-point scale, strong Republican to strong Democrat), ideology (seven-point scale, extremely liberal to extremely conservative), family income, gender, and age. The regression analysis finds that there is indeed a significant relationship between the feeling thermometer score for Trump and both NFC and political knowledge.<sup>24</sup>

Specifically, we find that those with a low need for cognition or a low level of political knowledge have relatively "warmer" feelings toward Trump, compared to those with higher levels of NFC and political knowledge. Interesting, this relationship is found only for Trump. People with either low or high levels of NFC or political knowledge are just as likely to support Clinton; whereas people with low levels of NFC or political knowledge are much more likely to support Trump compared to those who were measured to have high levels.

The implications of these divergent findings for understanding the sources of support for Clinton and Trump are displayed in the Figures 2 and 3. In each figure, the bars represent the mean feeling thermometer for Clinton and Trump for each category of NFC (Figure 2) and political knowledge (Figure 3). These values were generated from the respective regression models, which control for partisanship, ideology, education, income, gender, and age. Thus, the differences we see across the levels of NFC and political knowledge in the feeling thermometer scores are not due to these other factors, as they are fixed at the mean value in the sample for all of these calculations. In each case, the pattern is clear. Among the respondents with relatively high NFC and political knowledge, there is practically no preference for one candidate over the other. Although the feeling thermometer scores for Trump are slightly larger than those for Clinton, this difference is trivial in statistical terms. However, as we move to those with low NFC and political knowledge, a clear preference for Trump emerges. The advantage for Trump over Clinton is approximately 12 points among those with low NFC, and approximately 20 points among those with low political knowledge. Thus, compared to respondents with a high NFC and high political knowledge, low-information voters seem to exhibit significantly stronger support for Trump over Clinton.

<sup>24</sup>See analyses we have posted at: <https://urban.hunter.cuny.edu/~schram/lowinformationfinal.xls>.

This difference between low-information voters and those we designate as high-information voters is statistically significant for both analyses. But is this difference substantively significant? It is difficult to translate the magnitude of this difference in support into votes because the ANES survey was conducted in January, before the parties had chosen their nominees. However, we can compare the magnitude of the difference in support between low- and high-information voters to the differences seen for other subgroups that we generally believe to be politically meaningful. In addition, we can compare the difference in the Trump advantage between high- and low-information voters to the difference in 2012, when the Republican nominee was Mitt Romney.

To generate these comparisons, we computed a new variable, which we call the “feeling thermometer gap,” by subtracting the Clinton feeling thermometer score from the Trump feeling thermometer score. We then estimated the relationship between the feeling thermometer gap and our political knowledge scale, as well as the variables used in the first regression model (partisanship, ideology, education, income, gender, and age). Figure 4 presents the results from this analysis. We limit our analysis to the effects of political

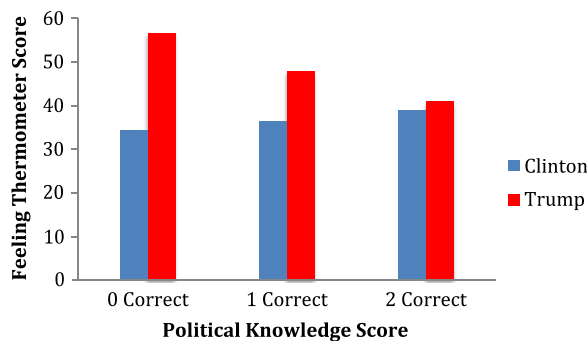


Figure 3. Predicted warmth toward Clinton and Trump by level of political knowledge. Source: This sample includes white respondents only ( $N = 859$ ).

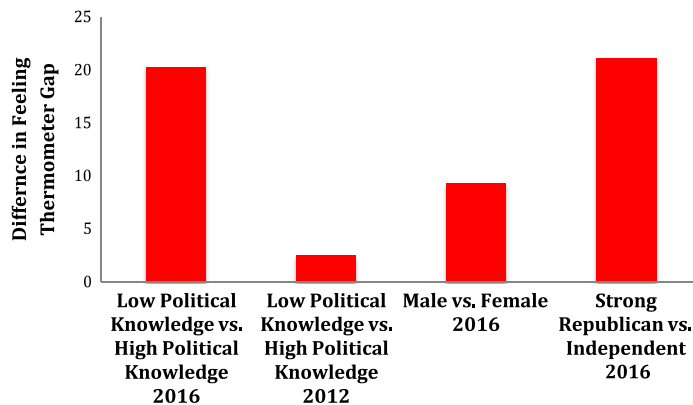


Figure 4. Difference in feeling thermometer gap between different subgroups. Source: This sample includes white respondents only ( $N = 854$ ).

knowledge because the items needed to construct the NFC scale were not included in the 2012 ANES.

The first bar in the figure represents the difference in the Trump-Clinton feeling thermometer gap between low political knowledge and high political knowledge respondents. The specific value for this comparison is 20.2, which means that the Trump-Clinton difference in the feeling thermometer score is 20.2 points higher (in Trump's favor) among low political knowledge supporters, compared to high political knowledge voters. This value thus, represents the magnitude of the effect of political knowledge in our analysis.

The second comparison presented in the figure is perhaps the most important and provides some insight into whether this tendency of low-information voters to swing toward Trump in 2016 is unusual. In 2012, the ANES asked the same two political knowledge questions in their pre-election survey, allowing us to replicate our 2016 analysis using 2012 data. Our analysis of 2012 data yields a very different result. The Romney-Obama feeling thermometer gap was only 2.6 points higher (in Romney's favor) among low-information voters compared to high-information voters. This difference was not statistically significant. Thus, not only have low-information voters decidedly favored Trump in 2016, this appears to be a phenomenon that is unique to the 2016 election, and not based on a general tendency of low-information voters to support the Republican nominee. Compared to Romney, who was arguably a more conventional Republican candidate, Trump has attracted significantly more support from low-information voters.

The remainder of the figure reports the difference in the feeling thermometer gap across other pairs of subgroups. The Trump-Clinton feeling thermometer gap was 9.3 points higher among men (in Trump's favor) than the difference among women. In other words, being a low-information voter (rather than a high-information voter) is more important in affecting one's relative support for Trump over Clinton than one's gender. Of course, this survey was conducted in January and we know that Trump's support among women declined after that. Nevertheless, the fact that the effect of political knowledge is as good a predictor of Trump support as gender is both surprising and impressive. The final bar in Figure 4 presents the effect of moving from Independent to Strong Republican on the seven-point partisanship scale. This results in an increase of 21.1 points in the Trump-Clinton difference. This effect is nearly identical to the effect of political knowledge (20.2 points).

### **Lack of Information Creates an Opening to Support Trump Based on Fear and Hate**

Our data shows that low-information voters, defined as those with low Need for Cognition or low level of political knowledge, were significantly more likely than high NFC or high knowledge respondents to indicate warm feelings toward Trump. However, this raises a final question. Why did so many low-information voters support Trump in this election? In other words, what were the mechanisms at work that underlie the relationship between low NFC/knowledge and Trump support? We conducted an additional analysis of the 2016 ANES data that we believe sheds light on this question.<sup>25</sup>

Based on our analysis of the many attitudinal items in the ANES data, we find that the effect of political knowledge exerts its influence on support for Trump through its effect on

<sup>25</sup>The additional analyses are available at: <https://urban.hunter.cuny.edu/~schram/lowinformationfinal.xlsx>.

several more specific attitudes and issue positions related to racial resentment, fears of Muslims, opposition to immigration, and the economy. Using path analysis techniques, we determined that approximately 85 percent of the effect of political knowledge flows through the following six items, each of which is significantly related to support for Trump over Clinton: (1) the belief that Barack Obama is Muslim, (2) the belief that whites are losing jobs to minorities, (3) the belief that Muslims are violent, (4) support for immigration restrictions, (5) “racial resentment” against Blacks, and (6) the belief that the economy has worsened over the last year. The relative magnitude of these indirect effects of political knowledge is displayed in Figure 5. The fact that the effect of political knowledge works almost exclusively through these six variables will be unsurprising to many. These pathways of influence represent some of the most important themes in Trump’s campaign speeches throughout the campaign. These findings also point to how low-information voters are prone to relying on emotional concerns in their evaluation of Trump versus Clinton. The fact that low-information voters are attracted to Trump for these reasons also helps explain why they continue to support him in the face of so many other mistruths. If they are willing to believe that Barack Obama is a Muslim, that Muslims are inherently violent, and that the economy actually worsened during 2015, for example, why wouldn’t they believe that the election was “rigged” against Trump. At the same time, many of Trump’s supporters refused to express concern about whether Trump colluded with the Russians in trying to influence the election. Was this because they were uninformed or emotionally committed to his success as President?

It is possible that people’s high levels of resentment made them impervious to facts; however, it is also possible that their informational and cognitive deficits concerning politics made them vulnerable to having their resentments stoked by a campaign that preyed upon their emotions. Either way, voters with low levels of political information and a low need for cognition supported Trump on the basis of social and economic anxieties about refugees, immigrants, African-Americans and the Presidency of Barack Obama.

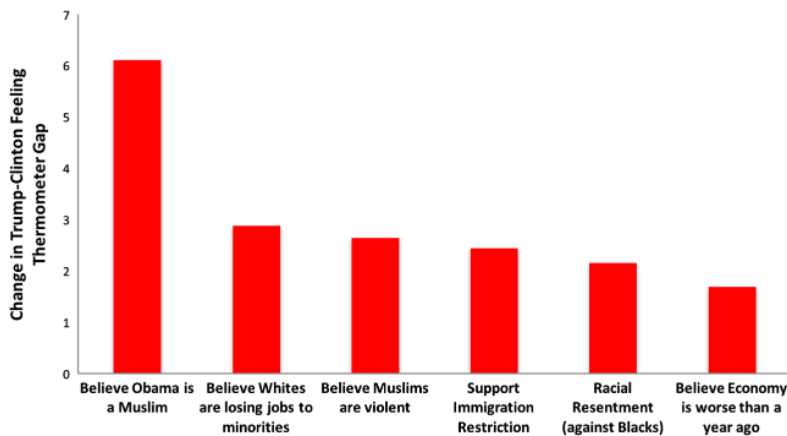


Figure 5. Indirect effects of political knowledge (low knowledge vs. high knowledge). Source: Based on path analysis of 2016 ANES data (whites only, N = 854).

## How to Lose a Democracy

The US has been called a Democratic Experiment, something that is a project in the making, as yet not fully realized and the potential of which was contingent upon the willingness of the people to take on the responsibility of being independent thinkers who could practice “eternal vigilance” as Thomas Jefferson emphasized.<sup>26</sup> Writing originally in 1835 for a French readership, Alexis de Tocqueville, as an ambivalent, if friendly, critic of Jeffersonian democracy, insightfully noted upon visiting the US in the early days of the Republic that a historical push to egalitarianism would engender a preference for democratic government making the US reflective of a global trend.<sup>27</sup> He worried that egalitarianism would lead to a devaluation of standards regarding many things, ideas and critical judgment included. The Country’s laudable impulses to realize a more egalitarian and democratic society risked enabling a populace that worshipped the “idol of equality” to the point of becoming vulnerable to the “tyranny of the majority” and by extension a disdain for independent critical thought. Under these conditions, people simultaneously dismissed being told by others what to think only to ironically end up following the crowd thoughtlessly.

While the egalitarianism Tocqueville found in US political culture can promote both a healthy anti-elitism and an unhealthy reluctance to think independently, the country’s political culture has also included an equally contradictory tendency toward an individualism that from another direction can work to reinforce the reluctance to be influenced by the ideas of others. At the turn of the twentieth century, William James added a critical perspective to the analysis of American political culture by suggesting that the Country’s tendency to allow for excessive individualism led people at times to practice a “certain blindness” toward others, especially those less fortunate than themselves.<sup>28</sup> Our individualistic culture encouraged people to not care about or feel the need to know about public problems and issues if they did not impinge on one’s own situation. So it was that an egalitarian society with democratic aspirations could be, for instance, the home of white people who frequently, if not always, expressed disinterest in learning about the life circumstances of a subordinated black population.

In other words, positive and negative strands of our political culture can produce low-information voters. Whether willfully ignorant, anti-elitist or extremely egalitarian, low-information voters with a low Need for Cognition are vulnerable to being manipulated by a virulent strain of politics, what Richard Hofstadter called “the paranoid style of American politics.”<sup>29</sup> The paranoid style was for Hofstadter a recurrent political practice throughout the modern era across the western world. It traded in conspiracy theories about how foreign elements were conspiring to take over society. Telescoping a long view of history across centuries and countries, Hofstadter wrote:

This glimpse across a long span of time emboldens me to make the conjecture – it is no more than that – that a mentality disposed to see the world in this way may be a persistent psychic phenomenon, more or less constantly affecting a modest minority of the population. But certain religious traditions, certain social structures and national inheritances, certain historical

<sup>26</sup>William Van Til, “The American Democratic Experiment,” *Educational Leadership*, (October, 1959): 6–10, available online at: [https://www.ascd.org/ASCD/pdf/journals/ed\\_lead/el\\_195910\\_vantil.pdf](https://www.ascd.org/ASCD/pdf/journals/ed_lead/el_195910_vantil.pdf).

<sup>27</sup>Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2000) vol. II, p. 243.

<sup>28</sup>William James, “On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings,” in *Talks to Teachers on Psychology and to Students on Some of Life’s Ideals* (New York, NY: Henry Holt & Company, 1899), Chapter 2, available online at: <https://www.uky.edu/~eushe2/Pajares/jcertain.html>.

<sup>29</sup>Richard Hofstadter, “The Paranoid Style in American Politics,” *Harper’s Magazine*, (November, 1964), available online at: <https://harpers.org/archive/1964/11/the-paranoid-style-in-american-politics/>.

catastrophes or frustrations may be conducive to the release of such psychic energies, and to situations in which they can more readily be built into mass movements or political parties. In American experience ethnic and religious conflict have plainly been a major focus for militant and suspicious minds of this sort, but class conflicts also can mobilize such energies. Perhaps the central situation conducive to the diffusion of the paranoid tendency is a confrontation of opposed interests which are (or are felt to be) totally irreconcilable, and thus by nature not susceptible to the normal political processes of bargain and compromise. The situation becomes worse when the representatives of a particular social interest – perhaps because of the very unrealistic and unrealizable nature of its demands – are shut out of the political process. Having no access to political bargaining or the making of decisions, they find their original conception that the world of power is sinister and malicious fully confirmed ... We are all sufferers from history, but the paranoid is a double sufferer, since he is afflicted not only by the real world, with the rest of us, but by his fantasies as well.<sup>30</sup>

Hofstadter was reminding us that informational and cognitive deficits regarding history can make people vulnerable to being manipulated into believing the most outlandish conspiracy theories about who is plotting to take over the government and everything else.

Trump practices the paranoid style of American politics perhaps better than any other presidential candidate over the last 150 years or more. It is difficult to think of someone who has done so better, acting out his own fantasies and nightmares. For instance, he repeatedly encouraged people to actively break election laws (ironically) on the grounds that the elections are rigged. And people have responded to follow him down that rabbit hole, even committing voter fraud (allegedly) because they feared Clinton supporters were stealing the election by doing the same.<sup>31</sup> Low-information voters, especially those with a low Need for Cognition, are perhaps the most vulnerable to being manipulated into acting on the basis of their fears and anxieties. They risk becoming pawns of a candidate like Trump, responding to his conspiracy theories irrespective of whether that would actually be any good for them individually or for us as a society collectively.

The paradigmatic example of how Trump is the quintessential practitioner of the paranoid style of American politics came late in the 2016 campaign with the major television advertisement that his campaign ran in the final weekend of the campaign.<sup>32</sup>

The ad makes less than subtle dog-whistles that Hillary Clinton is nothing less than a pawn of an international elite of global financiers led by Jews like George Soros, the international investment entrepreneur and social justice activist, Janet Yellen, the chairman of the US Federal Reserve, and Lloyd Blankfein, the Chief Executive Officer of the prominent Wall Street Firm Goldman Sachs. Trump argues that Clinton and others in Washington take their marching orders for this international cabal to ruin the US economy, take away our jobs and undermine everything that is good about our country. Only by electing him can we defeat this foreign foe from invading us and destroying our way of life. It is breathtaking to see this perfect-pitch rendition of the typical Anti-Semitic conspiracy theory fear-mongering by a presidential candidate. While it is classic paranoid conspiracy theorizing, it is actually unprecedented to have a presidential candidate espousing such theorizing so explicitly.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid., 6.

<sup>31</sup>Chris Sommerfeldt, "Donald Trump Supporter in Iowa Arrested for Voter Fraud," *Daily News*, (October 29, 2016), available online at: <https://www.nydailynews.com/news/politics/donald-trump-supporter-iowa-arrested-voter-fraud-article-1.2850101>.

<sup>32</sup>Josh Marshall, "Trump Rolls Out Anti-Semitic Closing Ad," *Talking Points Memo*, (November 5, 2016), available online at: <https://talkingpointsmemo.com/edblog/trump-rolls-out-anti-semitic-closing-ad>. The advertisement can be viewed at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vST61W4bGm8#action=share>

Trump's support comes from a diversity of sources, some of his supporters are more informed than others and some have given serious thought to supporting his candidacy while others have relied more on emotion and are responding to his constant barrage of emotional appeals. Nonetheless, our data indicates that low-information voters were much more likely to prefer him over Clinton and much more than such voters supported Romney in 2012. Trump was the candidate of low-information voters (and others as well). His candidacy in no small part thrived on the low-information levels and disinterest in ideas of a significant block of his supporters. As he himself at one point after a primary victory stated: "I love the poorly-educated."<sup>33</sup> And they have loved him back, sometimes with less reasoning than others. Sometimes more based on his emotional appeals than much reasoning at all, making them all the more vulnerable to manipulation. Love, just as much as hate, is an emotion and both can be manipulated, especially when people are not relying on sound political knowledge or do not rely very much on ideas for thinking about politics. Love for the candidate and hate toward out-groups combine to make a base of supporters prone to political manipulation.

Our research suggests that low-information voters were predisposed to vote for Trump; however it also suggests that campaign efforts helped seal the deal. In fact, more recent analyses fuel speculation that the Trump campaign trolled low-information voters on the internet, via social media, by profiling them and then exposing them to fake news stories, conspiracy theories and lies about his opponent Hillary Clinton.<sup>34</sup> If true this is a startling development in campaign tactics using the latest tools of the information age. Robert Mercer, the wealthy hedge fund investor and computer guru, who had backed Trump's primary opponent, US Senator Ted Cruz (R-TX), threw his support to Trump when Cruz dropped out. Along with his support came not just Steve Bannon as a top advisor and Kellyanne Conway as campaign manager, but also Cambridge Analytica, Mercer's internet firm, that was fresh off its involvement in the successful Brexit campaign to have England leave the European Union. Cambridge Analytica evidently was the organization that profiled people on the internet and then trolled them with a disinformation campaign on behalf of Trump. This operation was an unprecedented use of the internet to sway vulnerable voters. It was arguably more manipulative than the dirty tricks of past campaigns and points to another way in which Trump's candidacy was more than an extension of the questionable politics of the Republican Party of recent years.<sup>35</sup>

Therefore, in conclusion, the foregoing findings provide empirical evidence for the hypothesis that Trump distinctively attracted unprecedented levels of support from low-information voters who also had a low Need for Cognition. His campaign exploited the void of facts and reasoning among these voters that made them more vulnerable to relying on emotions, fear, anxiety, hate and rage, about Mexican immigrants, Muslims refugees, and African-American citizens, as well as their disdain for the first African-American President Barack Obama. Given their low levels of political knowledge and their low Need for Cognition, these voters were more vulnerable to responding to emotional appeals that exploited their

<sup>33</sup>Aaron Blake, "The Poorly Educated" People of America Cut an Ad for Donald Trump," *The Washington Post*, (February 25, 2016), available online at: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2016/02/25/the-poorly-educated-people-of-america-cut-an-ad-for-donald-trump-video/>.

<sup>34</sup>Paul de Haye, "Microtargeting Low-Information Voters," Medium, (December 30, 2016), available online at: <https://medium.com/personaldata-io/microtargeting-of-low-information-voters-6eb2520cd473>.

<sup>35</sup>Adam Henshall, "What Marketers Can Learn from Trump about the Science of Persuasion," *process.st*, (March 31, 2017), available online at: <https://www.process.st/science-of-persuasion/>.

fears and anxieties regarding these groups. As a result, these Trump supporters were less in a position to want or be able to question Trump's seemingly unprecedented campaign of misstatements, untruths and lies.

The implications of our analysis for our political system are worth pondering. Back in 2012, former Associate Justice David Souter responded to a question about the importance of civic education from a woman in the audience in ways that are pertinent to our analysis:

Franklin was asked by someone I think on the streets of Philadelphia shortly after the 1787 convention adjourned in what kind of government the constitution would give us if it was adopted. Franklin's famous answer was 'a republic, if you can keep it.' You can't keep it in ignorance. I don't worry about our losing republican government in the United States because I'm afraid of a foreign invasion. I don't worry about it because I think there is going to be a coup by the military as has happened in some other places. What I worry about is that when problems are not addressed, people will not know who is responsible. And when the problems get bad enough, as they might do, for example, with another serious terrorist attack, as they might do with another financial meltdown, some one person will come forward and say, 'Give me total power and I will solve this problem.' That is how the Roman republic fell. Augustus became emperor not because he arrested the Roman senate. He became emperor because he promised he would solve problems that were not being solved.... That is the way democracy dies. And if something is not done to improve the level of civic knowledge, that is what you should worry about at night.<sup>36</sup>

Trump's surprising victory was in no small part enabled by support from low-information voters. This result is disconcerting in many ways, but perhaps most profoundly for what it says about threats to the Country's democratic aspirations posed by campaigns that exploit low levels of political knowledge and low interest in political ideas among segments of the voting public. The Country's admirable commitments historically to an egalitarian political culture, anti-elitism and disdain for the idea that ordinary people ought to be told what to think have unfortunately periodically turned around to become self-defeating. Anti-intellectualism can slide into know-nothingism. This reversion is often exploited by elites who say they are acting the name of the people when in fact they are manipulating mass opinion by preying on people's lack of knowledge and disinterest in ideas. People who lack information and disdain critical thinking often turn to relying on their feelings and emotions, acting on the basis of fear and anxiety, hate and rage, to demand political change that they often rightly deserve. Yet, when elites manipulate those emotions by directing them against convenient scapegoats they can at times ride to political victory on the backs of irrational political hysteria. When that happens, their manufactured popular mandate comes with no real democratic accountability for then people have authorized elites to act on the basis of how they had their emotions exploited. Without sufficient political knowledge and a willingness to engage in critical thinking, emotionally manipulated voters lose their ability to enforce democratic accountability. A manipulated populism replaces democracy.<sup>37</sup> As Justice Souter suggests "this is how democracy dies."

<sup>36</sup>Karoli Kuns, "Justice David Souter On Civic Ignorance: 'That Is How Democracy Dies,'" *Crooks and Liars*, (October 22, 2016), available online at: <https://crooksandliars.com/2016/10/justice-david-souter-civic-ignorance-how>.

<sup>37</sup>John Judis, *The Populist Explosion: How the Great Recession Transformed American and European Politics* (Columbia Global Reports, 2016), Conclusion; and Jan-Werner Müller, *What is Populism?* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press 2016), Conclusion.

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