

# Loyalists and Switchers: Characterizing Voters' Responses to Donald Trump's Campaign and Presidency

MEREDITH DOST  
RYAN ENOS  
JENNIFER HOCHSCHILD

CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN POLITICS IS OFTEN characterized as increasingly intense, even vituperative, and polarized between partisan identities or tribes.<sup>1</sup> Many Democrats and Republicans claim to not want to live near people who do not share their political views, and close to half in some

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<sup>1</sup>Christopher H. Achen and Larry M. Bartels, *Democracy for Realists: Why Elections Do Not Produce Responsive Government* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016); and Lilliana Mason, *Uncivil Agreement: How Politics Became Our Identity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018).

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MEREDITH DOST is a PhD candidate in Government and Social Policy at Harvard University studying American politics. Her dissertation research focuses on how interactions with and decisions made by the administrative state influence individuals' political behavior and attitudes. RYAN ENOS is Professor of Government at Harvard University. He is the author of *The Space Between Us: Social Geography and Politics* and the 2019 recipient of the Erik Erikson Early Career Scholar Award from the International Society of Political Psychology. His current research is on partisan segregation in the United States and the long-term determinants of political behavior. JENNIFER HOCHSCHILD is Henry LaBarre Jayne Professor of Government, and Professor of African and African American Studies, at Harvard University. She studies racial and ethnic dynamics, mostly in the United States, and the politics surrounding genomic science. Her forthcoming book is *Genomic Politics: How the Revolution in Genomic Science Is Shaping American Society* (Oxford University Press, spring 2021).

analyses claim they would be unhappy if a family member married someone of the other party.<sup>2</sup> Citizens express “fear and loathing across party lines,” to the point that “the level of partisan animus in the American public exceeds racial hostility”; more than a third of Republicans and almost a third of Democrats agree that the other party’s policies “threaten the nation’s well-being.”<sup>3</sup> Switching one’s vote to the other party is increasingly rare in presidential elections, and voting a straight party ticket on a given ballot is increasingly common.<sup>4</sup>

And yet, some people do change their mind, moving from support for to opposition of a politician or political party. When voters who supported the winner no longer do so, they may abandon that candidate or his or her party in the next election. Just over 5 percent of white voters switched from voting Republican in the 2012 presidential election to voting Democratic in 2016, and almost 9 percent of white voters switched in the opposite direction from 2012 to 2016.<sup>5</sup> In a nation so evenly divided between the two major parties,<sup>6</sup> even a small percentage of vote switchers can change a state’s Electoral College outcome. If that happens in a few key states, it can change the national outcome, as Americans learned in 2000 and 2016. To understand the views of potential vote switchers, this article characterizes the opinions and perceptions of people who have abandoned the candidate they endorsed in 2016, comparing them with vote loyalists, who, as of the dates of our surveys, give no indication of switching to the other party in 2020.

We develop characterizations of both types of voters through two parallel surveys, conducted in 2017 and 2019. We investigate four

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<sup>2</sup>Robert Jones and Maxine Najle, “American Democracy in Crisis: The Fate of Pluralism in a Divided Nation” (report, PRRI, Washington, DC, 2019), accessed at <https://www.prrri.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/Democracy-in-Crisis-3-Pluralism-1.pdf>, 8 October 2020; Pew Research Center, “2014 Political Polarization Survey: Detailed Tables,” 12 June 2014, accessed at <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2014/06/12/political-polarization-in-the-american-public/>, 22 September 2020; and Pew Research Center, “Big Houses, Small Houses: Partisans Continue to Want Different Things in a Community,” 18 February 2020, accessed at <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/02/18/big-houses-small-houses-partisans-continue-to-want-different-things-in-a-community/>, 22 September 2020.

<sup>3</sup>Shanto Iyengar and Sean J. Westwood, “Fear and Loathing across Party Lines: New Evidence on Group Polarization,” *American Journal of Political Science* 59 (July 2015): 690–707, at 69; and Pew Research Center, “Political Polarization in the American Public,” 12 June 2014, accessed at <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2014/06/12/political-polarization-in-the-american-public/>, 22 September 2020.

<sup>4</sup>Alan I. Abramowitz and Steven Webster, “The Rise of Negative Partisanship and the Nationalization of U.S. Elections in the 21st Century,” *Electoral Studies* 4 (March 2016): 12–22; and Joel Sievert and Seth C. McKee, “Nationalization in U.S. Senate and Gubernatorial Elections,” *American Politics Quarterly* 47 (September 2019): 1055–1080.

<sup>5</sup>Tyler T. Reny, Loren Collingwood, and Ali A. Valenzuela, “Vote Switching in the 2016 Election: How Racial and Immigration Attitudes, Not Economics, Explain Shifts in White Voting,” *Public Opinion Quarterly* 83 (Spring 2019): 91–113.

<sup>6</sup>Frances E. Lee, *Insecure Majorities: Congress and the Perpetual Campaign* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016).

groups, defined by a combination of support for or opposition to Donald Trump in the 2016 presidential election and their subsequent views of him. The two sets of vote loyalists are “Republican Loyalists,” who voted for Trump and continue to support him in 2019 (or 2017), and “Democratic Loyalists,” who did not vote for Trump and continue to oppose him. (As we explain later, our main evidence is a 2019 survey, supplemented by a 2017 survey). The corresponding sets of potential vote switchers are “Republican Switchers,” who voted for Trump in 2016 but no longer support him in 2019, and “Democratic Switchers,” who did not vote for Trump but support him in 2019.

Note that about 9 percent of respondents whom we characterize as Democratic Loyalists or Switchers voted for a candidate other than Hillary Clinton or Donald Trump. We call them *Democratic* Loyalists or Switchers to avoid the awkward locution of “Not-Trump Loyalists” and “Not-Trump Switchers.”

Determining what traits and opinions distinguish the four groups or are held in common enables us to identify views that bind voters to the president or push them away. We focus in particular on two elements of Trump’s performance because of their prominence in his 2016 presidential campaign: voters’ evaluations of economic success since the election and voters’ appraisals of Trump’s governing style and values, primarily expressed through social identity appeals and claims about leadership. The former element is the focus of classic research on retrospective voting,<sup>7</sup> and the latter is especially important in judging this distinctively norm- and rule-breaking political actor.

Comparing patterns across the four groups, we find that Democratic Loyalists’ and Switchers’ views are not closely aligned by the time of the survey and, similarly, Republican Loyalists’ and Switchers’ issue positions are not closely aligned. In fact, Republican Switchers hold views in 2019 (or 2017) that are relatively close to those of Democratic Loyalists, while Democratic Switchers hold views relatively close to those of Republican Loyalists. That is, *attitudes and support for a given candidate were brought into line by 2019, even at the cost to voters of abandoning their original position on a candidate, and even in the face of highly polarized politics*. By virtue of being an extraordinary promiser in a lot of arenas,

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<sup>7</sup>Morris P. Fiorina, *Retrospective Voting in American National Elections* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1981); Andrew Healy and Neil Malhotra, “Retrospective Voting Reconsidered,” *Annual Review of Political Science* 16 (2013): 285–306; and Kurt Weyland, “Economic Voting Reconsidered: Crisis and Charisma in the Election of Hugo Chávez,” *Comparative Political Studies* 36 (September 2003): 822–848.

Donald Trump invited voters to judge him on his promises; they seem to be doing so.

The 2017 and 2019 surveys that provide the evidence for this analysis are not a panel, so we cannot track changes in individual voters' behavior; we also cannot determine whether switchers change their support for Trump and *then* bring their issue attitudes into line with this change,<sup>8</sup> or change their attitudes and then bring their support into line.<sup>9</sup> We can only demonstrate that attitudes and support eventually align at some point after the election. Nonetheless, this enables us, after comparing perceptions and attitudes of loyalists and potential vote switchers, to speculatively evaluate alternative explanations for switching to or from support for Trump.

Portraying voters who do, and do not, express unswerving views of Trump has obvious practical importance for a reelection campaign revolving around a presidential candidate whose victory was gained by the smallest of margins. But our analysis also has larger importance for American electoral politics. Political scientists have elegantly analyzed the presence or absence of crosscutting cleavages among voters of the two loosely bounded major parties in the twentieth century.<sup>10</sup> But we know much less about movement from one political identity group to another in the current intensely polarized environment, and very little about the views of individuals who actually do make such a move in the face of so many incentives not to do so. The evidence presented in this article helps us understand them, and thus American electoral politics more generally.

## ANALYTIC FRAMEWORK

Reams of research have examined why American voters did or did not support Donald Trump in the 2016 presidential election, and do or do not support him in subsequent years. Without attempting to review it all here, we note six important streams of explanation, which are sometimes posed against one another but need not, in fact, be mutually exclusive. First, voters support Trump out of some mix of anti-black racism, anti-immigrant xenophobia, and fear of the demographic diminution of

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<sup>8</sup>Achen and Bartels, *Democracy for Realists*; and Paul Goren, "Party Identification and Core Political Values," *American Journal of Political Science* 49 (October 2005): 881–896.

<sup>9</sup>Benjamin I. Page and Robert Y. Shapiro, *The Rational Public: Fifty Years of Trends in Americans' Policy Preferences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

<sup>10</sup>Robert A. Dahl, *Pluralist Democracy in the United States* (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1967); Ira Katznelson, *Fear Itself: The New Deal and the Origins of Our Time* (New York: Liveright, 2013); and V.O. Key, *Southern Politics in State and Nation* (1949; Nashville: University of Tennessee Press, 1984).

traditional white dominance and its associated culture.<sup>11</sup> Conversely, voters oppose Trump because they reject racism and xenophobia or because they do not fear white demographic decline. Second, voters support Donald Trump in reaction against a trajectory of economic decline, whether for themselves and their family, their community or region, or the United States as a whole.<sup>12</sup> Conversely, voters whose families, community, or region are not feeling the effects of economic stagnation or decline, or who endorse international trade and the relatively free working of market forces, endorse political leaders other than Trump. Third, voters support Trump and remain loyal to him or have joined him since 2016 because they hate or mistrust Hillary Clinton.<sup>13</sup>

A fourth explanation for support for Trump in 2016 and beyond points to an underlying strain of populism<sup>14</sup> and/or authoritarianism<sup>15</sup> that was released by Trump's candidacy and given a mainstream outlet for expression. Conversely, people who either oppose populism or authoritarianism or are indifferent to them voted against Trump or at least oppose him by 2019. A fifth explanation holds that, after all of the confusions and complexities of the campaign season and first few years of the Trump presidency, voters adhere to their partisan loyalties. After all, only 8 percent of Democrats voted for Trump in 2016 and 12 percent of Republicans did not vote for him. In the 2018 midterm elections, the role of partisan identification was even more marked; only 4 percent of Democrats voted for a

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<sup>11</sup>John Sides, Michael Tesler, and Lynn Vavreck, *Identity Crisis: The 2016 Presidential Campaign and the Battle for the Meaning of America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018); Reny, Collingwood, and Valenzuela, "Vote Switching in the 2016 Election."

<sup>12</sup>Anne Case and Angus Deaton, *Deaths of Despair and the Future of Capitalism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2020); and David Autor, David Dorn, Gordon Hanson, and Kaveh Majlesi, "Importing Political Polarization? The Electoral Consequences of Rising Trade Exposure" *American Economic Review* 110 (October 2020): 2139–83.

<sup>13</sup>Nicholas A. Valentino, Carly Wayne, and Marzia Ocenio, "Mobilizing Sexism: The Interaction of Emotion and Gender Attitudes in the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 82 (2018): 799–821; Margo J. Monteith and Laura K. Hildebrand, "Sexism, Perceived Discrimination, and System Justification in the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election Context," *Group Processes and Intergroup Relations* 23 (February 2020): 163–178; Gary C. Jacobson, "The Triumph of Polarized Partisanship in 2016: Donald Trump's Improbable Victory," *Political Science Quarterly* 132 (Spring 2017): 9–41, at 16–18.

<sup>14</sup>Paola Giuliano and Romain Wacziarg, "Who Voted for Trump? Populism and Social Capital" (Working Paper No. 27651, National Bureau of Economic Research, Cambridge, MA, August 2020), accessed at <https://www.nber.org/papers/w27651>, 8 October 2020; Paul Pierson, "American Hybrid: Donald Trump and the Strange Merger of Populism and Plutocracy," *British Journal of Sociology* 68 (2017): S105–S119; and Jacobson, "Polarized Partisanship," 20–23.

<sup>15</sup>David Norman Smith and Eric Hanley, "The Anger Games: Who Voted for Donald Trump in the 2016 Election, and Why?" *Critical Sociology* 44 (March 2018): 195–212; and Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart, *Cultural Backlash: Trump, Brexit, and Authoritarian Populism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

Republican candidate for the House of Representatives and only 6 percent of Republicans made the comparable shift to a Democratic House candidate.<sup>16</sup>

Finally, voters may support Trump in 2016 and beyond for ideological reasons. Conservatives committed to ending the right to abortion, reviving manufacturing, deregulation, American nationalism, or sustaining Christianity may see Trump's presidency as the best guarantor of these normative or policy stances among the available options. Liberals, in this explanation, hold parallel, if obviously different, moral and policy commitments that lead them to oppose Donald Trump, as either Democratic Loyalists or Republican Switchers.<sup>17</sup>

Arguably, all of these explanations contribute to decisions about who to vote for or voice approval for, some more than others for a given voter or according to a particular analysis. But none speaks fully to the question we address here: why do some people eventually switch their support to or away from President Trump? In the absence of a developed scholarly literature on this point, our aim here is exploration rather than hypothesis testing. Thus, we examine in the text that follows each of the main claims about Trump or Clinton support in the 2016 election to judge their role in explaining why people do or do not jettison their 2016 vote choice in favor of a new evaluation of Donald Trump a few years later. (One exception: because of differences in available data, we briefly investigate the relationship between Trump support and gender attitudes in Figure A in Appendix A online, rather than in the text<sup>18</sup>).

## DATA AND CONCEPT MEASUREMENT

Under the auspices of the Harvard CAPS/Harris Poll, we fielded surveys of nationally representative samples of American adults during the periods 17–20 September 2017 ( $N = 2,296$ ) and 19–20 February 2019 ( $N = 1,922$ ).<sup>19</sup> We asked the same questions in both rounds. The

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<sup>16</sup>“Exit Polls: National President,” CNN, 23 November 2016, accessed at <https://www.cnn.com/election/2016/results/exit-polls/national/president>, 25 September, 2020; and “Exit Polls: National House,” CNN, 2018, accessed at <https://www.cnn.com/election/2018/exit-polls>, 25 September, 2020.

<sup>17</sup>Alan I. Abramowitz, *The Great Alignment: Race, Party Transformation, and the Rise of Donald Trump* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2018); and Jacobson, “Polarized Partisanship,” 23.

<sup>18</sup>Meredith Dost, Ryan Enos, and Jennifer Hochschild, “Replication Data and Appendices for: Loyalists and Switchers: Characterizing Voters’ Responses to Donald Trump’s Campaign and Presidency,” Harvard Dataverse, 2020. <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/B2QJ58>.

<sup>19</sup>Meredith Dost, Ryan Enos, and Jennifer Hochschild, “Replication Data and Appendices for: Loyalists and Switchers: Characterizing Voters’ Responses to Donald Trump’s Campaign and Presidency,” Harvard Dataverse, 2020. <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/B2QJ58>.

results reported in this article come primarily from the 2019 survey, though the results are consistent over time (see Appendix C for replication of results with 2017 data). Given our focus on why some people change their views after voting, we analyze results only for respondents who voted in 2016 ( $N=1,498$  in 2019,  $N=1,805$  in 2017).

### *Analytic Categories*

The surveys asked whether people voted for Trump in 2016 and whether they now approve of him, thereby enabling us to identify the four groups. Figure 1 displays their sample sizes and proportions.

Figure B in Appendix A enables comparisons between voters in our 2019 survey and the 2016 voting population as a whole. Our survey nearly recovers the actual presidential vote margin. Among our 2016 voters, 43 percent voted for Trump, 46 percent for Clinton, and 11 percent for someone else (or they refused to identify their vote choice). The official vote margins were 46 percent for Trump, 48 percent for Clinton, and 6 percent for someone else.<sup>20</sup>

### *Survey Questions*

Our dependent variable is the Trump group—that is, a combination of Trump vote in 2016 and Trump approval at the time of the survey. It forms the four categories depicted in Figure 1.

Our independent variables are questions focusing on issues for which candidate Trump had made clear promises or on matters of values and style on which Trump worked to differentiate himself from his opponents and predecessors. Because these topics were at the center of Trump's campaign and frequently reported in the media, they are salient issues on which voters may be most likely to know Trump's position and to have a coherent, meaningful position of their own, even if derived from elite discourse.<sup>21</sup> (See exact question wording and response categories in Appendix B).

The questions about attitudes and perceptions are structured by two methodological considerations. First, because we do not aim to show that a particular set of views predicts Trump support, but rather to compare the views of those who do and do not remain true to their 2016 vote, we

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<sup>20</sup>Federal Election Commission, "Federal Elections 2016," accessed at <https://www.fec.gov/resources/cms-content/documents/federalections2016.pdf>, 8 October 2020.

<sup>21</sup>John R. Zaller, *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

FIGURE 1  
*Loyalist and Switcher Groups*

	<i>Loyalists</i>	<i>Switchers</i>
Voted for Trump in 2016	<p><b>Republican Loyalists</b> 2019 <math>N = 602</math>; 38% of survey 2017 <math>N = 727</math>; 41% of survey</p>	<p><b>Republican Switchers</b> 2019 <math>N = 80</math>; 6% of survey 2017 <math>N = 77</math>; 4% of survey</p>
Voted for someone other than Trump in 2016	<p><b>Democratic Loyalists</b> 2019 <math>N = 710</math>; 49% of survey 2017 <math>N = 904</math>; 50% of survey</p>	<p><b>Democratic Switchers</b> 2019 <math>N = 106</math>; 7% of survey 2017 <math>N = 97</math>; 5% of survey</p>

*Notes:* Unweighted sample sizes and weighted percentages are shown. Republican Loyalists and Democratic Switchers approve of Trump at the time of the survey; Republican Switchers and Democratic Loyalists disapprove of Trump. The totals are  $N = 1,922$  in 2019 and  $N = 2,296$  in 2017. All non-Trump voters include third-party voters. Nonvoters are excluded; their unweighted count is 424 in 2019 and 491 in 2017; their weighted frequency is 22 percent in each year.

are agnostic about how best to measure debated constructs such as racial attitudes and how important any particular view is in explaining Trump support. Thus, the surveys use an array of measures about a variety of attitudes. This stance has the advantages of not relying on a single question or scale with a contestable meaning and of not starting from the questionable assumption that one attitude warrants the most attention.

Second, when possible, we present scales of individual questions that share a theme or question root. This yields measures that are less prone to error stemming from question wording or other stylistic issues than single-item measures.<sup>22</sup> The questions all include 5- or 7-point Likert-scale responses. We conducted principal component analysis (PCA) to decide which of a plausible set of questions to include in the scales. Items remain in a given scale if they return a loading of magnitude 0.7 or greater on a scale of 0 to 1. (See Appendix A, Figure C, for correlation tables and more information about our PCA). The scales are constructed as means of the individual questions and are rescaled to a -1 to 1 range. We include stand-alone items when no scaling was available.

We divide the scales and items into five categories that broadly capture Trump's promises or values.

<sup>22</sup>Stephen Ansolabehere, Jonathan Rodden, and James M. Snyder, "The Strength of Issues: Using Multiple Measures to Gauge Preference Stability, Ideological Constraint, and Issue Voting," *American Political Science Review* 102 (May 2008): 215-232.



### *National Economic Situation*

We place five indicators in a sociotropic category:<sup>23</sup> the country is on the wrong or right track; the United States economy is on the wrong or right track; approval of Trump’s jobs stimulation policies; approval of Trump’s handling of the economy; and the strength or weakness of the U.S. economy.

### *Personal Economic Situation*

The pocketbook category includes six indicators: trajectory of personal financial situation; job opportunities for you compared with those for your parents; job opportunities for your children compared with yours; current family finances compared with those expected for your family’s next generation; current finances compared with those for your family as a teenager; and family finances as a teenager compared with those expected for the next generation.

### *Governance Style*

Endorsement of strong authority and populism are protean concepts, both involving fluid and ill-defined politics. After experimentation, we settled on two indicators that focus on authority: whether the United States needs a leader who is willing to break rules if necessary, and whether political leaders should compromise or to stick to their beliefs. We identified two scales measuring populism; one combines items about the tax contributions of “wealthy people” and “large corporations,” and the other asks about favorability of laws to the same two targets. We show all of the individual tax and law favorability items in Appendix A, Figure G, given that our scales only use a few of the many items.

### *Racial Conservatism and Concern about Immigrants*

We place nine indicators in this category: approval of Trump’s handling of immigration; the classic four-item racial resentment scale; a scale combining questions about laws’ favorability to “blacks,” “Hispanics,” and “illegal immigrants”; a scale combining items about the tax contributions of the same three groups; two scales on what it means to be “truly American” (one more identity based and one more choice based); two

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<sup>23</sup>Stephen Ansolabehere, Marc Meredith, and Eric Snowberg, “Sociotropic Voting and the Media,” in John Aldrich and Kathleen McGraw, eds., *Improving Public Opinion Surveys: Interdisciplinary Innovation and the American National Election Studies* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011), 175–192; and Donald Kinder and D. Roderick Kiewiet, “Sociotropic Politics: The American Case,” *British Journal of Political Science* 11 (April 1981): 129–161.

scales of items about whether a given position is racist; and a scale of cosmopolitanism.

### *Is It Racist?*

Given the sensitivity and salience of this question in American politics—exemplified during the period of our surveys by reactions to the president’s comments after the white nationalist protest and murder in Charlottesville, Virginia—we closely examine views on 10 (disaggregated) items in an “is it racist?” battery. Those items include both attitudes and behaviors. We randomly split the respondents into equal groups to be asked if each statement “is racist” or “is not racist;” we combine the data and make the coding consistent. (Note that we use data for 2017 rather than 2019 for the “is it racist?” battery because a recording flaw in the 2019 survey made these responses unavailable).

## PROFILES OF TRUMPISM GROUPS

To calibrate the strength of the relationship between attitudes and perceptions, on the one hand, and individuals’ placement into the four loyalist-switcher groups, on the other, we begin by examining each group’s partisan and demographic profiles. Along with partisanship, analysts frequently note the racial and ethnic differences, gender gap, and differences by educational level between Trump and Clinton voters;<sup>24</sup> this examination enables us to determine whether the loyalist groups in our 2017 and 2019 surveys show these same divisions as voters in the 2016 election. More interestingly, this also allows us to examine the demographic and partisan profiles of the Republican and Democratic Switchers, who are potential vote-switching groups and thus plausibly important voters in the 2020 presidential campaign.

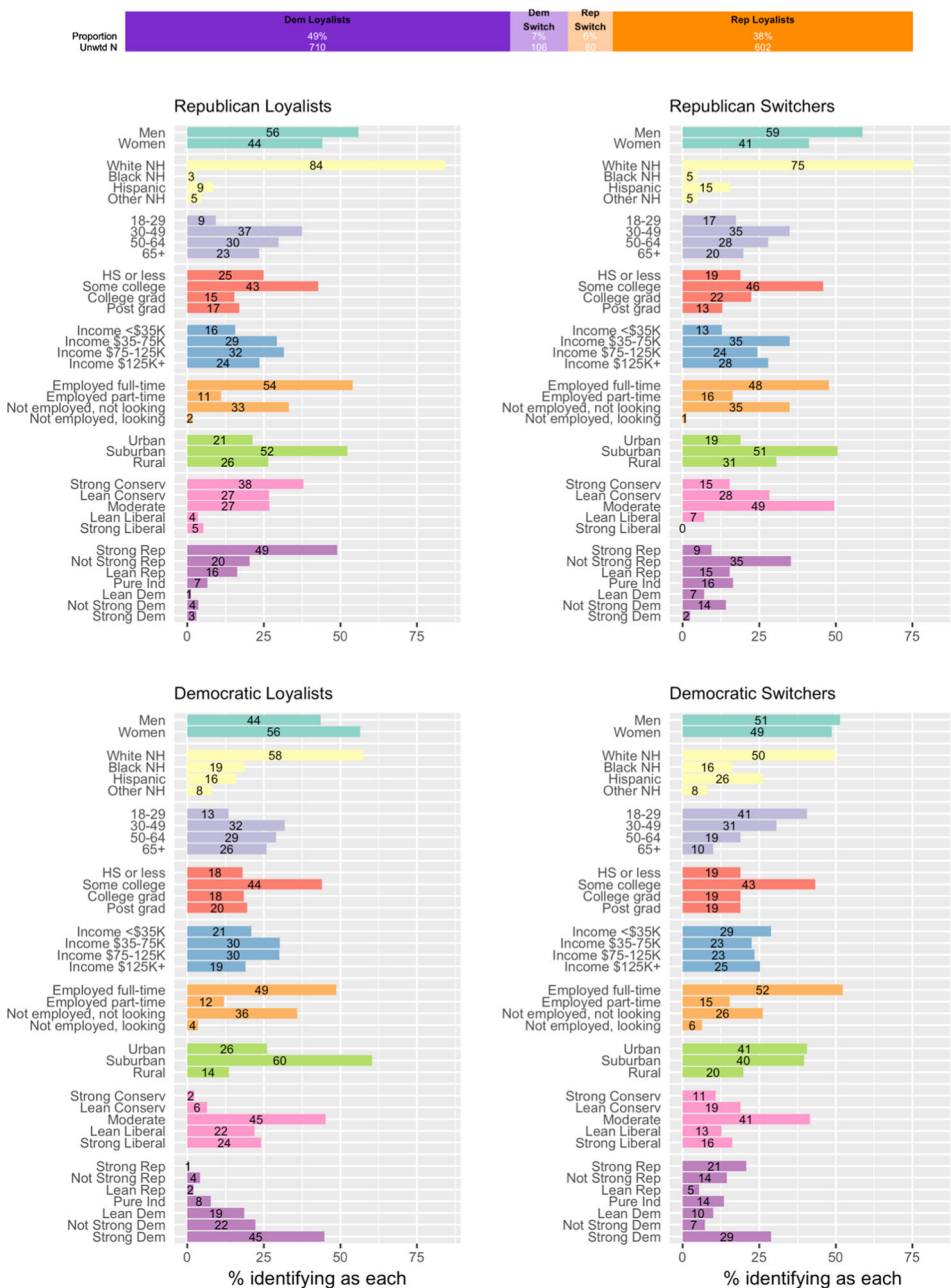
Figure 2 presents the evidence. We focus on appraisals across rows—comparing the demographic and political characteristics of potential vote switchers and vote loyalists, where Republican Switchers are the counterpart to Republican Loyalists, and Democratic Switchers to Democratic Loyalists. Appendix A, Figure D, presents a version of the figure with 95 percent confidence intervals shown.

As shown in Figure 2, Republican Loyalists and Switchers are demographically similar: most identify as non-Hispanic white, a majority are

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<sup>24</sup>Center for the American Woman and Politics, “The Gender Gap: Voting Choices in Presidential Elections,” 2017, accessed at <http://cawp.rutgers.edu/sites/default/files/resources/ggpresvote.pdf>, 22 September 2020; and Pew Research Center, “An Examination of the 2016 Electorate, Based on Validated Voters,” 9 August 2018, accessed at <https://www.people-press.org/2018/08/09/an-examination-of-the-2016-electorate-based-on-validated-voters/>, 22 September 2020.

FIGURE 2  
Demographic, Partisan, and Ideological Profiles of Groups in 2019 Survey



men, and their income, employment, and education profiles are alike. Republican Loyalists and Switchers differ substantively, however, in ideology and partisanship. Far fewer Republican Switchers are “strong” Republicans or strong conservatives: two-fifths are independents and Democrats, while half are ideological moderates. The much larger share of people near the center of the partisan and ideological spectrums suggests that Republican Switchers’ initial commitment to a Republican or Trumpist identity group is weaker than that of Republican Loyalists, which may make it easier for them to perceive economic failures or disjunctive values or governance styles in the president.

Like Republican Loyalists and Switchers, our other loyalist-switcher pair of Democratic Loyalists and Switchers differ little demographically. However, far fewer Democratic Switchers call themselves Democrats (either “strong” or “not so strong”) compared with Democratic Loyalists (36 percent versus 67 percent, respectively). Though members of both groups are most likely to call themselves political moderates than something else, there are more liberal Democratic Loyalists than liberal Democratic Switchers. Thus, analogous to Republican Switchers, Democratic Switchers’ initial commitment to a Democratic identity group or to a liberal ideology is relatively weak.

Overall, we conclude that each pair of potential vote switchers and their vote loyalist counterparts (Republican Switchers versus Loyalists, and Democratic Switchers versus Loyalists) do not differ substantially when it comes to demographics. However, switchers are less ideologically polarized than loyalists, and they are less likely to have a strong political party affiliation.

In multivariate analyses (see Appendix A, Figure E), we examine whether demographic or political characteristics predict staying with Trump versus leaving him, and staying with Trump’s opposition versus leaving that opposition. These analyses confirm the descriptive patterns of Figure 2: demographic characteristics do not predict a voter switching from either a Republican or Democratic 2016 vote, but ideology and partisanship do. In particular, the finding of some predictive power of ideology separate from the predictive power of partisanship implies that switching allegiance from 2016 to 2019 involves a substantive choice and is not simply rejoining one’s partisan group after a temporary aberration. We reinforce this conclusion by replicating the analyses in the text, which use the full 2019 sample of voters, through parallel analyses among only Democrats or Republicans. Appendix A, Figure F shows the results; there are similar patterns as in the text for each loyalist-switcher pair. In other words, holding partisanship constant, we still see coherent patterns of

attitudes that may help to explain remaining with one's earlier view or switching sides.

We thus have suggestive evidence that deciding whether to stay with one's 2016 position after two years of Trump's presidency involves underlying attitudes on key issues about which Trump had made clear promises or on matters of values and style on which Trump has differentiated himself.

### ATTITUDES OF LOYALIST-SWITCHER PAIRS

The previous section shows that ideology, along with partisanship, distinguishes potential vote switchers from loyalists more consistently and strongly than demographic characteristics. Because ideology is at least partly composed of attitudes, and of perceptions that are influenced by attitudes,<sup>25</sup> we turn to an analysis of attitudes that are likely to be especially salient in evaluating Trump's presidential performance in order to discern why potentially important segments of American voters changed their minds about him between 2016 and 2019.

#### *Economic Outcomes*

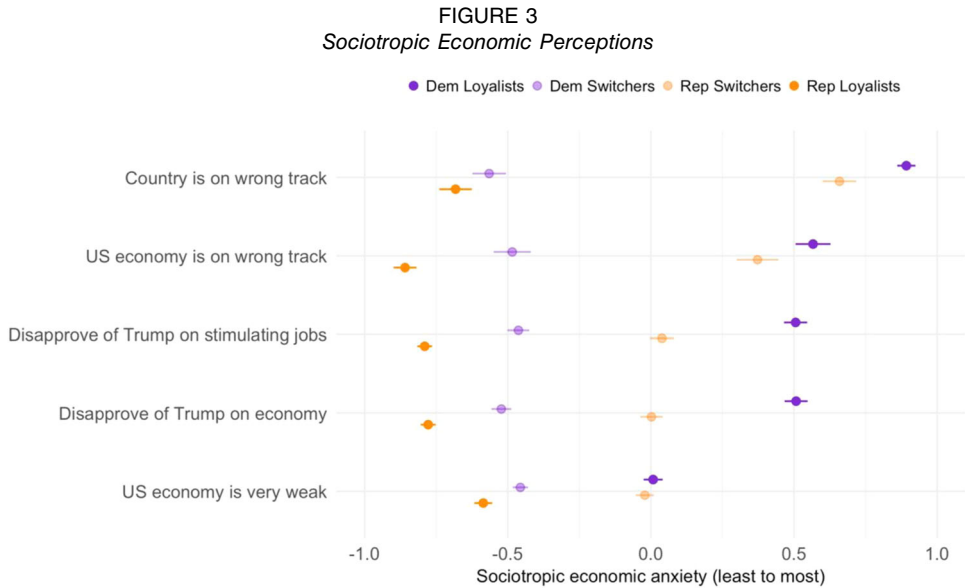
Candidate Trump promised both that the American economy as a whole would thrive under his presidency—"it's time to establish a national goal of reaching 4 percent economic growth... I think we can do, and maybe substantially better than, that"—and that his economic plan would generate 25 million new jobs, mostly in manufacturing and extraction.<sup>26</sup> By 2019, Americans had had an opportunity to evaluate his success in both sociotropic and pocketbook terms.

The pattern of attitudes of the two loyalist-switcher pairs is very consistent for sociotropic evaluations of the national economic situation. Figure 3 presents the pattern of views in 2019.

We begin by explaining this and the remaining figures, which are laid out in the same way. As described earlier, each cluster of views includes both scales and individual items. They are laid out in order, with the views that most strongly differentiate Republican and Democratic Loyalists at the top and the views with the smallest differences between those two groups at the bottom. If the evidence exemplified the larger pattern perfectly, Democratic Loyalists (dark purple) would always be on the far left or right of a given

<sup>25</sup>James T. Jost, Christopher M. Federico, and Jaime L. Napier, "Political Ideology: Its Structure, Functions, and Elective Affinities," *Annual Review of Psychology* 60 (2009): 307–337.

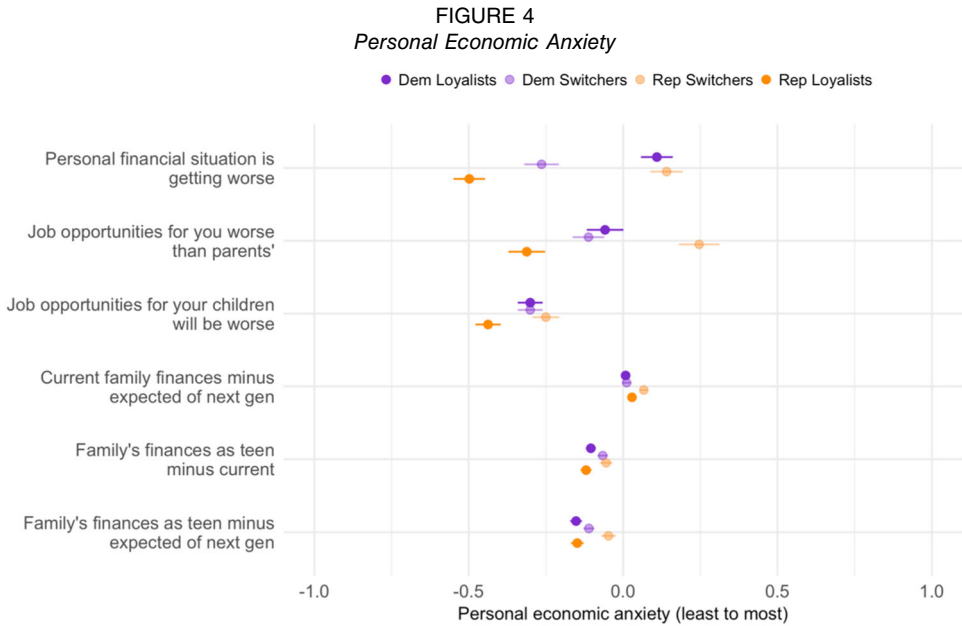
<sup>26</sup>Yian Mui, "Donald Trump Keeps Moving the Goal Post for Economic Growth," *Washington Post*, 29 December 2016; and Alexander Burns, Binyamin Appelbaum, and Neil Irwin, "Donald Trump Vows to Create 25 Million Jobs over Next Decade," *New York Times*, 15 September 2016.



figure; Republican Loyalists (dark orange) would always be on the opposite extreme; Republican Switchers (light orange) would be close to Democratic Loyalists, and Democratic Switchers (light purple) would be close to Republican Loyalists. In other words, we expect that potential vote switchers will look less like those who voted the same way in 2016 and more like the other side’s loyalists. The top two rows of Figure 3, “Country is on wrong track,” and “US economy is on wrong track,” exemplify that pattern. The remaining three rows come close to the epitomizing pattern.

The message with regard to sociotropic economic perceptions is clear: not only are loyalists on the extremes, but switchers hold the same perceptions as people who voted the opposite way in 2016. People who perceive the economy to be thriving in a Trump presidency—even some of those who voted against him—support him; people who believe that the economy is doing poorly—even if they voted for the president—oppose him. These data clearly show that perceptions of American economic success in 2019 are strongly associated with levels of support for the president, regardless of who respondents voted for in 2016.

Voters may perceive a discrepancy between general and personal success, or at least between how well the economy is doing and how well I and my family are doing. Perceptions of the economy as a whole may be more subject to selective information flows or subjective interpretations than perceptions of my own situation. Furthermore, people may hold the president responsible for national economic success but not their own.



Therefore, we analyze the two sets of economic evaluations separately; Figure 4 provides the evidence.

Responses to four of the six items cluster tightly, showing that potential vote switchers and loyalists alike do not associate concern about their family's economic mobility with their views of Trump's presidency. Voters are differentiated in support for Trump, however, on the two questions about respondents' own economic situation. As with views of the national economic situation, we find vote loyalists at the two extremes; Republican Loyalists are the least anxious with regard to their finances and job opportunities, and Democratic Loyalists are among the most anxious. Once again, potential vote switchers hold views quite different from those of their loyalist counterparts—Democratic Switchers are fairly far from Democratic Loyalists, while Republican Switchers, the most concerned of all about their job prospects, are far from the more sanguine Republican Loyalists. Many Trump voters whose job prospects seem dismal two years after his election no longer endorse the president.

### *Governance Styles*

Trump's claims about leadership and governance during his candidacy were as prominent as his dramatic economic promises. Responding to a debate question about military disobedience of illegal orders, for example,

he promised that as president, “If I say do it, they’re gonna do it. That’s what leadership is all about.”<sup>27</sup> In his nomination acceptance speech, Trump listed a long series of problems calling out for solutions and concluded with “I am your voice. I alone can fix it.”<sup>28</sup> Here and elsewhere, he claimed an unusual amount of unilateral authority if he were to become president.

Candidate Trump was also distinctive among modern major party nominees for his populist messaging. Trump portrayed himself as the champion of ordinary people against coastal, intellectual, and financial elites: “The establishment protected itself... Their victories have not been your victories; their triumphs have not been your triumphs; and while they celebrated..., there was little to celebrate for struggling families all across our land. That all changes—starting right here, and right now.”<sup>29</sup>

Figure 5 presents views on both elements of Trump’s governance style, in the usual order from the least to the greatest agreement across the two groups of loyalists.

Although the survey items vary in their ability to distinguish among respondent groups, the overall pattern is clear and consistent: vote loyalists hold the most extreme opinions, and potential vote switchers’ attitudes are relatively far away from the loyalists with whom they now disagree. It is no surprise that Democratic Loyalists are less supportive of strong authority (second and fourth rows) and more antagonistic toward large corporations and the wealthy (first and third rows), than are Republican Loyalists. What is more revealing is that Democratic Switchers are much closer to Republican Loyalists than to their erstwhile allies, the Democratic Loyalists. Symmetrically, the views of Republican Switchers are relatively far away from the views of Republican Loyalists. That is, from 2016 to 2019, as Americans learned more about how Trump was asserting presidential power, and as they watched his populism evolve into more conventionally conservative market-oriented policies, some opponents came to approve of his governance style, while some supporters came to oppose it.

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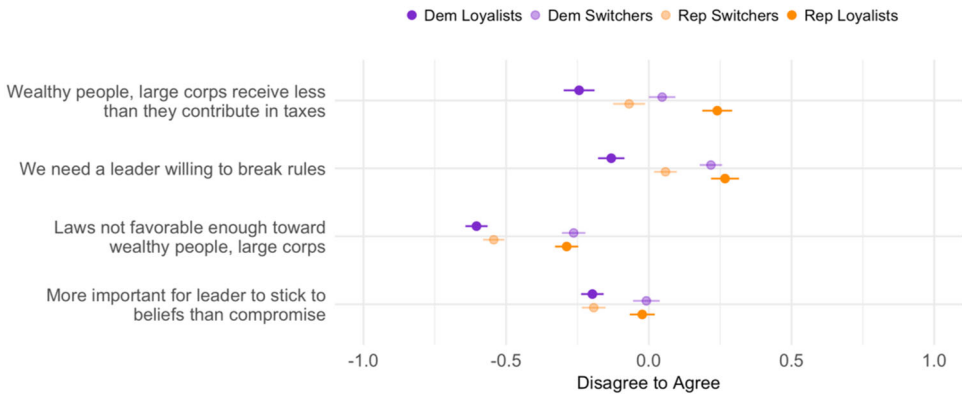
<sup>27</sup>Shannon Young, “GOP Debate: 5 Takeaways from the Republican Presidential Debate in Detroit,” *MassLive*, 4 March 2016, accessed at [https://www.masslive.com/politics/2016/03/gop\\_debate\\_5\\_takeaways\\_from\\_th\\_3.html](https://www.masslive.com/politics/2016/03/gop_debate_5_takeaways_from_th_3.html), 22 September 2020.

<sup>28</sup>Kwame Anthony Appiah, “The Multiculturalist Misunderstanding,” *New York Review of Books*, 9 October 1997, 30–34.

<sup>29</sup>White House, “The Inaugural Address: Remarks of President Donald J. Trump,” 20 January 2017, accessed at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/the-inaugural-address/>, 22 September 2020.



FIGURE 5  
Governance Styles

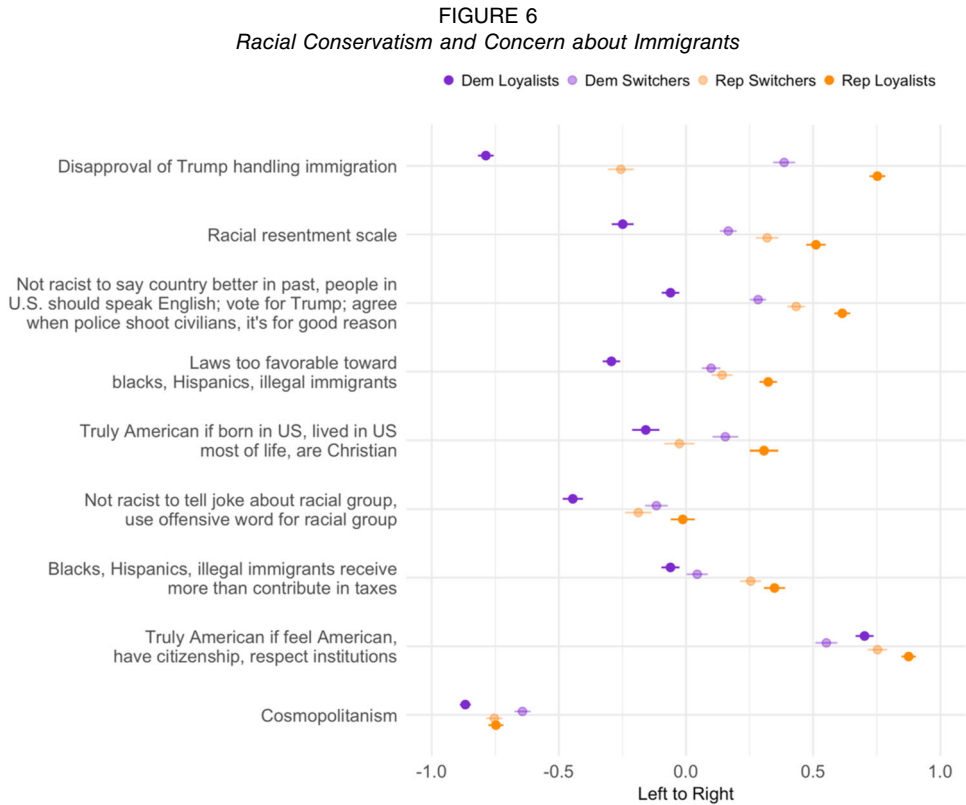


### *Views on Race, Ethnicity, and Immigration*

Next, consider the relationship between racial attitudes and the views of loyalists and switchers. Donald Trump announced his candidacy for president by asserting that many Mexican immigrants are drug dealers, criminals, and rapists. He had long challenged Barack Obama's constitutional right to be president, proposed a ban on immigrants from predominantly Muslim countries, described black neighborhoods as war zones, retweeted messages from white supremacists, and endorsed stop-and-frisk policing practices. His views on race, ethnicity, and immigration were well known both before and after he took office.

To examine the relationship between Trump support and racial attitudes, our 2019 survey asks a battery of questions to discover how views on race, ethnicity, and immigration are associated with changing or persistent views of Trump himself. Figure 6 shows the results.

Once again, the overall pattern is clear, even though the items differ in their ability to distinguish between loyalist and switcher pairings. On eight of the nine measures, Democratic and Republican Loyalists hold the most liberal and conservative racial attitudes, respectively. Setting aside the bottom two rows showing mostly concurrence, potential vote switchers are always between the two extremes. Unlike in previous figures, however, switchers do not show consistent distances from their loyalist counterparts. For example, Democratic Switchers are far from Democratic Loyalists in their views of Trump's immigration policy (first row), but they are relatively close to Democratic Loyalists with regard to racial resentment, agreement that tax policies favor minorities too much, and denial of accusations of racism. Conversely, Republican Switchers

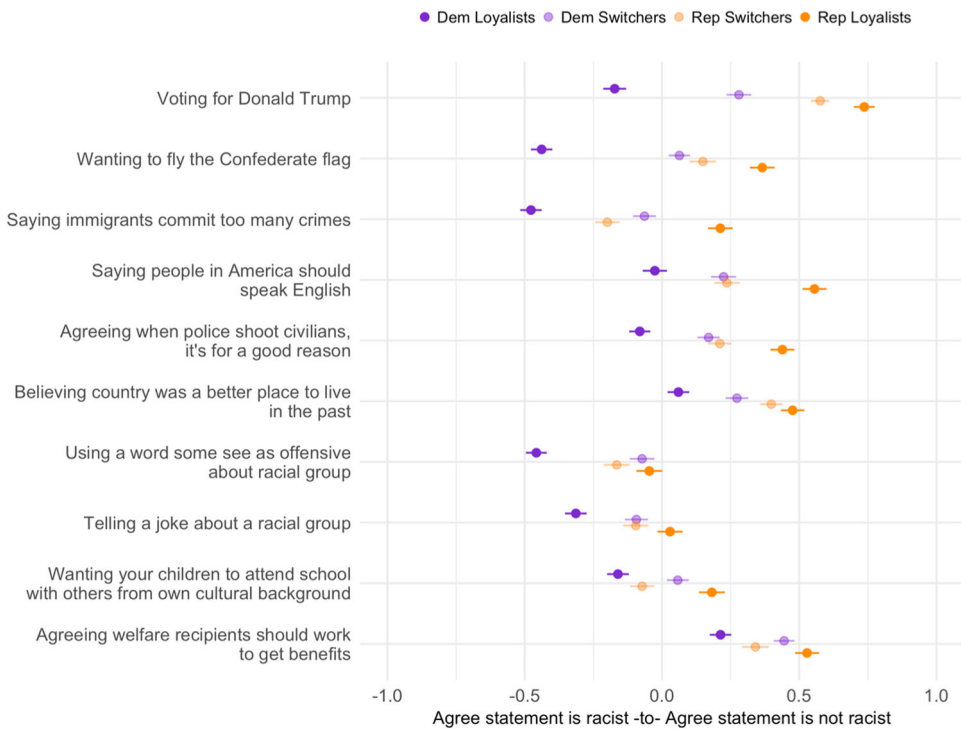


disagree with Republican Loyalists’ support of Trump’s immigration policy, but they agree with them in levels of racial resentment, denial that certain views are racist, and the view that minorities receive disproportionate tax benefits. Overall, switchers shift between greater agreement with their erstwhile loyalist allies and greater agreement with their new allies in the opposite set of loyalists; one gets the impression of ambivalence or uncertainty in the highly sensitive arena of switchers’ attitudes about race, ethnicity, and immigration.

The 2017 survey sought additional purchase on whether Americans see Trump’s statements about Mexicans, Muslims, and African Americans as racist and xenophobic or simply as descriptions of unpalatable facts and rejection of undesirable behaviors. To do so, we disaggregate the “not racist to say” scales into their six component statements and add in the additional four statements included in that survey. Figure 7 shows views on whether these 10 statements are, or are not, racist.

Once again, the overall pattern is clear, even though the survey items vary in their ability to distinguish among the four groups. For every

FIGURE 7  
*Is It Racist?*



statement, we find vote loyalists at the extremes: Republican Loyalists are the most likely to reject the claim of racism, and Democratic Loyalists are the most likely to perceive racism. Disagreements can be stark, with Republican Loyalists often more than twice, and occasionally three times, as likely as Democratic Loyalists to respond “not racist.” Both sets of potential vote switchers always fall between the extremes, and are not sharply distinguished from one another. Republican Switchers, not surprisingly, seldom agree that having voted for Trump is racist—after all, they did vote for him!—and Democratic Switchers are at most indecisive about the accusation of racism directed at the president whom they newly support. The position of both switcher groups may be psychologically dissonant, and Figure 7 might be interpreted as further evidence of their ambivalence or uncertainty on this difficult issue.

Nonetheless, Figure 7 shows that Trump’s rhetoric about minority groups and immigrants is strongly associated with Americans’ choice to remain politically loyal or, more unusually, to switch their opinion of the president after he took office. Those who agree with Trump’s challenge to political correctness consistently support him; those who believe

statements like his to be racist consistently oppose him; and those with mixed or ambivalent views are switching from support to disapproval, or vice versa, in roughly equal measure.

### WHY DO ATTITUDES AND TRUMP SUPPORT COME INTO LINE?

Although there is certainly variation across topics, we have shown a consistent pattern: by 2019, attitudes and (non)support for Trump were brought into line, with Republican Loyalists and Democratic Switchers grouping together and Democratic Loyalists and Republican Switchers grouping together. Because our 2017 and 2019 surveys are not a panel, we cannot track changes in individual voters' opinions and therefore cannot determine why respondents do or do not remain loyal—so we have focused on depicting the patterns of views held by loyalists and potential vote switchers. Nonetheless, examination of these patterns enables plausible inferences about why voters are loyalists or potential vote switchers.

One explanation is that switchers are voters who first abandon their support for a party and then bring their issue positions into line with those of their new party and its leaders. Indeed, this is a common pattern of voter behavior.<sup>30</sup> However in an era when issue attitudes are more tightly constrained than has been the case in the past half century,<sup>31</sup> such movements may be less common than the reverse. More particularly, some issues in our survey engage with views probably shaped early in life, or address direct evaluations of one's own economic circumstance. At least in those instances, where deeply held views or starkly apparent perceptions are the leading edge for other tightly constrained attitudes, it seems more likely that support for Trump is being brought into line with issue attitudes rather than the reverse.

Thus, it is plausible that some switchers are “returning home” with regard to core commitments regarding values and identity after an aberrant vote in 2016. After all, more than one-third of Democratic Switchers are Republicans, so whatever impelled them to vote against Trump in 2016 could have been overcome by 2019. Since attitudes about race and authority are socialized early in life, highly stable, and broadly influential,<sup>32</sup> long-standing views on race, immigration, or authority

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<sup>30</sup>Achen and Bartels, *Democracy for Realists*; Larry M. Bartels, “Beyond the Running Tally: Partisan Bias in Political Perceptions,” *Political Behavior* 24 (June 2002): 117–149; and Gabriel Lenz, *Follow the Leader? How Voters Respond to Politicians' Performance and Policies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012).

<sup>31</sup>Steven Webster, “Anger and Partisan Issue Constraint” (working paper, Department of Political Science, University of Indiana Bloomington, 2020), accessed at <http://www.stevenwebster.com/research/constraint.pdf>, 25 September 2020; and Pew Research Center, “Political Polarization.”

could contribute to leading Democratic Switchers back into the Republican fold. Concretely, Republicans who voted against Trump in 2016 may decide that what others criticize as racism, xenophobia, or authoritarianism are in fact appropriate racial conservatism, border protection, and leadership—that is, reasons to return to their party and support the president.

The same logic holds for Republican Switchers. That is, after seeing how Trump’s presidency is taking shape, Republican Switchers who are racial liberals may become dismayed that Trump’s actions are sliding into unacceptable racism. Given that views on race are closely and increasingly linked with views on other issues, long-standing racial liberalism may therefore induce some Trump voters to switch to disapproval of his presidency.

Finally, it seems especially likely that support for Trump is being brought into line with issue attitudes rather than the reverse when we consider voters’ evaluation of their own economic situation. Although all presidential candidates promise a strong economy and good jobs,<sup>33</sup> Trump’s promises were unusually specific and dramatic. Republican Switchers are far from Republican Loyalists, and Democratic Switchers are equally far from Democratic Loyalists, in evaluations of their personal economic trajectory (Figure 4). Republican Switchers’ strong movement away from their 2016 vote suggests that these switchers are responding vigorously and angrily to what they perceive to be real and consequential external stimuli—that is, the Trump administration’s inability to help them improve their economic standing and prospects. Democratic Switchers are responding with almost equal vigor to the opposite external stimulus—demonstrating support for a presidency in which their economic standing and prospects have improved. In both cases, issue constraint has the effect of expanding voters’ views from appreciation of or resentment about a particular economic situation into a broad endorsement or rejection of Trump.

In addition to changing loyalty and then issue positions, or changing issue positions and then loyalty, a third pattern is also possible. Even

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<sup>32</sup>Marc J. Hetherington and Jonathan D. Weiler, *Authoritarianism and Polarization in American Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009); David O. Sears and P. J. Henry, “The Origins of Symbolic Racism,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 85 (August 2003): 259–275; Karen Stenner, *The Authoritarian Dynamic* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005); and Michael Tesler and David O. Sears, *Obama’s Race: The 2008 Election and the Dream of a Post-Racial America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010).

<sup>33</sup>Lynn Vavreck, *The Message Matters: The Economy and Presidential Campaigns* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009).

though collectively all of these issues are highly visible and politically salient, switchers may only be concerned with a subset of them. In that case, voters may switch to or away from Trump because of one intense concern while setting others aside as less important or more muddled.

In sum, we cannot prove that values surrounding issues of race, immigration, and authority or evaluations of the American economy and their own prospects *cause* voters to remain loyal to their 2016 presidential choice or become potential vote switchers in 2020. But we see several reasons why people change their evaluation of Trump's presidency in response to pre-existing attitudes or concrete experiences. An ideal research design for understanding loyalty and switching would be a panel survey through an election cycle and into the succeeding presidency. Using a variety of measures of a given attitude, it would repeatedly examine views on multiple policies and promises. Of course, the unpredictability of Trump's campaign and presidency, and his reshaping of traditional issue coalitions, would have made any stable survey design from 2016 through 2019 feel outdated even by pre-COVID 2020 standards. But regardless of these methodological complexities, and especially if the appeal of Trump-style politics proves an enduring feature of American politics, researchers should develop panel designs to determine when and how partisan polarization is blurred by boundary crossing.

## CONCLUSION

Much has changed since our survey in February 2019. In the following year, the economy grew, unemployment fell to record low levels, the Trump administration's immigration policies and practices became more restrictive, Trump's racial and ethnic rhetoric grew harsher, and his claims to and practices of untrammelled authority expanded. Then came the COVID-19 pandemic in February 2020, followed by nationwide protests over police violence and anti-black policies and practices. Change came to some topics tracked in our surveys: the economy came close to crashing and unemployment rose to levels not seen since the 1930s. Little changed with regard to other topics: the Trump administration's immigration policies and practices became even more restrictive, and Trump's racial and ethnic rhetoric grew even harsher. And some topics saw confused results. Trump alternately claimed complete control over the United States' response to the pandemic and disclaimed any responsibility. His administration oversaw both widespread cash distributions to distressed Americans and the funneling of billions of dollars to wealthy corporations and politically connected contractors.

How might this upheaval affect the two pairs of loyalists and potential vote switchers? Democratic Loyalists have no reason to move away from

their persistent opposition, and they may in fact intensify it. Judging from our surveys, whether Democratic Switchers actually switch their vote in 2020 may depend largely on the economy. That is, Trump's immigration restrictions, racially provocative rhetoric, and assertions of authority will arguably reinforce their newfound approval, but they may nonetheless vote against him if they do not perceive the economy to be back on the right track by November 2020 and if their own economic prospects are dismal. Strong views about economic gain or loss, in short, might outweigh switchers' confused or ambivalent views about racism and immigration control.

Republican Loyalists will most likely continue to endorse Trump's immigration and racial rhetoric and policies. But they may be shaken in their support for the president if they perceive his claims to leadership to be unconvincing, if the economy does not improve, and if their own job and financial prospects are precarious. Republican Switchers are the most likely vote switchers. Even before the pandemic hit, they did not perceive the economy to be successful or their own economic prospects to be good; it is hard to see how their economic discouragement will lessen before the 2020 election. Republican Switchers are ambivalent or uncertain about Trump's immigration policies and racial rhetoric; they do not endorse his strong claims to authority. So even if Republican Loyalists remain loyal to the president, their former allies, Republican Switchers, are not likely to return to the fold.

Potential vote switchers may hold more political power than their numbers suggest. A small share of voters, in the right states, with particular levels of turnout, and with the right configuration of partisans on both sides, can change the outcome of a presidential election. Even if we refrain from predictions about November 2020, we are confident that the relative balance of switchers and loyalists, in both pairs, bears a close watch.

More generally, how and why people leave their partisan identity and join another group or remain unattached warrants closer attention in a democratic polity. Understanding boundary crossers is one key to evaluating whether Americans decide to back away from mutual fear and mistrust and from perceptions of the other party as a threat to American democracy.

## SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information may be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of the article.