

Podcast #33---Why People Sometimes Vote  
Against Their Own Interests

You don't need to be a shrink to know that people act against their own interests all the time. And as a therapist, of course, this is my bread and butter. A lonely woman who wants to fall in love but avoids social life out of fears of rejection. A college student drops out of school one semester shy of graduation. A man drives himself into bad health because of his perfectionistic workaholism. These are all cases of people acting in ways that contradict their self-interest.

But I think it's possible to see a similar pattern in people's political behavior; namely, that people sometimes vote for politicians who

act in ways that harm their supporters' real interests. Now--I'm going to use white working - class Trump voters as a case in point. And, yes, I realize that this is my bias and that someone else might try to offer up a similar analysis when it comes to liberal voters. The reason that I'm focusing on white working class Trump voters is that there is a ton of evidence that his policies have hurt and not helped this constituency. For example, the tax cut of 2017 went disproportionately to corporations and the wealthy. When clean air and water regulations are weakened, everyone's air and water suffers. And trade wars hurt farmers and workers in the Rust belt who voted Republican in 2016. My point is that there is a lot of evidence that Trump's actions have hurt people in the middle or lower end of the socioeconomic spectrum

who voted for him and will likely vote for him again.

It's tempting for liberals to judge these voters in ways that are patronizing or disdainful, attributing their support for Trump to-- primarily --racism or ignorance. This is a mistake.

Instead, I think we have to try to look at the world from their point of view, feel our way into their skin and try to empathize with the life experience that generates the very particular political reflexes that, I'd argue, end up hurting them.

Some of the pain that I think Trump supporters experience is shared by all of us. We

-all of us -- too often have to interact with institutions that are indifferent to our needs and in relation to which we are made to feel helpless. This includes government. Irrational building codes, endless queues at DMV's and welfare offices, unfair bureaucratic regulations from the IRS – these go along with the endless waiting we already do at doctors' offices, or when we are put on hold with insurance companies, cable and phone companies. We're made to wait everywhere. And, of course, we wait in traffic jams on highways that are part of the infrastructure that is crumbling around us. Or we attend school classes that are too big and/or are oriented toward passing some bureaucratic test.

These are experiences in which we feel helpless and in which our normal human needs

for recognition are systematically thwarted. These experiences are universal and don't yet give us insight into the ways that white working class voters choose a Republican to govern them

That is, until we add the effects of social and economic inequality. Under conditions of inequality, the people who need empathy are made much more vulnerable. In a famous epidemiological study, researchers Wilkinson and Pickett found a strong correlation between the degree of inequality and problems like rates of imprisonment, teen pregnancies, obesity rates and problems like anxiety, depression and addiction. Turns out that inequality makes people feel insecure, preoccupied with their relative status and standing and make them vulnerable to the judgment of others. It creates

social distance and reinforces people's sense of isolation. Here's how Wilkinson and Pickett put it: *For a species which thrives on friendship and enjoys cooperation and trust, which has a strong sense of fairness which is equipped with mirror neurons allowing us to learn about life through identification, .....it is clear that social structures based on inequality, inferiority and social exclusion must inflict a great deal of social and psychic pain."*

This is the pain of white working class people who have been left behind in the process of globalization and automation. Their incomes have stagnated. And they are too often left with a feeling that no one really cares about them. They are in dire need of empathy and Trump appeared to give it to them. *Let me repeat this:*

*They are in dire need of empathy and Trump appeared to give it to them.*

Many other people could, of course, say the same thing. People of color have been victimized more than others and haven't turned to the right.

But now we have to include the ways that race factors into the equation for these white working class Trump voters. For people left behind, race matters — in more ways than one. Berkeley sociologist Arlie Hochschild has offered one narrative of how this works in her book *Strangers In Their Own Land.*” Based on her experiences embedded with white working class Tea Party sympathizers in southwest Louisiana, Hochschild offers us what she calls the “deep

story” of the people she got to know. This is a subjective prism through which these folks saw the world and I think she captures the spirit of the Trump voters who ended up voting against their own self-interest.

Listen carefully as Hochschild tell their story using a series of metaphors And notice now---this is a *story in which people feel there is no fairness, no empathy, and no redemption.*

Here it goes: *You are patiently waiting In line... it's a long line leading up a hill – you're situated in the middle of this line, along with others who are also white, older, Christian and predominantly male, some with college degrees, some not. Just over the hill is the American Dream, the goal of everyone waiting in line. Many in the back of the line are people of color – poor, young and old,*



*mainly without college degrees. It's scary to look back; there are so many behind you. In principle you wish them well. Still, you've waited a long time, worked hard and the line is barely moving. You deserve to move forward a little faster. You've suffering long hours, layoff and exposure to dangerous chemicals at work, and received reduced pensions. You have shown moral character through trial by fire and the American Dream of prosperity and security is a reward for all of this, showing who you have been and are – a badge of honor. Will you get a raise? Are there good jobs for us all?*

*The line is moving backward!! You haven't gotten a raise in years and your income has dropped. You're not a complainer, but this line isn't moving.*

*Look! You see people cutting in line ahead of you! You're following the rules. They aren't. Some are black...affirmative action. Women, immigrants,*

*refugees, public sector workers – where will it end? You're a man, but there are women demanding the right to the men's jobs. .And overpaid public sector employees...who seem to you to work shorter hours in more secure and overpaid jobs, enjoying larger pensions than yours. Four million Syrian refugees and thousands from Central America fleeing chaos and war...even the brown pelican which is protected as an endangered species. Even they have cut in line. You feel betrayed.*

In this story, the economy and government are indifferent to the people in the middle of the line. Their sacrifices are ignored. And other people seem to be getting special recognition. To the extent that people have racist proclivities, this is one way they come out---toward people of color, including immigrants. Trump's racist

dog whistles are heard by people who are struggling with dead end lives and a strong sense of injustice and entitlement. It doesn't matter that this narrative of people "cutting in line" isn't accurate or true. The fantasy that there are undeserving others who get what belongs to me is one that not only breeds resentment but tribalism. There is then an "us" against which is posited a "them" – often defined in ethnocentric ways.

Trump played on these feelings and gave his voters to believe that he would stop all this "cutting in line" and deliver the American Dream back to worthy – white working class – Americans.

You see, when a demagogue speaks to people's deepest needs and passions, he gets

people to act—in this case, to vote—against their own best interests. We can judge the people who do, but that just gives them further cause to feel victimized. We have to, instead, feel and then extend genuine empathy to all victims, regardless of their inclinations to act in ways with which we disagree.