



# DEMOCRACY CORPS

C A R V I L L E ♦ G R E E N B E R G

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To: Friends of Democracy Corps  
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## **Trump-skeptical secular conservative Republicans** *Findings from Trump-GOP project*

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*Democracy Corps* recently conducted a series of focus groups with all the major factions of the Republican base, including a conflicted group of “secular conservative” men in Denver.<sup>1</sup> They are part of the one-in-five Republicans who are ideologically conservative and religiously unaffiliated or non-observant. All of them supported Trump’s tax cuts, deregulation, and conservative Supreme Court picks, and most think the economy is moving in the right direction. A sizable minority embraced President Trump and repeated the *Fox* narrative about the country. But the majority were turned off by Trump’s protectionist policies, the way he badgers private businesses, his tendency to over-claim, and his inability to act presidential.

President Trump is using his rallies to speak to Republican base voters, but most of the secular conservative men pulled away after watching clips of Trump speaking on the campaign trail. They are turned off by Trump’s personality and confrontational style, so they are not as motivated as Evangelicals and Tea Party Republicans to defend Trump in the off-year elections.

Secular conservatives align with Trump on tax cuts and deregulation, but they are not motivated by the divisive culture war levers that Trump pulls, so the stakes are not as high for them as for the Evangelicals and Tea Party supporters desperate to stop the Democrats from taking control. They will not be persuaded to vote for a Democrat, but they could stay home in November.

They want to vote for Republicans in November to continue to pass a conservative economic agenda and to confirm conservative judges. But they have not drunk the Kool-Aid. They are looking for Republican candidates who will stand up to Trump on tariffs and hold him accountable on rule of law issues, including possible obstruction of justice. Long term, they will be conflicted about voting for Trump in 2020 while considering a Third-Party candidate who better shares their values.

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<sup>1</sup> *Democracy Corps* conducted a focus group on July 12, 2018 with Republicans and Republican-leaning independent white men from Denver, CO who are ideologically conservative, do not identify as evangelical Christian or observant Catholic, and are not strong supporters of the Tea Party. Half voted for Trump, two did not vote, one voted for Hillary Clinton, and one voted for Third Party candidate Evan McMullin in 2016.



## Wearing their GOP hat

This bloc of Republicans was very in line with the Republican establishment in support of Trump's tax and regulatory policies and Supreme Court appointments. A sizable minority even voiced the *Fox* narrative so important to Trump's defenders and embraced Trump.

All the secular conservatives liked that someone with "business savvy" is "running [the] USA as a businessman as opposed to a politician." They were thrilled with the "booming" economy, noting the stock market had grown and the "record low unemployment." In terms of economic policy, they considered the tax cuts – which they labeled "tax reform" – and cuts to regulations on businesses huge successes.

They applauded Trump for "top notch" nominations to the Supreme Court. They appreciated that he had nominated conservatives who will "hold up the Constitution" instead of activist judges taking power from the Congress and the states.

Most secular conservatives thought that Trump was making progress on national security, particularly with respect to North Korea. They called his summit with Kim Jong-un "a crazy big step for that country and this country."

They all believed that Trump "genuinely cares about this country" because he was selflessly "losing money" by getting involved in politics instead of staying in business.

A few secular conservatives excused Trump's cockiness as an act that lets him get things done because he isn't a politician.

I think *because* of his attitude he's able to come to the table and say, 'We're going to get this shit done,' and most people are like, 'All right.'

I think that same style that I even find distasteful and polarizing and create doubts in my mind, are actually what are still working for him.

At the very least they said it was a good thing that Trump is "assertive."

Unfortunately for Trump and his defenders, most of the secular conservatives wanted more than victories on policy issues; there was a strong desire for a return to conservative convictions and leadership style.

## Pushing back against Trump's leadership style

When asked about some of their doubts about Donald Trump, secular conservatives went directly to his unorthodox, unpresidential behavior and speech and did not hold back. "I really don't like Donald Trump," said one man, "I don't like his style." The called him an "egomaniac" and wished "he would just keep his mouth shut."



Trump's freewheeling, confrontational approach to communication riles up his Evangelical and Tea Party base who said it set him apart from other politicians in a good way, but it has made it hard for many secular conservatives to defend Trump's presidency: "It's phenomenal to see a business acumen in the White House, but then to see the same a\*\* hat writing stuff on Twitter about prostitutes and this, that, and the other, it's a tough dichotomy for me to really be all in."

The limits of Trump's appeal to secular conservatives were evident in this exchange in reaction to a video of him touting his accomplishments at a campaign rally. They felt the need to qualify their praise for the policy successes.

**Speaker A:** I don't care about what he has to say. I don't care about where we're at right now. His term's not over, so, that he's accomplishing all this crap is ridiculous. It's short-lived right now. There's a long way to go. If he thinks he's going to run and get elected again, that's great, but I don't know, I just, I- the dude can't even say nuclear, he says "nuclear," and it's so frustrating to live in a world like this now. Where people are just so ignorant and dumb.

**Speaker B:** It's contrived statements. I mean, Make America Great Again was his platform like his hats, tee shirts, banner ads everywhere, and now, America is Great [is his new slogan in 2020]? Whatever the hell he said, I don't know. I mean, again, I'm very 50-50 on it because I completely agree with what [Speaker A] just said – it's short-lived, because he's only been in for a year and a half, pushing two, I mean, it is short-lived at this point. But also, like what has happened, has been a huge economical turn. Whether you play around with investing on your phone or your multi-millions are in the market, you've seen a positive bump. Significant.

**Speaker C:** Not this year.

**Speaker B:** Well, we did take a hit early in the year.

**Speaker C:** I mean, I think his North Korea thing was taking the victory lap too soon. They have not denuclearized. It's not an official treaty, what they did. The President doesn't have the power to make an official treaty. It's in the Constitution, it's Congress. But at the same time, he does tout his achievements with the economy, and you know, even if the stock market is out of shape because of the trade war, there's still more jobs now than there's ever been in the country.

For many, this negative reaction went far beyond campaign rally antics and tweeting to who Donald Trump is as a person: "He might know what he's doing with running the country as a business, but he's not a good human being and not somebody that kids should be looking up to. And that's kind of what I thought a president was supposed to be, was what everybody wants to be when they grow up and a good role model. And he obviously doesn't do that."

They were shockingly forceful in their disgust for Donald Trump's treatment of women. After viewing a video of Donald Trump disrespecting women on the campaign trail, they called him "a



pig man” and “sexist” and a “disgusting person.” This was when some of the secular conservatives revealed just how conflicted they had been about Trump being the Republican nominee: “Wow, that's - You hear stuff like that about [women], you just go-again, I just don't understand how [he became the nominee]. He was not even close to being my first choice. Not even close.” One man who ultimately voted for a Third Party in 2016 made a point to say that the Trump comments he found most offensive – those captured on the *Access Hollywood* tape – were not even included on this video.

Many of the secular conservatives, like the moderate Republicans, said social division is the biggest threat to the country. They blamed both the left – which is so eager to call those who disagree with them racists and has a “victim mentality” – and the right – which has some cultural views they wouldn't defend and then ceded the high ground by elevating Trump. They resented the difficulty they have had reconciling their ethics with their political choice in 2016, and that may be a real threat to their enthusiasm in 2020.

### **Pushing back against his policies & priorities**

Most of the secular conservatives we spoke to in Denver expressed discomfort with some of Trump's signature executive actions and use of the bully pulpit. That included Trump's policies on issues like trade, where he diverges from the conservative orthodoxy, and the way Trump enjoys telling private businesses how they should behave, which offended their libertarian sensibilities.

Most of these secular conservatives disagreed with Trump's imposition of tariffs and were worried about a potential trade war:

I would say threats are still just maybe the fragility of the economy [...] with the trade war [and this] push for isolationism.

I generally think that any tariff is a tax on the American consumer, and that bilateral trade agreements are a very good thing. And I think Donald Trump tearing up NAFTA would be disastrous for my home state or any of the southern states who rely on trade to Mexico. So many jobs rely on trade, more than the factories.

While secular conservatives want strong borders and immigration enforcement, Trump's child-separation policy and obsession with the border wall bothered a handful of these men.

These secular conservatives were uncomfortable with N.F.L. athletes kneeling during the national anthem because it is unpatriotic, divisive, and sets a bad example for children. But some also expressed a libertarian respect for the rights of the athletes and the owners to make their own decisions: “Personally, I think there should be great respect for the flag, but I also think it's your freedom to express your opinion. But I think owners, I think they can make their own decisions and how to discipline players and their consequences.” They remind themselves that “It's dangerous to have the government compel an individual to do something” because it is a slippery slope from standing for the flag to compelling you to do something liberals may want you to do.



On a similar note, a few secular conservatives wondered out loud whether Trump's favoritism and public chastisement of specific companies put the country down the road to "crony capitalism." Some also worried that CEOs have "way too much" power. It is worth exploring this opportunity further.

### **Respect for institutions & limited power: Russia probe**

Of all the GOP groups, the secular conservatives were the most aware of the Special Counsel's investigation and the most likely to bring it up unprompted. Even though they thought a lot of the news coverage about the Russia investigation was fuel for the media outrage machine sowing division on both sides, a few said that we should "wait and see" what comes out of the investigation: "We don't know what he's found. It might be nothing. It could be something. I'd rather, if there is collusion, I'd rather we find it."

Some of the secular conservatives took very seriously the possibility that Trump's campaign team and even Trump himself may have inappropriately conspired with the Russians. When the moderator presented them with a hypothetical scenario in which the Special Counsel indicts Trump Jr. and other campaign principals and reports to Congress that President Trump obstructed justice, some accepted the conclusion. "It's not gonna be illegitimate judging by his background record, just from what I know," said one man of Mueller and his investigation. "I'd be surprised," said another man, who then elaborated, "but if somebody broke the law, then they should be held accountable."

Some disputed whether it was possible for the president to obstruct justice or whether Trump's actions counted as high crimes or misdemeanors, but others insisted that "if they found concrete stuff on Trump, they should go with the law proceedings." One man said this would mean that Trump was not legitimately elected and so should be impeached to teach people a lesson.

I would fully say if he went through Russian interference for getting him elected, then yeah. You know what? Like you don't deserve to be here. I mean, it wasn't the damn majority vote to begin with. I would say if that is the reality, then he should be on his way. If he got impeached for the first time, basically in the history of [America], because of [these] wrongdoings, I mean, everything we say about kids seeing him and not being the guy to follow and then they get the full circle and see like this guy really was a dips\*\*\* and this is how he went about it and he cut corners and now he's out. I mean, that might be a hell of a lesson for the United States and for all of its people in it."

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Most of the GOP's secular conservatives are either conflicted or ambivalent about the Trump Presidency and Trump's intensified efforts to communicate about his successes and the threats ahead. There was no sense in this group that secular conservative Republicans were motivated to vote in November to defend Donald Trump. If the Special Counsel makes more indictments against the Trump campaign or reports on obstruction, these are the base voters most likely to be impacted.