

Trump's core supporters won't reject him. It would mean rejecting their own values.

Derek Newton, NBC News Commentary, Feb. 11, 2018

Derek Newton is a communications professional and writer in New York City. He worked as a political consultant and speech writer for numerous campaigns including John Kerry's 2004 Presidential campaign and was formerly a Vice-President at The Century Foundation, a progressive think tank.

His voters never wanted him to keep his promises. They wanted someone who would believe in making them at all.

Political experience and logic tell us that, at some point, Donald Trump's supporters should become overwhelmed by the mounting evidence of his failures and broken promises — as Steve Bannon reportedly was over the inclusion of a path to citizenship for DREAMers in the State of the Union — and retreat.

But the back of the Trump base is not likely to break any time soon, because Trump's supporters aren't beholden to politics or logic. Instead, they are creatures of a group psychology dynamic more commonly seen in religious and fraternal organizations.

In the “communion mode” authority structure, described by Andrew Gray, people's recognition of legitimate authority is “based on an appeal to common values and creeds.”

“In this mode,” added Gray, “the legitimacy for actions lies in consistency with the understandings, protocols, and guiding values of shared frames of reference.”

Compare that to the contractual mode, which is based an agreement that sets out obligations and rewards, or “command mode,” which Gray said, “is based on the rule of law emanating from a sovereign body and delivered through a scalar chain of superior and subordinate authority.”

Communion governance structures rely on regular in-person meetings, call and response rituals (witness the continued usefulness of “Lock her up!” chants at Trump rallies, despite Hillary Clinton's 2016 loss) and faith in shared values and experiences. Groups built around communion authority are tightly connected and very strong in part because, research shows, they display “homophily and parochialism directed to those outside the group.” (That is a scholarly way of saying that those in communion groups tend to associate and bond with people that are similar to themselves and view those who are not with suspicion and hostility.)

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Significantly, researchers have also found that religious communion authority followers make contributions as a show of their values rather than to affect any consequence. That's key to understanding Trump's base because it means that contributions to the cause — whether money, posting on social media or voting — were unlikely to be influenced by whether Trump could actually deliver on his promises.

And it explains why political arguments about whether the wall will really get built (Trump has admitted that it doesn't need to be a full scale wall), whether Mexico is going to pay for it (they won't, and Trump knows it) or whether he's brought coal jobs back (he didn't) did not, do not and will not matter to Trump supporters.

Even though Trump promised a wall for which Mexico would pay and coal jobs, among other broken promises, his supporters did not invest in his campaign to get those specific things. When Trump said he was going to build that wall, he was reflecting a shared value of opposition to immigration, or anti-Hispanic bias or frustration with paralysis on immigration policy (or all three). To those in this communion structure, Trump's seriousness about their shared values — that he believes them too — is all that matters.

Moreover, according to philanthropy experts, for those in communion structures, a belief that the group's values are under threat or assault by larger, stronger forces dramatically increases followers' commitment. Therefore, the act of critics pointing out Trump's failures could strengthen his standing if drawing attention to those failures are seen as persecution by outside forces (such as a "deep state" or a "fake news media").

Perhaps most importantly, as communion followers, those in the Trump base are likely to see attacks on him as attacks on them personally, because they recognize Trump as a values leader, not a political one. Opposition to him is opposition to those values — their values. So, when reporters ask, "Do you still support Trump?" they hear, "Do you still support your own values?"

Research supports that the bonds between communion group members are stronger than those between followers and a leader. It is important, therefore, to view Trump as distinct from the values of the group. A leader may be transitional, but the values tend to be more rigid. Therefore, inroads to Trump's base are more likely to be successful if they avoid the values or symbols of the supporters, and find ways to target Trump for betraying them.

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Because the values outweigh the leaders, when communion followers no longer see their values reflected by a communion leader, they become receptive to finding a new one. Since people's acceptance of communion authority relies on consistency with shared values, demonstrating that Trump no longer does (or never did) share the values of his followers in faith, not practice would be pivotal.

Similarly, the emergence of other leaders that more passionately reflect shared values would cleave Trump from his base. If, for example, someone stepped forward to say Trump is not hard enough on immigrants, terrorists or trade, that person might pull supporters away from Trump and into their orbit.

Still, owing to the group's insularity and resistance to outside criticism, any values-based replacements for Trump must come from within the structure, not outside. To work, the followers must believe the leader believes in the shared value more than Trump. And even under such scenario, it's unlikely that such a replacement leader could take over the Trump base as much as fragment it.

No further treks to Trump Country are needed to understand why Trump's base remains unshaken. They recognize his legitimacy and follow him not because of who he is or what he does, but because of what they think he believes — and what they think that says about them.