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Are MAGA voters rational?

In Trump's America, voting isn't always about economic self-interest. Culture and ideology often outweigh dollars and cents

Even as US President Donald Trump tramples long-standing rules and norms with abandon, he continues to enjoy strong support from a large share of voters, including many of the lower- and middle-income Americans whom his policies are hurting the most. The political loyalties of this part of Trump's 'Make America Great Again' constituency are at odds with its economic interests.

It is hard to grasp, for example, why beleaguered American workers enthusiastically back deep reductions in federal spending on government services like Medicaid – on which many of their households depend – alongside massive tax cuts for those with the highest incomes. After all, economics relies on the assumption that people largely act in their rational self-interest.

What drives voters?

When people vote against their economic interests, it is tempting to blame faulty or missing information. For example, a politician might mislead voters by ignoring their campaign promises once in office — or, in Trump's case, promising the impossible, such as bringing down consumer prices or ending the Ukraine war on 'day one' of his presidency. But while Trump has certainly not fulfilled all of his campaign pledges, he has followed through on a great many of them, from mass deportations to the elimination of diversity, equity and inclusion programs.

To be sure, not every broken promise is the politician's fault. Sometimes, political opponents thwart a genuine effort to fulfil a campaign pledge, as occurred when former US President Barack Obama attempted to close the prison at Guantánamo, Cuba. But this is not applicable to Trump, who has enjoyed the full support of Republican majorities in both the Senate and the House, and extended his own presidential power far

beyond the limits observed by his predecessors.

There is another possibility: voters may not understand the economics of the policies being implemented. This is an appealing explanation for Trump's enduring popularity among working-class and middle-class voters. People support his tariffs or his efforts to repeal the Affordable Care Act simply because they do not understand how these policies will affect them.

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There may well be some truth to this explanation. (Bryan Caplan's book *The Myth of the Rational Voter* provides a view of the ways in which voters tend to misperceive the economics of the policies they support.) But another force – which economists will find more uncomfortable – may also be at work. As the historian Thomas Frank showed in his 2004 book *What's the Matter with Kansas?*, voter behaviour is often driven by culture and ideology.

By this logic, voters might understand that Trump is going to reduce or eliminate government benefits that improve their lives, but support him anyway, because they believe in small government and self-reliance as matters of principle. They need not forego a benefit unilaterally; it *is* rational (and ethical) to take advantage of an available benefit or tax break, even if one is politically opposed to it. But they favour everyone – including themselves – losing access to that benefit.

Related to the cultural explanation, voters may support candidates who will not be good for them economically because they also pay attention to other issues, like abortion or foreign policy. Given that a candidate entails a package of positions on various issues, voters cannot express how they stand on all issues simply by choosing how to fill a single political office.

This explanation seems to belie the consensus that Trump's victory in the 2024 presidential election, as well as the outcomes of other recent elections, reflected pocket-book considerations above all. How many times have we heard, 'It's the economy, stupid'? But culture and ideas might also play an important role in shaping one's perceptions of the economy. This could help to explain why, in recent decades, public perceptions of US economic performance have had a distinctly partisan component: Republicans tend to view the economy more positively when a Republican president is in the White House, and Democrats view it more positively under a Democratic president.

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Notably, the way people rate the economy overall is not always consistent with their assessment of their own household's prospects. Paul Krugman has often highlighted this disconnect, especially during the 'vibecession' that confronted former President Joe Biden's administration, when Americans would tell pollsters that the economy was terrible, but they themselves were in good shape. In an October 2023 AP-NORC poll, 73 per cent of respondents said that the national economy was doing poorly, but 54 per cent described their own financial situation as very or somewhat good. More recent data from the US Federal Reserve show that this discrepancy persists.

As much as economists want people to be rational self-interested actors, the assumption is itself fundamentally inconsistent with the act of voting in the first place. Casting a vote takes time, even with mail-in ballots, and everyone knows that a single vote very rarely affects an election's outcome. Yet people still take the time to do it. Political scientists sometimes call this contradiction Downs' Paradox.

What else, if not economic self-interest, explains the act of voting? Perhaps voters want to be good citizens or set a good example for their children. Perhaps they want to display the courage of their convictions, to be able to engage credibly in political discussions with their communities, to demonstrate support for their 'team', or to affirm their cultural identity. If any of these motives explains the decision to cast a vote, it could just as well explain for whom votes are cast.

It is not inevitable that culture or ideas should cut against economic rationality. One can hope that they will be better aligned in next year's midterm election.

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