Trump's Political Fandom: Tribal Devotion in a Post-Truth World

Tahsin Rahman Khan

6861157

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Modern American politics has given rise to a unique and potent force - the political fandom. Characterized by fierce partisan loyalty, identity rooted in a cause or leader, ritualized behaviors, and willingness for activism, political fandoms share much in common with groups like sports fans or pop culture fanbases (Moon, 2018). However, when fused with the world's most powerful democracy, political fandoms carry greater implications and responsibilities. Donald Trump has commanded one of America's most zealous contemporary political fandoms, marked by tribal devotion, mistrust of institutions, and alternative interpretations of truth. Through rallies, merchandise, social media, conservative outlets, and shared symbols, Trump supporters have coalesced into a movement subculture that anchors personal meaning and purpose for members even amidst the leader's ongoing scandals (Ott, 2017). This essay will analyze Trump's political fandom - who they are, why they remain loyal, how they perceive attacks on Trump, and what their continued support reveals about misinformation and post-truth politics in America's polarized landscape. Ultimately, Trump's fandom reflects and reinforces troubling anti-establishment tendencies that undermine democratic norms regarding ethics, truth, and rule of law.

The Personality-Issue Paradox

Trump's political fandom defies assumptions about the traditional bases for American political support. As one CNN article notes, polls consistently find Trump supporters are more driven by his policies and positions than his personality and conduct (Enten, 2023). This directly contradicts popular narratives from critics that dismiss his base as a purely personality-driven cult divorced from ideology or issues. However, social psychology may explain this apparent

paradox between issues and personality. Research shows Trump employs rhetorical strategies including simplification, repetition, polarity, and vilification of opponents that appeal to psychological biases in human cognition – negativity bias, confirmation bias, mere-exposure effect, etc. (Strawser, 2023). Through these tactics, Trump frequently links himself in supporters' minds to their preferred stances on immigration, gun rights, abortion, and America's place in the world. The resulting "in-group" cultural identity rooted in issues sustains devotion even when his character invites more dissonance. Trump described this linkage at a 2023 rally, saying "When they go after me, they're going after you" (Beattie, 2023). Positioning attacks on his conduct as attacks on supporters' identity and values rationalizes continued backing irrespective of scandals through partisan cognitive filters. This personality-issue paradox helps explicate Trump's durability with his base and supra-political appeal.
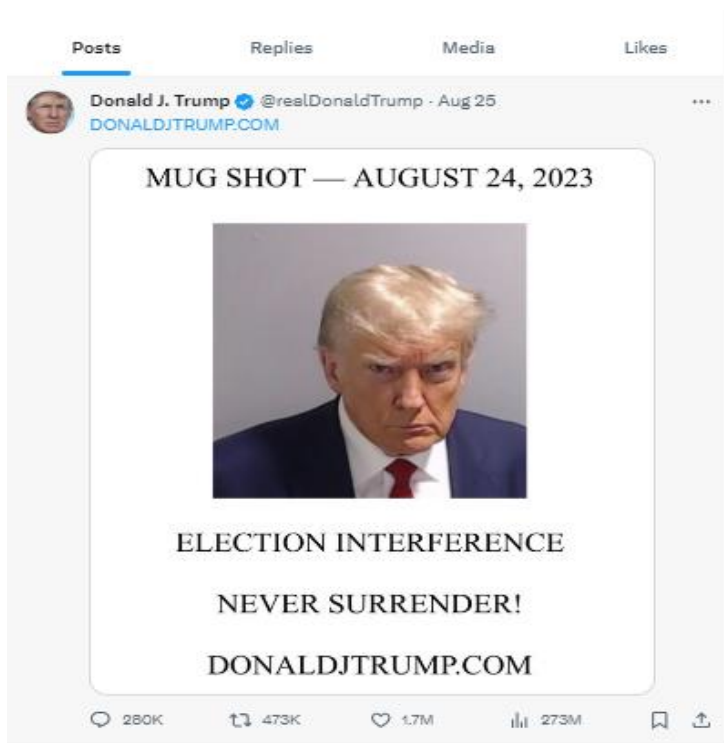

Figure 1: Trump's first post after returning to twitter (Trump, 2023)

Critically exploring this paradox reveals important insights about Trump's branding success and resilience. His longtime strategy of employing simple slogans, attacking critics, and framing policies in sharply moralistic terms triggers well-known biases in human psychology. Negativity bias makes insults and critiques more salient than positive rhetoric - lending Trumpian aggression memorability his opponents lack. Similarly, confirmation bias leads supporters to lend more credence to statements aligning with their perspectives while applying extra scrutiny to discordant information. Trump frequently playing to these biases through rhetorical choices makes his messaging uniquely memorable and impactful (Strawser, 2023). For instance, Trump's first post after returning to Twitter is his mugshot claiming there will be no more election interference synonymous with the beliefs of most of his supporters that the 2020 Presidential election results were not credible. Additionally, Trump's relentless linking of himself to supporters' views on touchstone conservative issues like gun rights, taxes, and abortion ingeniously fuses their identities. Supporting those positions becomes synonymous with backing Trump. This makes his fandom take attacks on Trump as assaults on their own values thus neutralizing the expected effects of his scandals. Someone who disregards controversies when their favored sports team faces them resembles Trump fans rationalizing away objectively outrageous behavior because it might hamper their "side's" goals. Similarly, the in-group identity shapes perceptions of what constitutes "truth" based on partisan leanings. This helps explain polls showing two-thirds of Republicans persisting in positive views of Trump despite cascade of definitively documented misconduct and violations (Murray, 2023).

Who Are Trump's Supporters?

The media frequently depicts Trump's base as predominantly working-class white males without college degrees. However, analyses reveal his coalition is more socioeconomically

diverse. Trump performs well among affluent voters in "elite zip codes" who laud his tax and regulation cuts while privately supporting him to avoid public backlash (Levin, 2023). Upscale conservatives appreciate Trump's judicial appointments, Abraham Accords, attempted North Korea diplomacy, and aggressive policies against China and Russia even if they dislike his behavior (Levin, 2023). This more complex coalition mirrors analysis showing Trump made inroads versus previous Republican candidates with minorities and working-class whites but also outperformed among those earning over $100,000 (Sides, et al., 2017). Capturing various ideological, cultural, economic, and social strains of conservatives, libertarians, and populists enabled Trump to build a "big tent" political fandom unified more by grievance and opposition than homogeneity. Just as sports fans booing a rival team together feel bonded despite having little else in common, Trump fandom's shared out-group animosity creates solidarity.
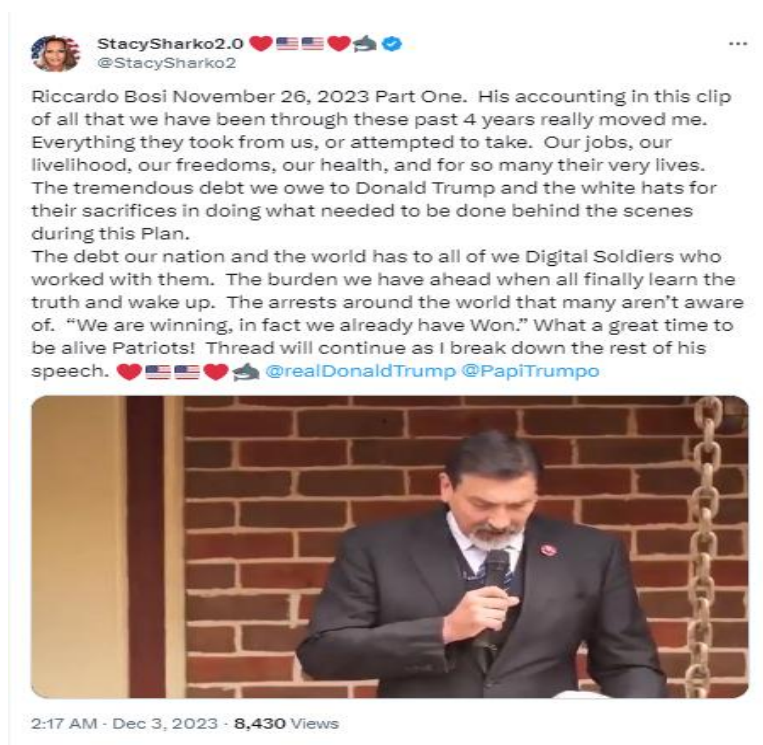

Figure 2: How Trump supporters are unified by grievances and opposition (Sharko, 2023)

Examining the economic diversity within Trump's coalition reveals crucial insights about his successful expansion of the Republican base. Affluent voters in upscale metropolitan suburbs backed Trump due to supporting policies like tax cuts, deregulation, and aggressiveness toward foreign adversaries as well as judicial appointments securing conservative gains on issues like abortion rights and religious liberties (Levin, 2023). These wealthier voters tended to express embarrassment at Trump's inflammatory rhetoric and boorish persona while appreciating the substantive policy priorities he delivered for traditional GOP orthodoxies. This allowed Trump to build inroads with upper-middle class voters typically more attracted to managerial, country-club style Republicanism making him unusual in transcending typical class-based voting cleavages. Additionally, Trump consolidated support from populist-nationalists opposed to both "woke" multiculturalism and globalist free trade who previously lacked partisan homes. These included minorities and whites without college degrees feeling abandoned by both parties in an increasingly divided economy and culture. By branding himself defender against invisible threats to these constituencies' traditional privileges and values from elites subtly trying to marginalize them through growing cultural diversity and economic interdependence, Trump drew polarized elements under a broad coalition (Abernathy, 2023). Even sports teams with bitter rival fan bases unite against shared non-conference foes.

Devotion Against the Odds

What is most striking about Trump's fandom is its resilience amidst scenarios that would derail almost any other politician. Trump is the first former President to face criminal prosecution, hit with four separate indictments since leaving office encompassing election subversion, classified document mishandling, and financial crimes. Yet his supporters remain stalwart – polls show around 70% of Republicans maintain a favorable view of Trump (Murray,

2023). Explanations range from cognitive shortcuts enabling supporters to dismiss charges as witch hunts to sunk cost feelings preventing them from admitting flaws in their past support (Abernathy, 2023). But Leon Festinger's (1957) seminal theory of cognitive dissonance likely also explains this steadfastness. By committing ever deeper socially and politically to Trump through things like attending rallies, donating money, or literal insurrection, supporters experience escalating "dissonance" when confronted with countering facts or Trump's misdeeds. Admitting mistakes or withdrawing allegiance grows increasingly painful. Instead, they rationalize, avoid discordant information, and "preach" Trump's gospel more loudly to regain consonance – all psychologically easier than changing behavior or beliefs at this point (Beattie, 2023). This self-perpetuating loyalty creates the unwavering base Trump boasts.

Figure 3: A form of rationalizing Trump's misdeeds (Robert, 2023)

Analyzing what sustains such resilient devotion despite conduct sinking any other modern leader reveals crucial insights about the collective psychology and defensive reasoning upholding Trumpism. Festinger's cognitive dissonance theory holds that when peoples' professed beliefs conflict substantially with their actions, they face psychological discomfort (Festinger, 1957). This tension manifests for Trump supporters whose champion faces criminal prosecution and unambiguous fact patterns of law-breaking after they vouched for his integrity. Admitting grave misjudgments proves painful, so they rationalize to avoid mental anguish. Sunk cost fallacy dynamics also help explain stubborn allegiance - having invested substantial social, reputational, financial or even physical capital into Trump, supporters feel it would be wasteful to withdraw support now however egregious fresh facts grow. Both explanations illuminate the fanatical loyalty characteristic of political personality cults and celebrity fandoms. The more extreme sacrifices followers make for their leader, the harder psychologically detaching becomes without chaotic loss of purpose, community and personal identity (Hassan, 2021).

Perceiving Attacks as Persecution

Integral to Trump fandom culture is a conspiratorial worldview seeing Trump as persecuted by elites and institutions biased against conservatives. Media coverage and polling reveal supporters perceive indictments as unjust partisan witch hunts (Townley, 2023). This deep-state narrative permeates online right-wing communities, wherein mentions of potential Trump arrests generate spikes in violent rhetoric (Wendling, 2023). Allegations against Trump morph into grievances against the system and validation of pre-existing anti-establishment leanings. Neutral accountability becomes partisan score-settling in this interpretive framework. This "gaslighting" inverts reality and truth, recasting criminals as victims (Hassan, 2021). For instance, Police State a documentary produced by Dinesh D'Souza portrays normal and harmless

Americans who have been allegedly harassed, censored and arrested by various branches of the

US government. The documentary shares the sentiments with most conservative politicians,

influencers and personalities that Trump's indictment is just witch hunt from the deep state.

Through this distortion, attacks on Trump's conduct never damage his support because his base

processes them as attacks on their values and freedoms. This "cult of victimhood" sustains the

fandom against overwhelming contrary evidence (Lawtoo, 2023).
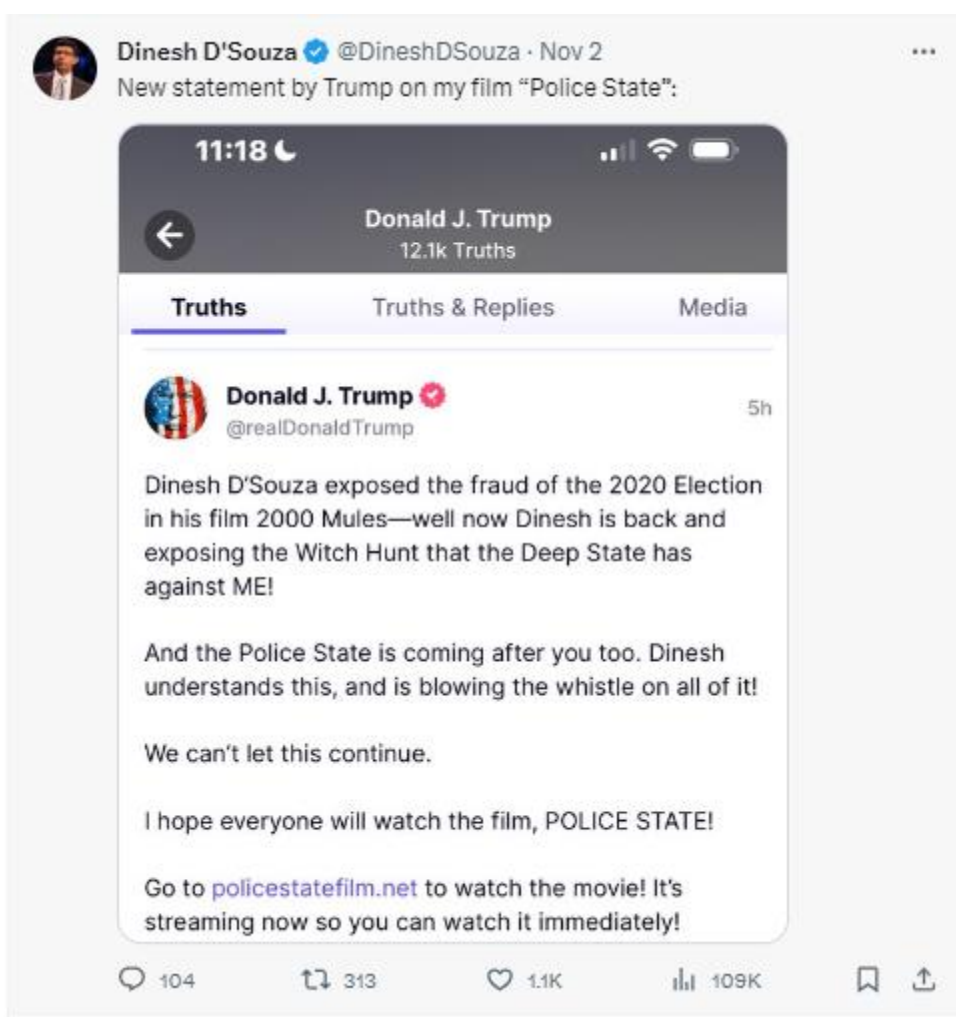

Figure 4: Police State, a documentary spreading the narrative of State Persecution (D'Souza, 2023)

Examining this phenomenon reveals crucial insights about the alternate reality and siege

mentality necessary to sustain Trump support amid indefensible misconduct. Analyses find

spikes in violent rhetoric within online right-wing communities when news breaks regarding potential criminal charges against Trump, as devotees frame it as confirmation of a deep-state "witch hunt" against conservatives (Wendling, 2023). Allegations prompt outpourings of "here we go again" exasperation casting Trump as recurring victim of partisan score-settling by a nefarious establishment intent on disenfranchising his followers. This reflexive dismissal short-circuits wrestling with damning facts by categorically rejecting them as persecution plots. Trump politically benefits from supporters' broadly collapsing trust in institutions and previously authoritative voices, allowing him to sub in his own counter-narrative serving to explain away misconduct sinking most leaders. This gaslighting persuasively inverts truth and falsehood, victim and violator - psychologically easing cognitive dissonance without having to admit grave misjudgments or flaws in the leader (Hassan, 2021).

Everything fits pre-existing oppression expectations. Supporters infuse themselves so heavily with his struggle such that attacks on Trump become attacks on their community and belief system. This cult of victimhood sustains devotion against overwhelming factual disconfirmations (Lawtoo, 2023). The partisan persecution narrative provides catch-all rationalization and justification to dismiss each indictment, lawsuit, and conviction as further "proof" of the conspiracy against them rather than re-evaluating their judgments or leader with empirical evidence. Violence manifests when promised justice and redemption fail to arrive - whether sport fans after a championship loss or Trump supporters awaiting the Storm. Their reality itself militates against legitimate criticism.

Alternative Truth and Misinformation

The durability of Trump's support despite scandals also reflects the power of misinformation within modern political fandoms. Studies have found the willingness to believe and share false or misleading claims, conspiracy theories, and hyper-partisan content highest among those identifying as "Trump die-hards" (Reinhard et al., 2022). Alternative "Echo Chamber" media ecosystems like Gab, Truth Social, and One America News provide information-poor, identity-rich environments that cultivate confirmation bias, build Trump fans' power as content sharers, and replace objective truth with subjective interpretation (Foster, 2023). Distrust in mainstream institutions like media or academia adds insulation against counter-attitudinal facts. Just as fans of a sports team or musician have their loyalty strengthened, not weakened, by feeling their identity is under attack from rivals, so too do Trump supporters filter additional criticism or charges as threats to their in-group that actually bolster their resolve and community bonds. When 70% of Republicans believe Trump acted legally regarding classified documents – contrary to apolitical expert analysis – it exemplifies a post-truth political reality where partisanship and identity override facts (Murray, 2023). This epistemic tribalism explains why Trump fandom persists through not just scandals but clear evidence of criminal violations.

Interrogating the processes enabling Trump devotees to persist in support amid unambiguous misconduct reveals the formidable resilience of today's partisan information ecosystems thriving on identity-protective reasoning rather than truth-seeking. Communication studies find the Americans most likely to spread mis/disinformation overwhelmingly comprise Trump's most ardent fanatics compared to ordinary partisans. For instance, conservative leaning individuals were more likely to share misleading information on Twitter and Facebook during 2016 elections and believe Covid-19 was a hoax during the early phases of the pandemic

(Kakkar & Lawson, 2022). These supporters often consuming news and information through outlets like Breitbart, Truth Social and One America News that cater expressly to right-wing identity confirmation rather than informing audiences. Communication researcher Matt Levendusky terms these "selective exposure regimes" wherein partisan media explicitly frames coverage around in-group affirmation and out-group attacks to rocket content virality through outrage (2013). This interplay of divisive selective exposure and cumulative extremism sheds light on polling showing 70% of Republicans continuing believing Trump despite apolitical expert indictments (Murray, 2023). Their cocooned reality itself militates against acknowledging inconvenient truths.

Implications for American Democracy

The politicization of truth and neutrality carries worrisome implications for democracy, civility and governance. Attacks on institutions like the FBI or DOJ tear at impartial rule-of-law foundations, instead advancing an authoritarian perspective of justice existing solely to protect one's own side. Trump fandom's conspiratorial worldview primes millions of Americans to implicitly support insurrection if elections don't go their way by framing electoral losses themselves as products of persecution. Willingness to excuse criminal behavior from one's partisan leader also signals the abandonment of principles in favor of cults of personality – echoed in supporters arguing Trump could govern successfully "from prison" if elected in 2024 (Traylor, 2023). Such blind allegiance leaves democracies ill-equipped to provide accountability. Lastly, the post-truth conditions fueling Trump fandom reflect social fragmentation wherein Americans literally inhabit different information worlds – undermining shared understandings of reality necessary for functional policymaking and governance (Hellinger, 2018).

Analyzing the stakes of Trump fandom's epistemic conditions reveals the profound threats partisan media distortions and post-truth decoupling from empirical reality pose for democracy's health. This partisan tribal epistemology rationalizes implicitly anti-democratic beliefs like violent insurrection if elections do not go their way by only recognizing outcomes favoring the in-group as legitimate reflections of "the people's will" -- thus fundamentally abandoning agreed commitment to rules, processes and compromises democracy requires. Moreover, once raw political power maximization displaces principles for conservative media audiences and lawmakers, precious few checks remain securing minority rights and institutional integrity needed for functional, ethical governance. The conditions fostering Trump fandom already partly enabled one deadly Capitol attack and could again absent accountability. Researchers find greater susceptibility to misinformation, conspiracy theories and explicit rejection of apolitical expert consensus authority highest among Trump die-hards compared to ordinary partisans. This reflects the view of knowledge itself as political battleground rather than means of navigating complex challenges. Until steps are taken industry-wide to improve media literacy, combat mis/disinformation, and bursting "bubbles," these conditions will only deteriorate.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Trump's political fandom resembles other fan groups in fierce loyalty and tribal devotion, but carries greater democratic responsibilities. Polls show Trump supporters are more motivated by his policies than personality, explained by his rhetoric psychologically linking himself with their preferred issues. The media depicts Trump's support base as working-class whites. However, it is more socioeconomically diverse including wealthy suburbanites who quietly support his agenda. What is striking is Trump maintains 70% approval among

Republicans despite unprecedented criminal prosecution of a former president. Theories like cognitive dissonance explain supporters rationalizing worsening facts rather than admitting grave misjudgments given the high social and political investment. Integral to Trump support is a conspiratorial worldview seeing him as recurring victim of unjust partisan witch hunts by institutions biased against conservatives. Trump die-hards disproportionately believe and share misinformation in partisan media ecosystems that replace truth with identity-protective interpretation. Trump fandom's erosion of impartial institutions and openness to insurrection carries worrisome implication for American democracy and governance.

In many ways, Trump has appealed to a strain of conservative populism suspicious of diversity and change by portraying himself as a defender of traditional American identity. He has built a fiercely loyal coalition united more by who they oppose than specific policies. This fandom is reinforced by partisan media and misinformation that creates an isolated bubble. Trump's enduring support despite criminality and prosecution reveals vulnerabilities in America's democracy - including susceptibility to demagogues who erode impartial institutions, media echo chambers disconnecting people from facts, and tribal partisanship overriding principles. As pressures on Trump intensify, this isolated base may only grow more defensive and committed. America needs to address the post-truth dynamics allowing such a divisive movement rooted more in identity grievances than substantive policy debates to gain such momentum.

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