

# To beat Trump, we need to know why Americans keep voting for him. Psychologists may have the answer

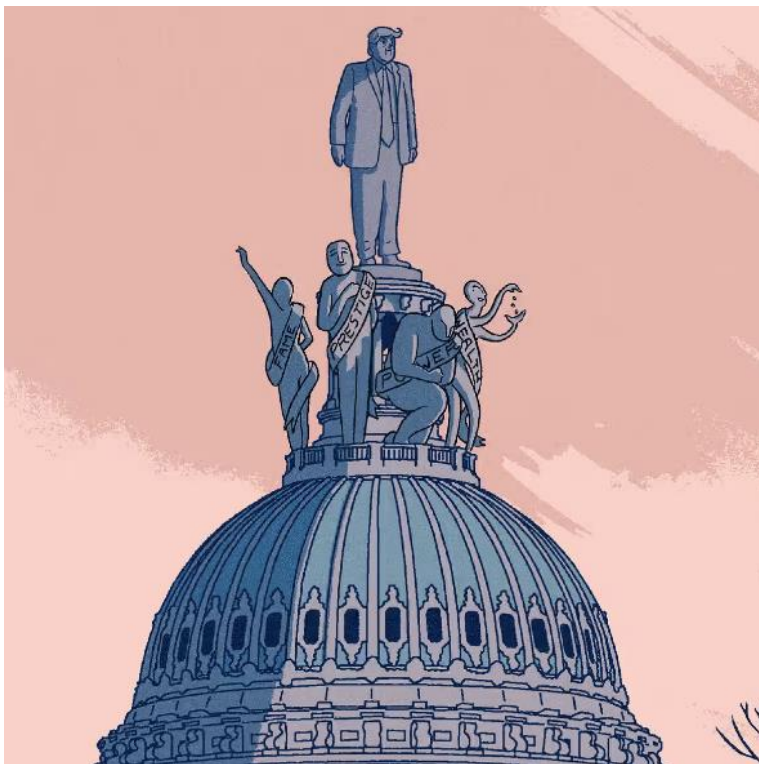
George Monbiot

Many explanations are proposed for the continued rise of Donald Trump, and the steadfastness of his support, even as the outrages and criminal charges pile up. Some of these explanations are powerful. But there is one I have seen mentioned nowhere, which could, I believe, be the most important: **Trump is king of the extrinsics**. Some psychologists believe our values tend to cluster around certain poles, described as “intrinsic” and “extrinsic”.

- People with a strong set of intrinsic values are inclined towards empathy, intimacy and self-acceptance. They tend to be open to challenge and change, interested in universal rights and equality, and protective of other people and the living world.
- People at the extrinsic end of the spectrum are more attracted to prestige, status, image, fame, power and wealth. They are strongly motivated by the prospect of individual reward and praise. They are more likely to objectify and exploit other people, to behave rudely and aggressively and to dismiss social and environmental impacts. They have little interest in cooperation or community.

People with a strong set of extrinsic values are more likely to suffer from frustration, dissatisfaction, stress, anxiety, anger and compulsive behaviour.

Trump exemplifies extrinsic values. From the tower bearing his name in gold letters to his gross overstatements of his wealth; from his endless ranting about “winners” and “losers” to his reported habit of cheating at golf; from his extreme objectification of women, including his own daughter, to his obsession with the size of his hands; from his rejection of public service, human rights and environmental protection to his extreme dissatisfaction and fury, undiminished even when he was president of the United States, Trump, perhaps more than any other public figure in recent history, is a walking, talking monument to extrinsic values.



We are not born with our values. They are shaped by the cues and responses we receive from other people and the prevailing mores of our society. They are also moulded by the political environment we inhabit. If people live under a cruel and grasping political system, they tend to normalise and internalise it, absorbing its dominant claims and translating them into extrinsic values. This, in turn, permits an even crueller and more grasping political system to develop. If, by contrast, people live in a country in which no one becomes destitute, in which social norms are characterised by kindness, empathy, community and freedom from want and fear, their values are likely to shift towards the intrinsic end. This process is known as **policy feedback**, or the “**values ratchet**”. The values ratchet operates at the societal and the individual level: **a strong set of extrinsic values often develops as a result of insecurity and unfulfilled needs**. These extrinsic values then generate further insecurity and unfulfilled needs.

Ever since Ronald Reagan came to power, on a platform that ensured society became sharply divided into “winners” and “losers”, and ever more people, lacking public provision, were allowed to fall through the cracks, US politics has become fertile soil for extrinsic values. As Democratic presidents, following Reagan, embraced most of the principles of neoliberalism, the ratchet was scarcely reversed. The appeal to extrinsic values by the Democrats, Labour and other once-progressive parties is always self-defeating. Research shows that **the**

further towards the extrinsic end of the spectrum people travel, the more likely they are to vote for a rightwing party.



‘From his endless ranting about ‘winners’ and ‘losers’ to his reported habit of cheating at golf, Donald Trump is a walking, talking monument to extrinsic values.’ Photograph: Justin Lane/EPA

But the shift goes deeper than politics. For well over a century, the US, more than most nations, has worshipped extrinsic values: the American dream is a dream of acquiring wealth, spending it conspicuously and escaping the constraints of other people’s needs and demands. It is accompanied, in politics and in popular culture, by toxic myths about failure and success: **wealth is the goal, regardless of how it is acquired.** The ubiquity of advertising, the commercialisation of society and the

rise of consumerism, alongside the media’s obsession with fame and fashion, reinforce this story.

The marketing of insecurity, especially about physical appearance, and the manufacture of unfulfilled wants, **dig holes in our psyches that we might try to fill with money, fame or power.** For decades, the dominant cultural themes in the US – and in many other nations – have functioned as an almost perfect incubator of extrinsic values.

A classic sign of this shift is the individuation of blame. On both sides of the Atlantic, it now takes extreme forms. Under the criminal justice bill now passing through parliament, people caught rough sleeping can be imprisoned or fined up to £2,500 if they are deemed to constitute a “nuisance” or cause “damage”. According to article 61 of the bill, “damage” includes smelling bad. It’s hard to know where to begin with this. **If someone had £2,500 to spare, they wouldn’t be on the streets.** The government is proposing to provide prison cells for rough sleepers, but not homes. Perhaps most importantly, **people are being blamed and criminalised for their own destitution,** which in many cases will have been caused by government policy.

We talk about society’s rightward journey. We talk about polarisation and division. We talk about isolation and the mental health crisis. But what underlies these trends is a shift in values. This is the cause of many of our dysfunctions; the rest are symptoms. When a society valorises status, money, power and dominance, it is bound to generate frustration. It is mathematically impossible for everyone to be number one. **The more the economic elites grab, the more everyone else must lose.** Someone must be blamed for the ensuing disappointment. In a culture that worships winners, it can’t be them. It must be those evil people pursuing a kinder world, in which wealth is distributed, no one is forgotten and communities and the living planet are protected. **Those who have developed a strong set of extrinsic values will vote for the person who represents them,** the person who has what they want. Trump. And where the US goes, the rest of us follow.

**Trump might well win again – God help us if he does.** If so, his victory will be due not only to the racial resentment of ageing white men, or to his weaponisation of culture wars or to algorithms and echo chambers, important as these factors are. It will also be the result of values embedded so deeply that we forget they are there.

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