

# What Could Change Your Mind?

## Intellectual Humility and the “Loyalty” of Trump’s Supporters

Ian Church  
University of Edinburgh

Part of being intellectually humble is knowing when to change your mind. Quintessentially, an intellectually *arrogant* person is someone who is wilfully blind to the evidence against their views and/or wilfully blind to the lack of evidence in favour of their views. An intellectually humble person, in contrast, is someone who follows the evidence. Simply put, if the evidence against a given belief (or view or idea) grows—or as the evidence in favour of it vanishes—an intellectually humble person will change their mind about that belief and stop believing it.

It can be extremely revealing to ask people, “What could change your mind?”, about their beliefs. For example, ask someone who believes that the risks of vaccines outweigh their tremendous benefit (i.e. anti-vaxxers) what it would take to change their mind, and you more than likely won’t hear them say “empirical research”—at least not without spurious qualifications. Rigorous, peer-reviewed, scientific research has clearly already established that the benefits of vaccines far outweigh the risks. Of course, anti-vaxxers are often deeply suspicious about this empirical research—dismissing it as nothing but the nefarious influence of major pharmaceutical companies. But, insofar as it’s not at all clear how one could convince an anti-vaxxer that the empirical research on vaccines is legitimate (or that their worries about unscrupulous science are largely unfounded), this highlights a wilful blindness to a large body of evidence against anti-vaxxer beliefs. This highlights intellectual arrogance in the anti-vaxxer position.

And, in an election year, it can be especially revealing to ask people “What could change your mind?” regarding their favoured candidate. For most of us, if our favoured candidate clearly and unambiguously advocated war crimes, then that would be sufficient evidence to change our mind about that candidate. For most of us, if our favoured candidate clearly and unapologetically expressed racist, sexist, or ableist sentiments, then that would be sufficient evidence to change our mind about that candidate. And I think all of this would be *especially* true if whatever positive evidence we had for favouring that candidate in the first place was found to be shoddy or otherwise deeply suspect. And all of this is revealing (though hopefully not surprising) because we want to have good, positive evidence for thinking that our favoured candidates are the best candidates, and we find advocating war crimes, racism, sexism, and ableism completely abhorrent.

*But, strikingly, none of this has seemed to bother the supporters of Donald Trump.* Donald Trump unambiguously advocated targeting or “taking out” the families of terrorists—a war crime. Donald Trump has infamously claimed that illegal immigrants are “bringing drugs...crime” and that “they’re rapists.” He has referred to various women as “dogs,” “slobs,” “fat-pigs,” and “piece[s] of ass.” He mockingly imitated a disabled journalist. And nevertheless, he’s now the presumptive GOP nominee for president (even though most of the GOP have opposed him). To be sure, some

of Trump's supporters might not be terribly troubled by the epitaphs of war crimes, racism, sexism, or ableism. For example, David Duke, the former grand wizard of the KKK, has openly advocated Donald Trump for president, and presumably Duke and his ilk won't be too bothered by racist rhetoric. Let's assume, however, that *most* of Trump's supporters are decent people. Let's assume that most of them would indeed be bothered by evidence that their preferred candidate advocates war crimes or expresses racist, sexist, or ableist sentiments. But if we assume this, then it easily becomes baffling as to how they could possibly endorse a candidate like Trump. If we agree that most of Trump's supporters are decent folk who are bothered by racism, sexism, ableism and the advocacy of war crimes, then how can they possibly support a candidate who so clearly employs racist, sexist, and ableist rhetoric and who unambiguously advocates war crimes? If these failings can't change their mind about Trump, what possibly could?

Of course, the failings of a candidate can be outweighed by their merits. Abraham Lincoln, for example, wasn't morally perfect by any measure, but he is nevertheless broadly (and correctly) considered to be one of America's greatest presidents. Lincoln's merits far outweigh his failings. But what merit does Trump manifest as a candidate that could possibly outweigh his failings? Arguably the greatest merit Trump's candidacy can muster is his status as a political outsider. Trump, the story goes, is rich, and so cannot be bought. It's thought that Trump is someone who will shake up an inept and deceitful political establishment. Perhaps *that* gives us a reason to support him. But would Trump's status as a political outsider outweigh the reasons to reject Trump as a candidate? Not even close. Besides, even if we ignore the fact that Trump's wealth has seemingly played a corrupting hand in politics for years (nullifying the "political outsider" status), there are *other* political outsiders to vote for who haven't, for example, expressly advocated war crimes.

*So why are people voting for him?* Can it be his clear policy ideas? I don't think so. His policies are often only discussed in the broadest possible terms. The only thing he usually tells us is how smart he is and that he knows smart people who can get things done. Could it be his business acumen? His business acumen is questionable—his tremendous luck of being born into a rich family (and enjoying a immense inheritance) and his many business failures have already been explored online in great detail. (Besides, there is no obvious reason to think that business acumen translates directly into political acumen!) Could it be his consistent political ideology? Trump's ideology often seems erratic and unpredictable—shifting with whatever talking points are going to get him attention on a given day. In the future, could it be the mere fact that he's at least not a Democratic candidate? While this might be particularly salient to some voters, I'd like to suggest that perhaps this is the year to seriously consider voting for a third party candidate.

Even if we could come up with good reasons to vote for him, there are *so* many other reasons to *not* vote for him. For most of us, if our favoured candidate challenged religious liberty (e.g. proposed banning a major religious group from entering the country), challenged the freedom of the press, or encouraged senseless violence against law-abiding protestors, that would give us conclusive reasons to change our minds about that candidate. But, again, Trump seems to be doing all of these things, yet his supporters remain steadfast. The evidence seems absolutely conclusive; Trump is a terrible candidate for president. There are an overwhelming number of reasons not to vote for Trump, and the reasons to vote for him (over anyone else) seem excessively

difficult to come by. So why are people voting for him? What could possibly change the minds of Trump's core supporters?

Trump himself gives us a clue: his supporters are "loyal." He famously (or infamously) said that he "could stand in the middle of 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue and shoot somebody and...not lose any voters." And this *loyalty* is touted as a virtue. While this is, no doubt, hyperbole, Trump is making an important point. For most of us, if our favoured candidate publicly committed murder, then that would be sufficient evidence to change our minds about that candidate. Most of us wouldn't want to vote for a murderer. But, as Trump is brazenly suggesting, not even conclusive evidence that he was murderer could change the minds of his supporters. Granting that most Trump supporters are decent folk who would otherwise be bothered by murder, this suggests that Trump's supporters would nevertheless turn a blind eye to such things out of loyalty to their favoured candidate. And maybe *that's* what's happening with Trump's apparent racism, sexism, ableism, and advocacy of war crimes. His supporters are decent folk and generally bothered by such things, but they nevertheless are loyal to their candidate and blind and unresponsive to those reasons to reject Trump as a viable presidential candidate.

And that seems to be the nature of our contemporary political discourse surrounding the merit (or lack thereof) of Trump as a political candidate. It's not a matter of giving reasons or evidence for or against voting for Trump—Trump's supporters seem unresponsive to such reasons and evidence—it's something much more intractable. The minds of Trump supporters, it seems, cannot be changed by simply giving them conclusive evidence to think that Trump would be an unmitigated disaster as a president; *that* evidence is already there and it's apparently ineffective. What is needed is a change of heart. *Trump supporters are loyal, but that loyalty is no virtue.* The "loyalty" of Trump supporters seems to render them unresponsive and blind to evidence against thinking Trump is a good candidate and to their own lack of evidence regarding his merits. Changing the mind of Trump's supporters is going to take more than evidence or reason, it's going to take a change of heart, it's going to take intellectual humility.

But let's be entirely clear—and this really needs to be emphasized—advocates of other presidential candidates can be blind to evidence too. Whether it's advocates of Bernie Sanders, Hillary Clinton, or third-party candidates (like Gary Johnson or Jill Stein), we can all be blind to evidence (or its lack). This has always been the case with the supporters of any presidential candidate. (That's part of the reason why it can be so helpful to ask ourselves what could change our minds about our favoured candidates, to see where we might be unresponsive to evidence or good reasons.) There are supporters of every candidate, I'd suggest, who are guilty of some degree of intellectual arrogance. But I think what's so very puzzling when it comes to Trump and many of his supporters, is that the evidence against thinking that Trump is a viable candidate is so immense and unambiguous that blindness to it is particularly jarring.

Trump's supporters may be loyal, but that loyalty makes them intellectually arrogant. They seem wilfully blind or unresponsive to the evidence against thinking that Trump could be a viable candidate and/or wilfully blind or unresponsive to the lack of evidence in favour of thinking that Trump could ever "make America great again." And just as we can't expect to make a deaf person hear by talking louder and slower, we can't make someone more intellectually humble by giving them more evidence that they're already blind to. If we're going to relieve Trump's supporters of

their loyalty, *of their intellectual arrogance*, we need to sincerely understand and try to cure what's causing their blindness in the first place. Perhaps, in addition to asking "What could change your mind?" to Trump's supporters, we should be asking ourselves—those of us who are so baffled by Trump's political success and support, those of us who would never dream of voting for Trump—questions like "What could possibly make *us* blind to the evidence that Trump would be a disastrous president?". And to be sure, it's not a matter of education or intelligence; there are Trump supporters who are as educated and intelligent as the supporters of any other candidate. The uncomfortable reality is that Trump's supporters are just like the rest of us. So what's the difference? Why can *we* see the abhorrence of Trump's candidacy and *they* can't?

I think it's worth closing with this thought: In many ways, Trump's supporters are refugees of the American society, the American economy, and the American government. They feel dispossessed and alienated. They have largely been left out of a changing economy and forgotten. Jobs have been lost. Dreams and ambitions have melted away. And they have been disenfranchised by a political establishment (Republican and Democrat) that not only ignores them but also often actively moves against them. We should do our sincere best to imagine what it's like to be in such a position, to be so alienated, so neglected, and so desperate. Maybe once we've done that, we'll be able to see how an authoritarian demagogue who looks primed to set the world on fire could be irresistibly appealing to otherwise decent and thoughtful people; after all, who knows who'll rise from the ashes? Perhaps if we can empathize with Trump's core supporters—seeing their legitimate anger, sadness, and felt hopelessness—we can better understand how to approach and cure their alienation and desperation. And, subsequently, perhaps we can change their minds about Trump, and help them see the evidence against his candidacy with unmitigated clarity.