

The
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Political science

Trump and the academy

Political science refashions itself to deal with the Republican nominee

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SOON after Donald Trump announced his candidacy, the usually bickering American pundits scoffed in unison. Armed with time-tested principles of political science, they were sure that no one so inexperienced and iconoclastic could build the consensus needed to win the Republican nomination. Their precious theories now sullied, scholars of American politics are hurriedly revising the old, and originating the new. A course on the political science of Trump will begin at the University of California, Irvine this month.

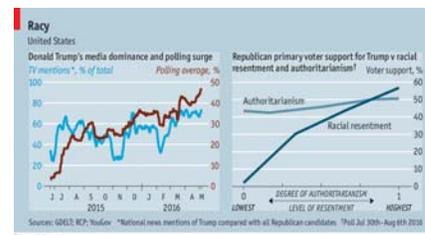
As with all disciplines, some explanations have gained more traction in political science than others. One of them was the idea put forward in a weighty and amply-footnoted book, “The Party Decides”, that parties still exert a good deal of influence over who gets the nomination. In a forthcoming paper in the journal *Political Science and Politics*, the book’s authors set out to save their theory from its mauling by Republican primary voters. A candidate who eschews consensus and campaigns only for a narrow section of voters could win, they concede, by appealing to voters directly via social media and by “playing on the penchants of journalists”. The idea that this caused Mr Trump’s rise has both the merit and the drawback of being impossible to verify. But throughout the Republican primary, national media did indeed lavish attention on the braggadocious upstart (see chart 1). The 16 other contenders vying for the Republican nomination had to make do with scraps.

The apparent failure of the book’s highly influential theory has created a new field of Trumpology. A mammoth survey of 87,000 Americans by Gallup, a pollster, shows that people who lived in areas less affected by globalisation—whether the loss of manufacturing jobs or influxes of immigrants—were the ones more likely to view Mr Trump favourably. The simple explanation that white Americans roiled by free trade and immigration are flocking to the outrightly protectionist and anti-immigration candidate does not suffice.

Disaffection of another sort seemed to predict support for Mr Trump: his popularity rose in areas with the least healthy populations and lower social mobility. A salesman first and foremost, Mr Trump spun a story that “elites in both parties haven’t taken the white working class seriously”, says Jonathan Rothwell, an economist who wrote the study. Yet polls suggest more than 40% of the electorate backs Mr Trump: only a small slice of that can be explained by his support in deprived areas.

Perhaps none of the many theories proposed were so jarring, or gained so wide a following, as the “authoritarianism” explanation. A study published in January argued that support for Mr Trump was fuelled by newly awakened “authoritarian” voters who thrilled to his continued haranguing of Muslims and Mexicans. After all, Mr Trump had “replaced the dog whistle”—coded language to appeal to prejudiced voters—“with a bull horn”, says Matt MacWilliams, author of the study.

This argument did not suggest that Americans were pledging admiration for a new Mussolini en masse. “Authoritarianism” is instead measured by four questions on child-rearing—such as whether respect for elders matters more than independence. A general preference



for obedience and authority, evinced by fancying good manners over curiosity, say, was especially prevalent among Trump supporters.

To test some of these nascent theories, *The Economist* examined the data underlying them. We asked YouGov to include the same questions used to assess authoritarianism in their weekly tracking poll. In this survey, authoritarianism, measured using the same child-rearing questions, was not associated with support for Mr Trump among Republican primary voters—though it was for his closest challenger, Senator Ted Cruz. We also examined the raw data behind another widely read version of this thesis and found it had not taken religion into account. When we repeated the analysis including measures for religiosity, authoritarianism became a far weaker predictor of Trump support.

However, one theory of Trump remains standing. Along with the questions on authoritarianism, we also requested YouGov to ask a battery of questions aimed at measuring racial resentment. Different from outright racism, this is measured by support for the idea that blacks are undeserving and clamorous for special assistance. Strongly disagreeing with the claim that “over the past few years blacks have gotten less than they deserve”, for example, reflects a high degree of racial resentment.

Racial resentment was tightly linked to Mr Trump’s supporters. These results held true when we controlled for region, race and religion, among other factors: 59% of Trump supporters in the Republican primary scored in the top quartile on racial resentment, compared with 46% of Republicans who backed other candidates and with 29% of voters overall. Those who thought that more should be done to fight terrorism were also much more likely to support him. In the Gallup study, whites who lived in racially isolated areas had a higher opinion of Mr Trump as well.

These findings cast doubt on the alarming notion that Mr Trump is propelled by a latent yearning for a strongman. Instead, they bolster the view that the candidate’s recent speeches painting a dystopian vision of black America racked by crime and unemployment were aimed not at black voters themselves, but rather at the kind of whites who tell pollsters that blacks are lazy and overindulged.

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