

LIVING BLUE IN A RED STATE: UNDERSTANDING THE TRUMP PHENOMENON AND THE CONSERVATIVE BACKLASH

JAMES ARVANITAKIS

ABSTRACT

We have seen what can best be described as a U-turn in US political positioning: From street protests and outpourings of grief in support of Black Lives Matter (BLM) following the murder of George Floyd, to a moral panic about ‘critical race theory.’ How did things change so quickly and how do we understand this change? This article explores the reasons for this turn and explores whether such swings will continue to define contemporary politics.

Keywords: Donald Trump • Trust • Critical Race Theory



BACKGROUND

I sit at the counter of the local diner with my wife following our newly established ritual of reading the New York Times over a cup of coffee. A family of five walk in with the father of the group, around his mid-50s, wearing a cowboy hat, cowboy boots and openly carrying a handgun in his holster.

Both my wife and I stop eating and look at the gun then up at the man. He warmly smiles at us, nods his head and wishes us a good morning. We respond and the rest of the family warmly greet us as they walk past.

For Australians, this is a strange sight: most of us will never own a gun or even shoot one. In fact, for most Australians, the only guns we will ever see will be the ones that the police carry in their holsters.

Australia and the United States have much in common but also significant cultural differences that run deep. To truly understand these differences, what is required is profound engagement and deep cultural analysis through a program that is consistent with the history, integrity, and intent of the Fulbright Program.

THE PROJECT

My Fulbright Project was the inaugural University of Wyoming/Fulbright Australia Milward L. Simpson Fulbright Scholarship that included both teaching and research. While the focus of this article is the research component of my journey, the teaching and engagement with students provided me important insights that fed into my study.

The research component had three specific goals: 1. To understand the rise and support of Donald Trump amongst a socially conservative state; 2. To gain insights into the culture of a deep Red state such as Wyoming; and, 3. To gain an understanding of the future direction of the Republican Party.

I employed a number of research methodologies but central was ethnographic methods. As such, I embedded myself in the daily rituals of the small town I lived in and engaged in discussions about the state of America not just politics, but also standards of living and quality of life, America's place in the world and whether people saw expert institutions such as universities and public policy organizations as representing their interests. I was also an active member of the University of Wyoming academic community, as well as attending seminars and conferences and events with the Donald Trump, Bernie Sanders, Joe Biden and Elizabeth Warren campaigns. I gathered a wide range of secondary research across the political spectrum and wrote a regular opinion piece for an Australian online journal.

It is important to note that in my research I opted not to undertake structured or formal interviews. Rather, I explored conversations in informal, random and unexpected locations—from diners to college football games, airports to bars, rodeos to music festivals and political rallies. While I occasionally sought permission to record a specific quote, I gathered diary notes and observations after the interview rather than writing during the conversation. I acknowledge both the benefits and limitations of this process.

The fortnightly online opinion pieces established a discipline in forming and communicating my ideas, as well as giving me access to real time feedback from the readership. It also led to regular invitations to speak about my research, including academic conferences, public meetings, and a monthly discussion on Australia's national broadcaster, ABC News).

In the end, I gathered hundreds of pages of notes, visited ten states, and spoke at 22 public meetings and various academic gatherings. Unfortunately, the emergence of a global pandemic resulted in me returning to Australia two months earlier than planned. Despite this, I continued my teaching, attended online meetings, and sustained my public engagements.

While there are many elements I could write about, I will concentrate on three broad areas of my research: Understanding the complexity of the Trump base; discussing the declining levels of trust that now plague the U.S. (and Australia); and finally, examining how the elements of *the great reversal* – or backlash against progressive politics – had taken hold, even as Joe Biden was being elected and the Black Lives Matter movement gained momentum.

THE COMPLEXITY OF THE TRUMP VOTER

For many outsiders who witnessed the many controversies of the Trump Presidency, one question that continually emerged was, *how and why does Trump retain support?*

There is no simple answer. The first thing to note is that a vast majority of the American public have turned away from politics seeing it, according to the Pew Research Center, as “less respectful, less fact-based and less substantive.” This is not just about Trump. As such, while many I spoke to felt that Trump may have acted inappropriately, they also did not believe that the Democrats acted in good faith and saw the sustained attacks on former President Trump driven by a refusal to accept the 2016 election. From the Mueller Investigation to Freshman Representative Rashida Tlaib’s declaration in January that the newly installed Democratic majority in the House will “go in there and impeach the motherf***er” before any evidence was presented, suggests that many see a party obsessed with Trump rather than one interested in governing.

One mistake that seemed to be continuously repeated by media commentators and academics was a tendency to homogenize all Trump supporters as Hilary Clinton did in her infamous “basket of deplorables” comment. This fails to understand both the above mentioned collapse in respect for politics and the enmity towards the behavior of the Democrats. An understanding of the Trump phenomenon requires a more subtle analysis. The following groupings of Trump supporters is based on a joint analysis with Dr Jason McConnell from the University of Wyoming.

Committed Republicans. Data from the Voter Study Group highlighted that more than 80 percent of Trump supporters came from voters who voted for Republican nominee Mitt Romney just four years before. These are your traditional American Republicans: tax-cut advocates, religious evangelicals, gun rights supporters and business leaders eager for deregulation and tax cuts. While many may not like Trump himself, his Administration gave them enough to keep them inside and they see no home in the Democratic Party.

Those who are ‘anti-politics’. The Cooperative Congressional Election Study — an election survey of around 50,000 people – found that 12 percent of people who voted for Sen. Bernie Sanders in the 2016 Democratic presidential primaries went on to vote for Trump in the general election. These voters seem to be a growing segment of the American electorate that was

once both peripheral and ignored, which is now drawn to chaos incitement. They see the current system as failing them and would like to see the structures dramatically changed – and they saw Trump, an outsider detested by the establishment, as offering this opportunity.

The disenfranchised. A recurring theme over the last decade by economic commentators has been that economic liberalization has resulted in the hollowing out of the middle class. Those that feel left behind see someone like Trump, who is brash and willing to do things differently, actually changing the economic model that left them vulnerable. Further, Trump was perceived as paying attention to the rust belt. What we have seen from Reagan through to Obama is a relative continuity of foreign and domestic policies including never-ending wars and economic liberalization. An impartial observer may not feel that Trump has the solutions, but he does acknowledge that many have been left behind – and even traditional union-based Democrats saw him as the only politician speaking to them and their concerns.

Nationalists. Associated with *the* disenfranchised are those that believe America has lost its place in the world and negotiated away its economic supremacy. While Donald Trump has been criticized for embracing nationalism, the patriotic appeal for national unity and pride is what many feel America needs. Not all of us are comfortable with such patriotic calls, but the nation-state remains the most influential institution in our lives and Trump's America-First rhetoric appealed to those who feel that the nation has suffered while many others, both Republicans and Democrats, focused on a cosmopolitan globalism.

The Trumpers. All of this does not dismiss a specific portion of the Trump base that is attracted to his anti-political correctness rhetoric. The Trumpers continue to feed off Trump's many outlandish and unsubstantiated claims, such as migrants being the source of all of America's social and economic ills. Although baseless and sometimes openly racist, they appeal to a certain percentage of the population. It is simple to call them "deplorables" as Hillary Clinton did — and sure some may be — but such insults ignore the reasons they have turned to Trump.

A CULTURE OF MISTRUST

The 2016 election of Donald Trump reflected the rise of populism that became the focus of many researchers. While Trump may have lost the 2020 election, populist leaders remain prominent across the world – something unlikely to change in the foreseeable future.

One trend that has paralleled this rise of populist leaders has been the loss of trust by significant sections of the population in scientific and expert systems, including universities. This mistrust is a defining feature of many conservative states.

This is not to argue for a simple causality, but rather that experts have been attacked as elitist, out of touch. In fact, the priorities between ‘the experts’ (and elites) and ‘the people’ has been framed through simple binaries including ‘jobs v. environment’ or ‘immigration v. jobs.’ Populist media often describe universities as ‘ivory towers’ home to ‘boffins’, further exasperating divisions and distrust.

As far back as March 2020, many were worrying that this distrust in experts would undermine America’s response to the pandemic. Since then, we have witnessed the pandemic become a partisan issue and driven along by conspiracy theories and a refusal to believe medical experts. The impacts have been devastating.

This skepticism should not be simply dismissed for the scientific method has failed significant sections of the U.S. population. For example, the Tuskegee study that ran between 1932 and 1970 purposely left many Black men with syphilis so doctors involved could study the consequences of the disease even as treatments became available.

For others, the removal of scientific experts from decision-making is part of building a more business friendly environment, freeing American business from problematic red-tape, and encouraging entrepreneurship. In fact, Jared Kushner boasted that the Trump Administration was “taking the country back” from doctors.

THE GREAT REVERSAL

In May 2020, the world witnessed in horror as a Minneapolis police officer leaned on the throat of George Floyd with his knee and slowly suffocated him. The murder of George Floyd led to an outpouring of grief with mass vigils, sports stars ‘taking the knee’, high profile organizations vowing to be part of racial healing and the supercharging of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) as promises about pursuing racial justice were made. We debated the legacy of once celebrated figures such as Cecil Rhodes, and even revered former presidents George Washington and Thomas Jefferson who, we were reminded, were slave owners.

The protests that started in the U.S. quickly spread across the world as grief turned to anger and violence followed. As statues tumbled and riots manifested, there were claims and counter claims of who perpetrated the violence. Depending on your news source of choice, the world was either experiencing a long overdue racial reckoning or was imploding.

It is hard to understand that only a year later, this promise of reconciliation has been replaced by a wholesale backlash as witnessed through the moral panic towards Critical Race Theory (CRT). CRT, with its foundation in U.S. law schools in the 1970s, is an approach of studying how race and racism has shaped legal structures, institutions, and politics. The theory rests on the premise that racial bias – intentional or not – is embedded in laws and institutions across all Anglo-nations: including prisons, health, welfare and

education systems. Once an obscure academic pursuit, CRT is now the latest battleground of the cultural wars with White parents expressing fears that both they and their children are being made to feel guilty for past injustices and are blamed for all inequalities.

This move towards and then away from racial justice I describe as *the Great Reversal*. This move from reconciliation and resolution to fearing guilt and accountability for past injustices is, however, one of many phenomena we have witnessed recently. For example, debates about ‘freedom of speech’ and fear that political correctness has gone too far, made by conservative and right-leaning commentators, actually mirror the same language of progressive activists from the 1960s and 1970s. At that time, it was progressive activists that wanted to challenge accepted norms and expand the freedom of speech and were confronted by conservatives who laid out accepted customs of morality and decency.

Likewise, the language used by those who are anti-vaccine about the sanctity of one’s right to choose what is done to one’s body echoes that of ‘pro-choice’ activists in abortion debates. In this way, we see slogans ‘freedom of choice’ blazoned across anti-vaccine protest rallies while in Australia, the blue Eureka flag, once a symbol of unionism and the need to respond to tyranny, has become the rallying cry of resistance against mask and vaccine mandates with roots in the White supremacist movement. These same activists have been drawn to the Aboriginal Tent Embassy in Canberra that symbolizes claims of sovereignty by Australia’s First Nations people.

If we want to return to the idea of amicable disagreement, we need to relearn compassion, empathy, and nuance in political discourse.

How did this happen? The seeds of *the Great Reversal* are the discontent and loss of trust that have been described above. *The Great Reversal* is not only about a right-wing backlash against progressive politics, but a move away from the very foundations of the expert systems that are at the foundation of our society.

A CONCLUSION OF SORTS: WHAT I DID NEXT

In response, we must find ways to draw on our democratic and liberal values to engage with those citizens that have stopped listening. This is an ongoing project with no end in sight: from the need to understand those that feel disenfranchised, to finding ways to work in a bipartisan way, and ensuring that the value of scientific and humanities research is communicated, and that it positively impacts people’s lives.

Following my time in Wyoming, I continued my work at Western Sydney University for a further twelve months before accepting the Executive Director position at the Australian American Fulbright Commission. This was motivated for many reasons, but one of the keys was the many insights

I acquired while a Fulbright Scholar. These came in many forms, but one of the most important is that, if we want to return to the idea of amicable disagreement, we need to relearn compassion, empathy, and nuance in political discourse.

NOTES

1. This article draws from the many publications I produced while on my Fulbright which can be sourced from www.jamesarvanitakis.net.
2. The rise of populism and the Trump phenomenon has become a very crowded academic field which shaped many of the insights outlined here. Of all this literature, I would recommend the meta-analysis by Carlos Lozada in his book, *What Were We Thinking: A Brief Intellectual History of the Trump Era*.
3. A detailed analysis of trust in American society and the perception of expert systems is drawn from a cross section of qualitative and quantitative research produced by the Pew Research Center (www.pewresearch.org).



Dr Arvanitakis at the University of Wyoming campus

BIOGRAPHY

Professor James Arvanitakis is the Executive Director of the Australian American Fulbright Commission. He is also an Honorary Professor at Australian National University and an Adjunct Professor at the Institute for Culture and Society at Western Sydney University. In 2019, he was a Fulbright Fellow as the Milward L. Simpson Visiting Professor – University of Wyoming. He blogs at www.jamesarvanitakis.net and can be followed at @jarvanitakis. He can be reached at james.arvanitakis@fulbright.org.au
