

WORKING AMERICA

Front Porch Focus Group Report

100 Days into the Trump Era, Working-Class ‘Searchers’ Who Voted for Him Are Having Doubts, Open to Appeals

Face-to-face conversations with 976 working-class swing voters in Ohio reveal half of Trump swing voters differ with him on one or more issues, shows the importance of direct outreach

OVERVIEW

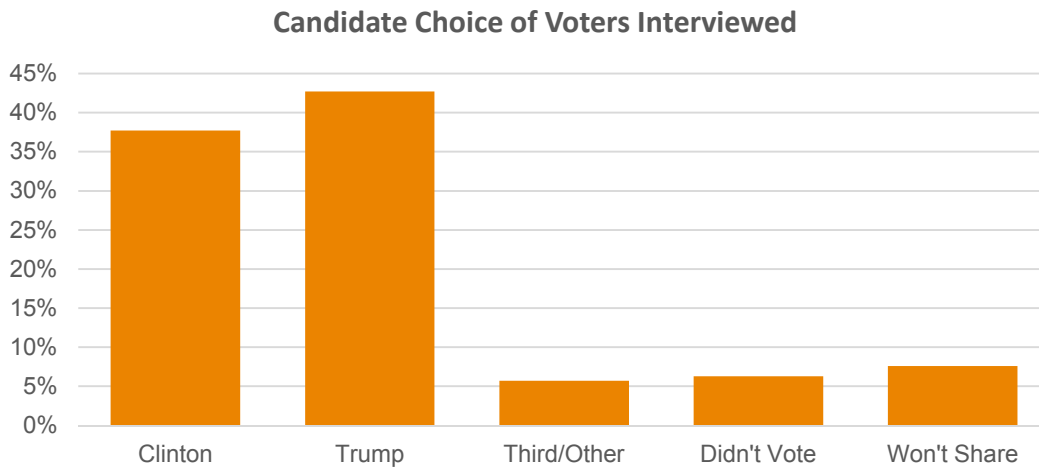
After almost 100 days in office, President Donald Trump has failed to consolidate the support of working-class swing voters. The swing voters who backed Hillary Clinton staunchly oppose him, and his support is softening among the swing voters who chose him. Trump’s failure to lock down these voters offers a major opportunity to progressives. But moving Trump swing voters — who tend to rely on conservative news sources — requires aggressive outreach and a strong progressive message. To win in 2018 and beyond, we need to reach out now to these persuadable swing voters.

Working America canvassers recently conducted in-depth interviews with 976 working-class swing voters in central Ohio. We talked face to face with both Clinton and Trump voters about their attitudes toward the president and his policies to gauge how they were feeling. But we wanted to do more than just survey their opinions. We also wanted to see if working-class Trump voters could be reached with a progressive message. Here are our key findings:

- **Roughly half of Trump’s working-class swing voters are “Searchers” who can be moved in a progressive direction when offered new information about his policies.** Many Trump swing voters were desperately searching for change in 2016. Our conversations suggest they may continue to search after hearing about his policies: 33 percent of Trump voters disapproved of his plan to cut taxes for the rich; 53 percent disliked his position on at least one issue.
- **Trump’s working-class support may be softening, but it is by no means inevitable that his swing voters will turn against him.** A solid 56 percent of Trump swing voters said that they get information about politics from cable TV, mostly Fox News. As a result, they hear little criticism of him. Turning them against Trump will require breaking through the Fox News din with direct outreach from trusted messengers with new information.
- **Trump voters can be moved on some issues, but they are not concerned about alleged Russia ties, his cabinet appointees or possible business conflicts.** Only 5 percent of Trump voters said they worried about ties to Russia; 10 percent expressed concern about his business interests; and 12 percent were critical of any administration official.

- **The gap in intensity between Trump’s working-class supporters and his opponents is striking.** While 37 percent of Trump voters strongly approved of his performance as president, 67 percent of Clinton voters strongly disapproved — a 30-point intensity gap. We also found large intensity gaps in support for Trump’s policies on health care (29 points) and immigration (23 points).

Our findings are based on “front porch focus groups” — interviews held in person at voters’ front doors. Working America canvassers conducted the interviews from March 6 to April 5 in working-class neighborhoods in Columbus, Delaware, Lancaster and other central Ohio communities. Among the swing voters we talked with, 43 percent voted for Trump, 38 percent for Clinton, 6 percent for another candidate, 8 percent wouldn’t share their vote, and 6 percent didn’t vote in November. Our sample included people who lived in households with annual incomes of \$75,000 or less and voted in at least one nonpresidential election since 2013, which suggests they are likely to vote in 2018. Ninety-seven percent of voters were white, 1 percent were Latinx, 1 percent were African-American, and 1 single voter was Asian.



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DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Part 1. Who Are the Trump “Searchers” and What Moves Them?

1.A. Identifying the Trump Searchers

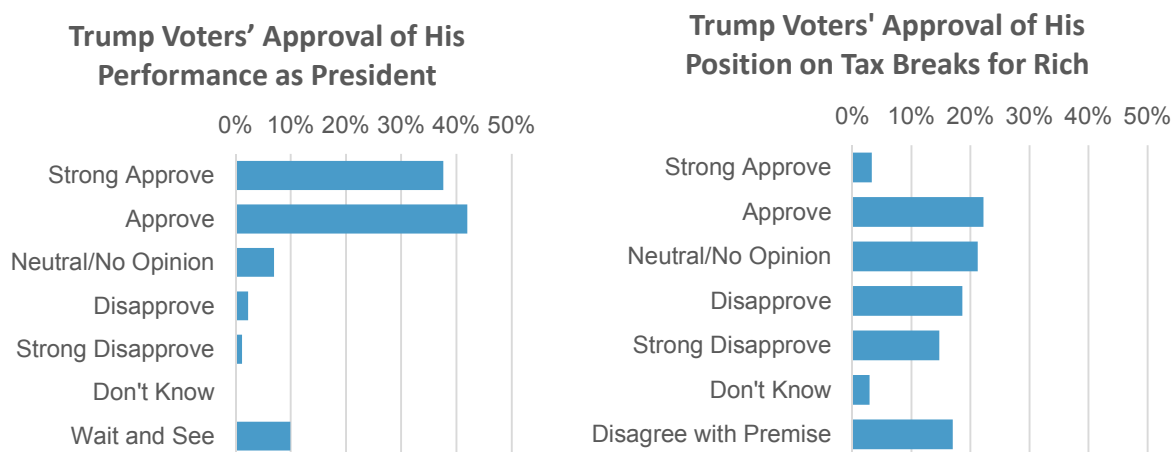
A key goal of our 100 Days canvass was to determine which, and how many, working-class swing voters could be moved in a progressive direction.

We began our conversations with swing voters with a question on whether they approved of Trump’s performance as president. Among the Trump voters we interviewed, just 3.5 percent

said they disapproved, 10 percent were neutral or had no opinion, and 7 percent said they'd have to wait and see. The balance said they approved or strongly approved of his performance.

But when we shared details about the president's proposals and policies, 53 percent of Trump swing voters disapproved of his position on at least one issue. These are the voters we call "Searchers" — the Trump voters who are fed up with politics and took a risk on an unorthodox candidate in 2016, but who may not be satisfied with what they've found. Their differences with Trump offer an opening to progressives. Our findings suggest that reaching out to these swing voters with new information about Trump's agenda through a trusted messenger can break through to a sizable share of them.

1.B. Information on Trump's Tax Breaks and Budget Cuts Swayed His Voters



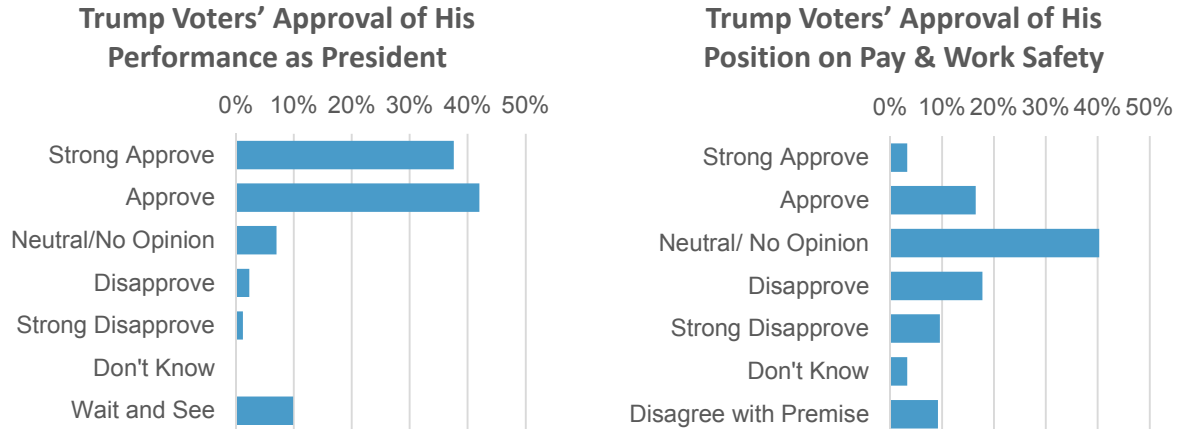
Many Trump swing voters didn't like the president's plan to cut taxes on the wealthy and slash funding for programs like Meals on Wheels. When offered information about it, 33 percent of Trump voters said they disapproved or strongly disapproved of Trump's position. This is dramatically higher than the 3.5 percent of Trump voters who said they disapproved of his overall performance as president.

New information about the Trump agenda persuaded a number of his voters that the president was not fulfilling the pledges he made during the campaign.

Rossen, 64, a Trump voter in Delaware, said, "Trump is not taking care of regular, everyday working Americans as he promised he would. ... Trump is doing what he promised he wouldn't do."

If Searchers hear about these issues and understand their impact, we erode support for Trump and his agenda.

1.C. Information on Threats to Pay and Workplace Safety Softened Support



The pay and workplace safety changes that Trump is proposing would directly impact many of his working-class swing voters. And yet many of them are unaware of his efforts to roll back overtime pay and slash workplace safety protections. When we presented this information to Trump swing voters, there was little support for the president's position.

Where 80 percent of Trump swing voters approved of Trump's overall performance as president, only 20 percent approved of his position on pay and workplace safety. This information also elicited vastly different disapproval numbers. Where only 3.5 percent of Trump swing voters disapproved of his overall performance, 28 percent of them disapproved of his stance on this issue. Their "neutral/no opinion" response jumped from 7 percent on the overall performance question to 40 percent on this issue.

The response to information on pay and workplace safety issues, like the reaction to news of tax breaks for the wealthy, exposed another point of vulnerability for Trump among working-class swing voters. As we saw in some of the comments, when workers learn about an issue that affects them directly, it can have a powerful impact:

James, 54, a Trump voter from Delaware, talked with us just after getting off his construction job. Caked in mud, James said he liked having a "businessman" run the country. But he was upset to hear that Trump might roll back safety regulations, as he had once been injured on an unsafe worksite. He was also upset to hear about Trump's tax policy. "That wasn't what he promised," James said.

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Part 2. The Power of Right-Wing Media Means a Turn Against Trump Is Not Inevitable

2.A. Fox News Is the Medium and Messenger for Trump Swing Voters

Working-class Trump and Clinton voters may live in the same neighborhoods, but they inhabit different media universes. The majority of Trump swing voters we spoke with (56%) said they get their information about politics from cable TV, with Fox News as their dominant choice. Looking at the most devoted segment of Trump supporters who approved of his performance no matter the issue, we see that share of people reliant on cable news for information increased (67%), confirming that those voters who lacked competing information sources were more disposed toward supporting him.

In contrast, 40 percent of Clinton voters told us cable TV was their news source for politics, and they were much more likely than Trump voters to say their news came from internet outlets (17% vs. 8%) and print newspapers (15% vs. 6%). Clinton voters who watched TV mentioned CNN and MSNBC as channels of choice, but no outlet on the left had the same number of devoted followers as Fox News.

2.B. Countering the “Fox Effect” with Direct Outreach and New Information

During our canvassers’ interviews with Trump voters, they reported a definite “Fox effect.” Often, it felt as if many Trump voters were reading off the same set of talking points. On multiple occasions, different Trump voters would repeat the same phrases — e.g., “criminal immigrants” — on the same night.

During one week, as news broke about the Trump campaign’s possible Russia ties, our canvassers were surprised to find many Trump voters uninterested in Russia and fixating on North Korea instead. It turned out Fox News was downplaying Russia-related news and pumping up the North Korean threat.

At another moment during our 100 Days canvass, multiple voters offered unsolicited remarks about the threat of tunnels being built under Trump’s border wall. Several had detailed discussions with us about the depth a wall would have to be built to deter tunneling. As our voters’ comments below attest, Fox News has an extremely devoted following.

“Fox is the ONLY honest station on TV,” said Linda, 68, a Trump voter from Columbus. “All the other stations lie and only talk about the negative.” Her husband joined her at the door and they talked about George Soros paying professional protesters. “We are disgusted by the Democrats,” he said.

Keith, 59, another Trump voter from Columbus, echoed the belief that Fox News is the only truthful news. “The protesters live on welfare,” Keith said. “If you don’t like our president, then you should move. ... He will protect us from those towel heads.”

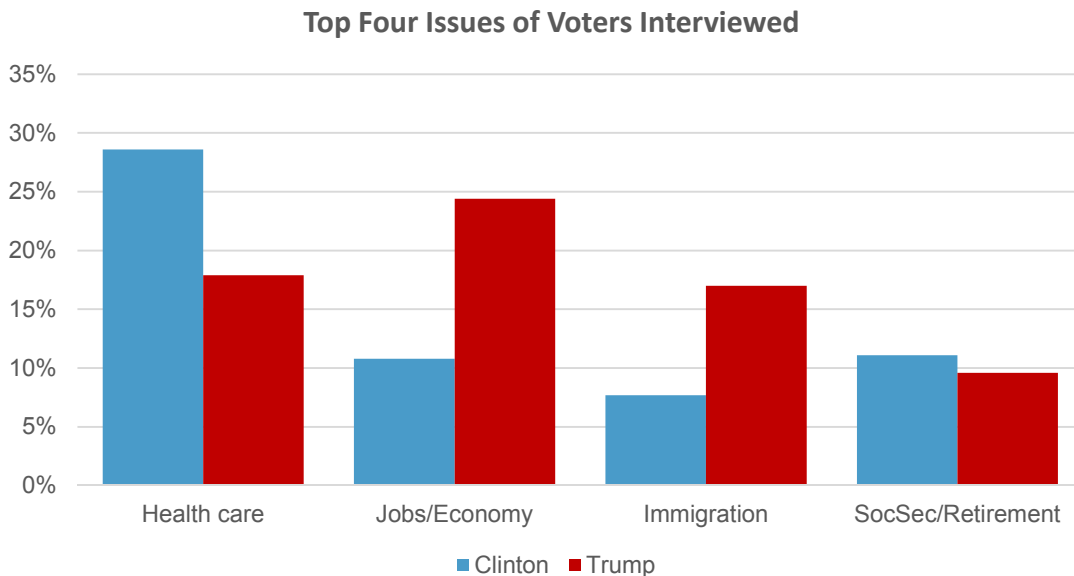
Only intensive and direct outreach by progressives can overcome the drumbeat of right-wing media that influences so many working-class voters. The way to do this isn’t by contradicting what viewers hear on Fox News. It’s by giving them new information they haven’t heard from a source they trust.

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Part 3. Ranking Swing Voters’ Top Issues, and Identifying the Issues that Will Not Move Trump Searchers

3.A. The Top Four Issues Moving Working-Class Swing Voters

We asked voters to rate Trump’s performance on a range of issues. For Trump voters, jobs and the economy was the No. 1 issue and health care was No. 2. During the 2016 campaign, jobs and the economy had been the dominant issue for all working-class voters, as it almost always is. However, during our 100 Days canvass, the Democrats’ signature achievement of the last eight years, the Affordable Care Act (ACA), was under assault, and it was far and away the most important issue to Clinton voters. Still, what holds true then and now is that working-class voters are most concerned about issues likely to have an immediate impact on their lives.



3.B. How Is Trump Doing on Health Care?

Among the three issues that Trump swing voters listed as their most important, health care was the one around which they were least supportive of the president. It was the only one of their top three issues in which less than a majority of Trump voters approved of the president’s

stance. Just 48 percent of Trump voters either approved or strongly approved of his handling of health care. By contrast, 60 percent approved or strongly approved his handling of the economy, and 64 percent gave him a thumbs-up on immigration. Almost all Trump voters wanted some aspect of the ACA changed, especially around cost, but only a small segment wanted the ACA repealed without a replacement.

Billie, a 49-year-old Trump voter from Lancaster, said, "Half of my husband's paycheck went to our health insurance. I had heart problems and we've been paying off \$10,000 to \$12,000 in bills. We're middle class and we've been hit with health bills really hard."

Madlyn, 24, a Trump voter from Whitehall, criticized Obamacare for its high "rates and [because] the enrollment period is once a year and such a small window." Madlyn said she makes "\$18 an hour due to hard work. If you don't want to work hard, the government rewards you for it and that's not right."

Although Clinton voters passionately opposed Trump on health care (76% disapproved or strongly disapproved), it was not among their top four issues where they most fiercely opposed the president. That was immigration, where 79 percent disapproved or strongly disapproved. One reason for the slightly less passionate opposition on health care may have been the problems with the ACA that some Clinton voters themselves reported.

Lillian, 64, an American Indian Clinton voter from Columbus, called Trump "a cretin." But she admitted having frustrations with health care. Though unsure about the role the ACA might have played, Lillian said she'd been switched from one insurer to another without her knowledge, and the coverage lapse left her with over \$1,000 in medical bills.

Nevertheless, most Clinton voters were deeply concerned about what an ACA repeal might mean. "My grandson was diagnosed with diabetes at the age of 3," said Vada, 81, a Clinton voter from Whitehall. "If they get rid of Obamacare, I'm not sure what will happen to his health care."

3.C. How Is Trump Doing on the Economy?

Jobs and the economy was the most important issue for Trump voters. (As noted above, health care was the dominant issue for Clinton voters, who saw the ACA facing possible repeal during our 100 Days canvass.) While 60 percent of Trump voters said they approved of his handling of the economy, that is notably less than their 80 percent approval rating of his overall performance as president. More than a quarter of Trump voters (26 percent) said they would have to "wait and see" when asked to assess the president's management of the economy. That was their highest "wait and see" response to questions about Trump's performance on voters' top three issues. It was dissatisfaction with the economy that drove many Trump swing voters to embrace his unorthodox candidacy. It seems they may still have concerns.

Janice, an 81-year-old Trump voter from Columbus, complained that "the poor folks don't pay taxes, the rich can afford them, and [the middle-class] gets the short end of the stick. Trump's for us though. ... We need a guy with a business head in there."

Scott, 46, another Columbus Trump voter, said the current president is the best person “to turn this country around.” Trump is “not a politician ... that’s why we voted for him.”

Sixty-eight percent of Clinton voters disapproved or strongly disapproved of Trump’s performance on the economy, but that was roughly in line with their disapproval rankings on health care (76%) and immigration (80%). It is notable that ACA repeal and Trump’s travel bans were dominating the news during much of our canvass.

3.D. How Is Trump Doing on Immigration?

Trump’s relentless attacks on immigrants and refugees stirred up some of the strongest, and ugliest, comments we heard from voters.

Thomas, 51, a Trump voter from Westerville, said immigrants “come over here, populate like rabbits and are trying to enact sharia law across America. It’s already in California.”

Phyllis, 87, a Trump voter from Hilliard, said immigrants “come here, don’t speak our language and get in car wrecks.”

Despite Trump’s constant hammering on immigration, it ranked third on his voters’ list of concerns, behind jobs and the economy and health care. Still, our canvassers stressed that they heard deeply troubling characterizations of immigrants and people of color, and felt that on this issue more than any other, a real sense of menace has been injected into the national debate.

In contrast to Trump voters, 79 percent of Clinton voters disapproved of Trump’s handling of immigration, with a majority (52%) strongly disapproving. Immigration ranked fourth on their list of top issues. Though some Clinton voters occasionally echoed Trump’s anti-immigrant rhetoric, most of their comments were highly critical of the president’s policies.

Deborah, 59, is a Clinton voter from Lancaster, and she “hates the wall.” Deborah used to live near the Mexican border and saw people get ID’d just to find out if they were American. “My husband is Canadian with a green card,” Deborah said, “but no one ever asked him for identification.”

“It’s not right what [Trump is] doing,” said Marian, 62, a Clinton voter from Hilliard. “I understand keeping the bad people out, but he’s stopping people and their families from having a life they deserve. As far back as my grandparents, we have let people come here. He just wants people to be scared.”

3.E. The Russia Scandal Is Not Resonating with Working-Class Swing Voters

We found little to no evidence that focusing on the Russia scandal will weaken Trump’s working-class support. During our month-long canvass, revelations of the Trump campaign’s possible ties to Russia dominated the news for days at a time. And yet, only 5 percent of Trump

swing voters expressed concern about it. In contrast, half of Clinton voters said the Russia ties did worry them, but it didn't rank in their list of top 10 issues.

During our conversations, Trump voters rarely engaged with the issue, and even some of the Clinton voters we talked with seem unmoved by it.

Raymond, 68, a Clinton voter from Columbus, didn't think there was any truth to the stories about Trump's Russia ties. "He's a businessman. I'm sure he talks to a lot of people," Raymond said.

3.F. Trump Voters Are Unmoved by Questions about His Business Conflicts

Only 10 percent of Trump swing voters said they were concerned that Trump's family business interests would put him at odds with what's best for the country.

Many Trump voters trust him precisely because he is a wealthy businessman. They argue that unlike a conventional politician, he won't need to use the office to enrich himself. Since he's already wealthy, they feel he's less likely to be corrupt.

Robin, a 56-year-old Trump voter from Columbus, strongly approves of Trump because he's "not a politician." She feels his business acumen "will be good for this country."

Linda, 74, a Trump voter from Whitehall, thinks his business background is a plus. In business, Linda said, "you can't just sit around on your haunches, you have to get things done."

We should note that Clinton swing voters are worried about potential conflicts arising from Trump's family business; 84 percent of Clinton voters say they are somewhat or very concerned. But again, it does not register on their list of top-10 issues.

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Part 4. The Intensity Gap Between Trump and Clinton Voters, and Attitudes Toward Trump and His Team

4.A. Trump Voters Like Him, But Not as Intensely as Clinton Voters Dislike Him

The first question canvassers asked in their interviews measured voters' approval or disapproval of Trump's overall performance. We found that central Ohio's working-class swing voters — like the rest of the American electorate — are deeply polarized. Eighty percent of Trump voters approved or strongly approved of the president's performance, while 87 percent of Clinton voters disapproved or strongly disapproved of Trump.

While that 7-point approval/disapproval difference is relatively narrow, we find a striking intensity gap between Trump and Clinton voters when those approval numbers were broken

down further. While 37 percent of Trump voters *strongly* approved of his performance, 67 percent of Clinton voters *strongly* disapproved — a dramatic 30-point difference. We found further evidence of this intensity gap in voters’ answers to a question about actions they’d taken to voice their opinions to elected officials — e.g., attending a rally or signing a petition. Nearly 1 in 5 Clinton voters (18%) had taken action since the election, but fewer than 5 percent of Trump voters had.

Voters’ strongly polarized feelings about Trump are reflected in the comments our canvassers recorded.

“Trump is exactly what America needs,” said Danny, a 65-year-old Trump voter from Grove City. On election night, Danny and his church members gathered “to pray that Mr. Trump would be president and lead Christians to God.”

“Trump is a crooked millionaire,” said Mary, a 52-year-old Clinton supporter from Hilliard whose husband died in Afghanistan. “Instead of helping Muslim refugees, he condemns them. My husband would be sickened by his lack of humanitarianism.”

We did see reticence about the president in comments from some Trump supporters, particularly from the 10 percent of them who said they needed to “wait and see” before assessing his performance as president. (By contrast, just 6 percent of Clinton voters answered “wait and see” on the performance question.)

“I’m holding out,” said Fran, a 62-year-old “wait-and-see” Trump voter from Delaware. “I don’t think he’s as nasty as he is portrayed,” Fran said. But on immigration, she added, “I’m a Christian, I don’t want to see us turn people away.”

4.B. One Word about Trump Confirmed How Polarized Swing Voters Are

We asked voters for one word they’d use to describe the president. From Trump voters, we got words like “powerful,” “go-getter,” “businessman” and “Superman.”

Charlene, a 59-year-old Trump voter from Groveport, said, “Trump is unafraid.” He’s not like the “establishment politicians” before him, and she believes he’ll stand up for working people.

But some Trump voters also described him with words like “hectic,” “chaotic” and “disappointing.”

Harriet, 90, a Trump voter from Columbus, called him “impulsive ... he really doesn’t know when to keep his mouth shut,” she said. “I sure hope somebody’s got a leash on him.”

From Clinton voters, the responses included “arrogant,” “terrible,” “bully,” “nut-job” and “clown.”

“He acts just like a child,” said Dorothy, a 94-year-old Clinton voter from Delaware. “He’s just fussing about something all the time.”

4.C. Lacking Familiarity with Administration Officials, Trump Voters Are Uncritical

Both Trump and Clinton swing voters were unfamiliar with the president’s appointees. When asked to name their favorite administration official, 70 percent of Trump voters chose “Don’t Know” or “Everyone.” When Clinton voters were asked to name their least favorite Trump appointee, 56 percent said “Don’t Know” or “Everyone.”

It should be noted that both Trump and Clinton voters singled out Education Secretary Betsy DeVos as the administration official they most disliked. However, relatively few voters weighed in: Just 9 percent of Clinton voters singled out DeVos by name and 4 percent of Trump voters did.

The person best liked by Trump voters was Vice President Mike Pence, though only 15 percent of Trump voters named him. Clinton voters who chose a favorite also selected Pence, but only 1.8 percent of them did.

Very few voters made comments about Trump’s cabinet or appointments. This suggests that news coverage of palace intrigue and power plays at the White House may be having little impact on working-class voters, and that concerns about filling his cabinet with Wall Street bankers and business leaders with conflicts of interest are not important to these voters.

4.D. The President’s Temperament, His Tweets and the Risk of War

There is deep concern among Clinton voters, and even among some Trump voters, that his temperament will make war more likely. Nearly 90 percent of Clinton voters were somewhat or very concerned that Donald Trump’s judgment and temperament will put America at greater risk of going to war. Twenty-two percent of Trump voters shared that concern.

“Trump’s rhetoric and inexperience puts us at a greater risk of war,” said Kathryn, 30, a Clinton voter from Columbus. “He’s a shoot-first-ask-questions-later guy.”

Rose, a 75-year-old from Columbus who didn’t vote, said, “I’m really scared about what’s going to happen. I’m concerned we’ll get into a world war. I had three brothers and two sons who served. They treat them like pawns, but there are real people’s lives at stake.”

Among the Trump voters who praised the president’s temperament, Norene, 49, from Hilliard, said she likes having a businessman, not a politician, as commander-in-chief. She’s glad Trump wants to raise defense spending. “If our kids are going to war, they need resources. Let’s win the next one.”

Yvonne, 56, a Trump voter from Columbus, said Trump would be strong where Obama was weak. Obama, she said, was “letting everyone do whatever when we should’ve been bombing them.”

As we talked with voters about Trump’s temperament, his tweets came up repeatedly. Most voters, including many Trump voters, were critical of his Twitter habit.

Leda, a 61-year-old Trump voter from Groveport, said, “He really does need to stop tweeting. It’s a good way to get out the word, but he needs to fact-check.”

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CONCLUSION

After conducting our canvass of 976 working-class Ohio voters, we have come away with evidence that many of Donald Trump’s swing voters can be moved with a progressive message. This conclusion summarizes the lessons we learned during our 100 Days canvass, and offers some thoughts on how progressives can reach out to working-class voters.

Working-class swing voters are open to progressive ideas — if they hear them. Our canvassers found that with door-to-door contact and a persuasive message, we can cut through the right-wing megaphone that has all but drowned out progressive voices in so many working-class homes.

When talking to voters, tell them something they don’t know. Don’t tell them that what they know is wrong. This classic insight helped shape our outreach efforts. Our canvassers found that it didn’t work to dispute Fox News’ talking points on well-worn issues such as the ACA. Rather, offering new information about Trump’s policies broke through and showed just how out of step they are with the needs of working people.

We can’t assume that the 2012 Obama voters who swung to Trump in 2016 will automatically swing back if he disappoints them. Trump’s working-class base may already be eroding in his first 100 days, but their declining support for Trump won’t inevitably lead to growing support for progressives. We saw in our canvass that many Trump swing voters are deeply disenchanted with politics. That’s why they cast a ballot for him in the first place. If Trump fails them — and progressives don’t offer an authentic alternative — they are very likely to give up on politics in upcoming election cycles.

This canvass focused on swing voters, but to win in 2018, Democrats will need to do better with both swing *and* base voters. A perfect storm hit Ohio Democrats in 2016. Base turnout dropped at the same time that swing voters abandoned them. In Ohio’s urban counties, where the base is strongest, Hillary Clinton received 162,000 fewer votes than Barack Obama did in 2012. And in the nonurban counties, where so many swing voters live, Clinton got 272,000 fewer votes than Obama. Given those numbers, progressives can’t afford to ignore either base or swing voters.

Ultimately, to win in Ohio and elsewhere, progressives need to reach out at all times to our base — to communities of color, millennials and women — as well as the white working-class voters open to a progressive agenda. That is how we'll take back vital battleground states and elect a Congress and a president who truly represent the interests of all working families.

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METHODOLOGY

Unlike traditional public opinion polling, which is based on a random sample of people representative of a given population, we targeted likely swing voters in working-class communities in central Ohio. We selected voters who cast a ballot in at least one non-general election since 2013, which suggests they'll be likely to vote in 2018. We defined "working class" as households making less than \$75,000 a year. Though we did not seek a representative sample of all voters, we did seek to interview voters who broadly reflect the demographic and political makeup of working-class, swing voters in the region. Our goal was to reach a large share of 2012 Obama voters who swung away from Clinton in 2016 — and to see whether they could be persuaded to swing back to progressive candidates in 2018 and 2020.

From March 6 to April 5, we canvassed 976 registered voters. Their voting preferences in the 2016 election broke down as follows: 43 percent said they voted for Donald Trump; 38 percent said they voted for Hillary Clinton; 8 percent didn't share their presidential choice; 6 percent said they voted for a third-party candidate; and 6 percent said they did not vote. (Note that the total percentage in the presidential vote adds up to more than 100 due to rounding of results.)

As far as a demographic breakdown, the canvassed populations skewed female over male (61 percent to 39 percent), and the vast majority of people we spoke with were white (97 percent); 1 percent were African-American, 1 percent were Latinx, and less than 1 percent were Asian. The predominant age groups were people in their 60s (20 percent) and 70s (20 percent).

Canvassers sought to understand how voters were feeling about President Trump after 100 days in office. Individuals could choose not to answer a specific question, which resulted in slightly different totals for each response.

We deployed canvass teams in the following eight Ohio cities and towns: Columbus, Delaware, Grove City, Groveport, Hilliard, Lancaster, Westerville and Whitehall.



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