

CAMPAIGN NOTEBOOK

How Trump Connected With So Many Americans

Donald Trump's campaign was a blend of comedy, fury, optimism, darkness and cynicism. "He gets us," some voters concluded.

Shawn McCreesh, *The New York Times* Online Edition, November 7, 2024.

The forces that propelled President-elect Donald J. Trump to victory will be endlessly analyzed. Many Americans woke up on Wednesday morning shocked that he could win again. But there is no doubt about one thing: Mr. Trump was a ferociously effective campaigner.

To watch him up close on this third run for president was to see him blend comedy, fury, optimism, darkness and cynicism like never before. He was an expert communicator, able to transmute legal and mortal peril to build upon his self mythology. He won new supporters and kept old ones in thrall.

At dozens of events, I watched as he connected with all sorts of people in all sorts of places. Suburban mothers in Washington, D.C. Military personnel in Detroit. Evangelicals in South Florida. Bitcoiners in Nashville. College football fans in Alabama. Firemen in Lower Manhattan. At rallies in Charlotte and Atlanta and Bozeman and Virginia Beach and the Bronx and beyond, I had countless conversations with people who were quick to dismiss or rationalize whatever controversy happened to be swirling around him at any moment. People saw in him whatever they wanted to see. And they believed that, after so many years, they knew him, and that he knew them, too. "He gets us," a hay and beef cattle farmer told me one afternoon in September in Smithton, Pa. It seemed a head-spinning assessment, but one I heard constantly and in the most unlikely of places. How could the man with the silver spoon and the golden triplex above Fifth Avenue understand anything about this woman's life? "He just knows where we're coming from," she shrugged.

We were standing inside a barn when she said this. Mr. Trump was a few yards away, sitting at a big wooden table. Behind him were stacked bales of hay and a John Deere tractor. He led a discussion about seed cost and fertilizer and shale and animal feed. Farmers nodded along as he reminded them how expensive everything had become because of inflation. "I feel very comfortable with the farmers," he said. And they felt very comfortable with him.



Mr. Trump speaking in Smithton, Pa., in September. Credit...Maddie McGarvey for The New York Times

The bond with Mr. Trump deepened for many people after the assassination attempt in Butler, Pa., in July. Mark Zuckerberg, a co-founder of Facebook, said that the way Mr. Trump had popped back up and yelled “Fight!” was “one of the most badass things” he had ever seen — and many people seemed to agree. It was an interesting inversion: Before that point, Mr. Trump had only ever played a tough guy on television, palling around with wrestlers and practicing his Clint Eastwood squint. Now he had behaved in an undeniably tough way on TV. People across the country began to regard him as a cross between Rambo and John Gotti. They posted memes and wore T-shirts that showed his mug shot or his bloodied face. Americans love their antiheroes and action movies. The campaign embraced the “badass” aesthetic. When Mr. Trump returned to Butler in early October, there were military veterans jumping out of airplanes, parachuting into the rally while AC/DC blasted from the speakers.

But beyond the merchandise and the high-octane stunts, the shooting provided Mr. Trump a new way to connect with certain people on a spiritual level. Until that point, some religious types had embraced Mr. Trump with reluctance, seeing him as an imperfect vessel at best. Now there were some who saw evidence of the divine in his survival — the way he had just happened to turn his head at the last moment, dodging a literal bullet. A school bus driver told me in Butler that she was now “1,000 percent” sure that Mr. Trump had been chosen by God to vanquish evil and that his victory was preordained. It was an idea I heard over and over in the crowd. Again, Mr. Trump leaned in. He began communicating in new ways. On social media, he posted images of St. Michael the Archangel battling demons. He talked a lot about blood, and made curiously pious gestures, like when he slowly bent his head onstage at the Republican convention to kiss the helmet of a volunteer firefighter who had been killed in Butler.

Religious scholars and experts in Christian martyrdom told me they were surprised at the newly sophisticated ways in which Mr. Trump was deploying Christian iconography. He had come a long way from writing “HAPPY GOOD FRIDAY TO ALL!” on social media in 2020 and talking about “Two Corinthians” a few years before that.

A ‘horrible city’

Mr. Trump’s rally in the lakeside town of Racine, Wis., in June seemed as though it had the potential to be awkward. Earlier that day, it had been reported that, during a closed-door meeting with congressional Republicans, he had called Milwaukee a “horrible city.” Much was made of this, given that the Republican National Convention would soon be held in Milwaukee. But what was treated as an embarrassing moment by the news media and his adversaries didn’t register with anyone I spoke to at the rally that day. Nobody was offended or surprised that he had referred to their metro area that way. They agreed with him about the state of things. They figured he was out to make it better. The uproar around his remark only amused them. There was often a split screen between the way the news media interpreted the things Mr. Trump said and how his voters heard them. (In October, I was in Detroit, listening to him trash Detroit. This became the subject of that day’s headlines. He would go on to flip Michigan.)



Mr. Trump during a campaign rally in Racine, Wis., in June. Credit... Doug Mills/The New York Times

His digressions about electrocuted sharks and Hannibal Lecter and whales and windmills were treated as the musings of a madman by a portion of the public, and the news media, that wondered if he was melting down. But there was a reason he launched into those bits over and over, and it wasn’t because he was cognitively impaired. It was because people found it funny. They always laughed. “You need at least the attitude of a

comedian when you're doing this business," Mr. Trump said in an interview with the podcaster Joe Rogan.

In July, I followed Mr. Trump to a cryptocurrency convention in downtown Nashville. There were a great many men wandering around who said they were unsure what to make of him. Was he as dangerous or deranged as some claimed? When Mr. Trump began to speak, it was awkward. He didn't know how to talk to them about blockchain technology — "most people have no idea what the hell it is," he said that day — but once he got them laughing, they were like putty in his hands. I caught a few men streaming out of the convention hall afterward who said they hadn't voted for him before but felt newly compelled to do so.

Before Mr. Trump had arrived in Nashville that day, a young comedian spoke onstage. He said something else that was illustrative about Mr. Trump's appeal to many this time around. The comedian reasoned with the assembled Bitcoiners that Mr. Trump might not be all that bad, since he seemed to have all the right enemies — namely, the corporate media and the intelligence agencies. The crowd burst into applause at this.

Hatred for institutions can hardly be overstated. As the year wore on, and Mr. Trump's battles against the courts and the news media raged on, he began to take on a countercultural sheen that drew in new types of young people. It wasn't just frat bros and jocks at Trump rallies anymore. In Racine, a 16-year-old boy with long hair and a Dead Kennedys T-shirt turned up for his first rally. In Bozeman, Mont., I talked to a young guy wearing a Lana Del Rey T-shirt. When Mr. Trump held a rally in the Coachella Valley, creative types from Los Angeles drove out for it; there were cinephiles who work in Hollywood and edgy art-world types curious to check it out.

The 78-year-old businessman who is rarely seen not wearing a full suit and tie made for an unlikely punk figure. But he eagerly wooed and then fully embraced a cast of characters who are critical of mainstream orthodoxy, like Robert F. Kennedy Jr. There were new and trenchant themes being explored at Trump rallies. Surrogates such as Tulsi Gabbard, Elon Musk and Tucker Carlson railed about the evils of censorship and a "1984"-like regime, led by big tech and government, that wanted to crush all freethinking people. This all connected with a conspiracy-minded public suspicious of elites.

Trump's 'hateful' ways

In July, Mr. Trump attended a religious conference at the same convention center in West Palm Beach, Fla., where he made his victory speech on Tuesday night. Young evangelicals from around the country were there. Several confessed they were not entirely thrilled that Mr. Trump had become the Republican nominee. One young man from Minneapolis said he had trouble grappling with the former president's "hateful" ways.

There were a lot of people like that. People who wished he were different. Older voters at a rally in Wisconsin told me it was painful to hear Mr. Trump ridicule President Biden's age and frailty. Suburban mothers in Washington winced at the misogynistic things Mr.

Trump posted on the internet about Vice President Kamala Harris (one woman called his posts “tacky”). But, by and large, people were a lot more concerned with what they believed he could do for them, and less worried about how the words coming out of his mouth might sound. Many voted for him despite the “hateful” and “tacky” things he says, not because he says those things.



Mr. Trump’s campaign rally at Madison Square Garden in New York last week. Credit...Hiroko Masuike/The New York Times

But hatred, and fear, are powerful forces, too, and Mr. Trump’s scaremongering tactics reached new levels in this campaign. By the end, he was using imagery generated by artificial intelligence depicting brown-skinned people marching on hospitals and preying on women. His messaging had become so dehumanizing, he wasn’t even showing actual human beings anymore. Even some of his supporters found this to be overly “provocative,” as one young woman said to me in Atlanta in October.

Fear kept people hooked, though. In July, at a rundown little arena in Charlotte, N.C., I spun my chair around so that my back was to Mr. Trump and the stage. I watched the entire rally this way, studying the faces in the crowd as his rhetoric washed over them. You could see eyes bulge and expressions contort when Mr. Trump began shouting about “child rapists” and “bloodthirsty predators.” Nobody was distracted or looking at their phone when he described in gory detail young women whose bodies he said had been defiled by migrants.

And yet, for all the dark language, there was often a sunny optimism for those who wanted to hear it. In the Bronx, in May, residents of the poorest congressional district in the country found it inspiring when he talked about all the success he had achieved, and they believed him when he said he wanted some of it to rub off on them, too.

“Think to the future, not to the past, but learn from the past,” he told them. “Wherever I go, I know that if I could build a skyscraper in Manhattan, I could do anything.” Hispanic and Black people cheered when he said that “it doesn’t matter whether you’re Black or brown or white, or whatever the hell color you are, it doesn’t matter. We are all Americans, and we’re going to pull together as Americans. We all want better opportunity.”

How to square that with all the racist commentary spewed months later at Madison Square Garden? Many speculated that rally would torch his inroads with Black and Hispanic voters. In reality, he put up bigger numbers across the city than ever before. The rightward shift was especially notable in Queens, Brooklyn and the Bronx.

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