

DAVID FRENCH

# Millions of Americans Like Trump Better in Theory Than in Practice

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It's not often that a single poll result can help you understand several things at once: why President Trump is politically vulnerable, why he is politically resilient and why millions of Americans still don't truly understand the MAGA movement. But I recently saw a single graphic that did just that.

It came from a CBS/YouGov poll released last week, and the most important finding was one that at first blush doesn't seem that interesting. CBS found that a majority of Americans approve of the goals of Trump's deportation program by a 10-percentage-point margin, 55 to 45.

At the same time, a slightly larger majority (56 percent to 44 percent) disapprove of Trump's methods. A majority of Americans like what Trump wants to do, but they don't like how he's doing it.

A similar analysis applies to Trump's approach to tariffs. Americans are evenly split about the goals of Trump's tariff-and-trade program, but a large majority (63 percent) disapprove of his methods.

This gap between approval for Trump's goals and disapproval of Trump's methods helps explain why he's been elected twice and why his approval sagged so quickly at the beginning of both terms. It also demonstrates why Democrats haven't been able to build an enduring majority in spite of Trump's relentless aggression and overreach.

If a majority of the American people believe that only one party shares their objectives, they'll keep giving it a chance even when its leaders fail, or when they're erratic or when they're corrupt.

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This pattern extends well past immigration and trade. If you look at much of Trump's second term so far through this same lens, we've seen the same cycle rinse and repeat.

Take higher education. I'm not aware of any substantial constituency of Americans who are pleased with the way that Jewish students were treated on elite campuses after the Hamas terror attacks on Oct. 7. There was no excuse for campus failures, and the encampments, in particular, were deeply unpopular with American voters.

Yet that does not mean that majorities also believe that the administration should inflict punishment on universities without due process, stifle free speech, defund vital medical research and snatch foreign students off the streets for writing an essay in a student newspaper.

Or consider the frontal attack on American law firms. Wealthy law firms aren't the most popular institutions in America, but they do possess First Amendment rights. Their ability to represent clients should not depend on the identity of the man in the Oval Office.

Even as their methods sow chaos and create division, Trumpists help maintain their support by accusing anyone who opposes their abuses of also opposing their objectives — as if the only way to support a secure border is to support Trump and his tactics.

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Raise your voice in protest of violations of Harvard's constitutional rights, and you'll be accused of excusing or even fomenting antisemitism. Express concern that undocumented immigrants are being sent to foreign detention facilities without due process and suddenly you find yourself accused of supporting open borders and child trafficking.

At the same time, there are those on the left who mistake popular opposition to Trump's methods as opposition to his objectives. It was no coincidence that as the resistance to Trump spread during his first term, progressivism surged. Widespread distaste for Trump was easily

misinterpreted also as distaste for populism (much less conservatism), and the Democrats marched leftward — straight into positions that haunted them in 2024.

But the bifurcation between objectives and methods still doesn't quite capture Trumpism. For one thing, when push comes to shove, Trumpism is the method far more than it is the objective. In fact, its objectives are often all over the place. It's got its entire MAHA (Make America Healthy Again) wing that's skeptical of Big Pharma, but it exists alongside millions of Republicans who don't question vaccines and don't want the government telling them what kinds of food to eat.

MAGA includes Iran hawks and staunch allies of Israel, and it includes people like Tucker Carlson who repeat Kremlin talking points, sympathize with traditional American enemies, and not only question America's longstanding relationship with Israel, but have also opened the door for vicious antisemitism on the right.

While the far left enforced rigid ideological conformity, refusing to admit people into the movement unless there was near-unanimous agreement on a host of ideological issues, the right let virtually anyone in the tent — so long as they supported Trump. Believe what you want to believe, but those beliefs will have to yield to Trump's will and to Trump's self-interest.

Trump himself applies the same calculus. To the extent he has any kind of ideological consistency at all, he's been consistent in his anti-immigrant rhetoric and his support of tariffs. Yet despite his tough-guy posturing, he'll compromise even on deportations and trade when it suits his interests.

On Thursday, for example, he signaled that he might relent on some elements of his deportation program, in part because shortages of hospitality and agricultural workers could cause him real political harm.

And the term TACO (Trump Always Chickens Out) was coined after Trump imposed tariffs with great fanfare and then rolled them back the second the political headwinds blew too strong.

In other areas, where he has fewer convictions, he's even more erratic. He initiated Operation Warp Speed to create a Covid vaccine in a remarkably short time and then appointed the most anti-vax secretary of health and human services in American history. He appointed the justices who helped overturn Roe v. Wade and then approved the most pro-choice Republican Party platform in decades.

Where he will never compromise is with his own power. There was never an inch of moderation after the 2020 election. As he lost case after case, and even as it was apparent that his effort to overturn the election was temporarily hurting his approval ratings, even with Republicans, he just kept doubling down.

He has never backed down on the 2020 election — not after thousands of his supporters stormed the Capitol and not after hundreds were convicted of federal crimes. Instead, he pardoned or freed them all.

His approach to foreign relations also depends on perceptions of personal support. Trump's approach to Ukraine in his first term was colored by the bizarre conspiracy theory that it was Ukraine, not Russia, that interfered in the 2016 election — to frame Russia.

In September 2016, when I debated Charles Kesler, the editor of The Claremont Review of Books, about the nature and merits of Trumpism, I defined Trumpism this way: “It is entirely about the aspiration and will to power of one man,” and that one man “will say and do and ‘believe’ anything he needs to say or do or believe to accomplish his political ends.”

I've been wrong about many things in my life, but I was right about that, and the fact that millions of people believe that in his heart he shares their objectives and supports their cause is part of his very successful con.

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