

‘He’s the only one that’s speaking the truth’: Trump’s fans trust nothing — except him

By [Jess Bidgood](#) and [Niki Griswold](#) Globe Staff, Updated December 22, 2023, 6:04 a.m.



Supporters of former president Donald Trump looked on as he delivered remarks during a campaign rally in Durham, N.H., on Dec. 16, 2023. DOUG MILLS/NYT

CORALVILLE, Iowa — Joannie Firkins, 63, does not trust the COVID vaccine. She does not trust the Internal Revenue Service. She does not trust the results of the 2020 election and she certainly does not trust President Biden.

The one entity the Iowa City hair salon owner does trust, however, is former president

Donald Trump.

“I believe Trump is appointed by God — appointed-slash-anointed, however you want to say it,” said Firkins, as she stood outside a hotel ballroom last week, a couple of hours before Trump was set to speak. “He’s the only one that’s speaking the truth.”

If Trump dominates the Iowa caucuses and the New Hampshire primary in January, as the polls suggest he will, it will be in part because of voters such as Firkins — a true believer who supported him in 2016, when he first ran for president, and whose devotion has only deepened in the ensuing years of critical headlines, criminal indictments, and other legal woes.

The depth, intensity, and tenacity of these voters’ support of Trump has been a fixture of the presidential primary campaign, turning them into a bloc that is so well known, some pollsters have a name for them: the Always-Trump base.



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Less appreciated, however, is the fact that, for many of these voters, devotion to the former president is tightly bound with a deep distrust of the government, of basic

institutions, and of his opponents. It is a distrust that he himself has intentionally stoked from the stump over the past eight years as he has railed against the country's election administrators, government agencies such as the FBI and the Department of Justice, educators — and some within his own party.

“He can be a dictator for a day, hello!” Firkins said, praising a [comment](#) made by Trump earlier this month that alarmed democracy experts but left his biggest supporters excited. “He’s going to shut the border and he’s going to start drilling. We’re going to get our prosperity back.”

In-depth interviews of more than 20 Trump supporters in the early voting states of Iowa and New Hampshire reveal just how much the doubts Trump has seeded among his followers, and his claims of being besieged, have deepened their enthusiasm for him and eroded their faith in their party and their government, laying the foundation for a presidency they hope will be as expansive as possible.

“They have no standing to, you know, crucify him,” said William Joe White, of Maquoketa, Iowa, who displays little Trump statues alongside his own family photos in his living room. “The quiet man has been awakened in this country.”

“He has fought tooth and nail to get where he’s at and he’s still ahead of everything,” said Starr Smith, 62, a retired real estate appraiser from Maine who said she got goosebumps as she watched Trump speak at a recent rally in Durham, N.H.. “Donald Trump is our voice.”

Most of the voters interviewed by the Globe said they had never seriously considered supporting any of the Republican candidates vying to beat him.

“He’s got such a commanding lead,” said Dave Testerman, a New Hampshire resident who retired from a career in the defense industry. Plus, Testerman added, he does not really trust the broader Republican Party anyway.

“It really doesn’t let people do their own thing, and I’m not happy with them,” Testerman said. “Mainly because they’re not for me, they’re for themselves.”

At recent Trump rallies, the air crackled with conspiracy theories and suspicion. At the podium in Coralville, Iowa, Trump warned of coming “destruction” from “people from within the country.” In Durham, N.H., he told voters that immigrants are “poisoning the blood of our country,” using widely condemned language that democracy experts warn is dangerously similar to that used by authoritarian leaders to target certain ethnic or religious groups.

He responded to the criticism by doubling down, saying that unauthorized immigrants are “destroying the blood of our country” and defending himself against accusations that he is using language similar to Hitler.

“They don’t like it when I said that,” Trump said at a rally in Waterloo, Iowa. “And I never read Mein Kampf. They said, ‘Oh, Hitler said that.’”

On the floor at his rallies, many of Trump’s followers are delighted by his rhetoric over immigration, which some describe as a turning point that secured their support for him. Sometimes, they seem to reference “replacement theory,” a far-right conspiracy theory that falsely alleges an intentional effort to replace white, conservative voters in the United States with minorities.

“They’re bringing all those people over the border and I heard they’re going to let them vote — they’re working on that now,” said Linda J. Honn, 76, of Oxford, Iowa, at Trump’s Coralville rally. (Undocumented immigrants are not allowed to vote; nor are legal immigrants who are not citizens.) “We’ve already got too many of them but another bunch is coming over.”

“I pray he does get back in,” Honn added, referring to Trump, “because if we don’t, we’re going under.”

Trump's focus on immigration helped draw John Goodwin, 72, who voted for former secretary of state Hillary Clinton in 2016 and Biden in 2020, to his rally in Coralville. "All the different people from all over the world coming in there, thousands a day!" Goodwin said, shaking his head. He plans to vote for Trump next year.

And in both Coralville and Durham, Trump spoke solemnly over instrumental music that is associated with the Qanon online conspiracy theory, urging followers to join him in dismantling an ever-growing list of institutions he has told them not to trust.

"With you at my side, we will demolish the 'deep state,' we will drive out the globalists, we will cast out the communists, we will throw off the sick political class, we will rout the fake news media," Trump said. "We will drain the swamp and we will liberate our country from the tyrants and villains once and for all."

The reach of his conspiratorial rhetoric is clear among his supporters.

"People who hide and want to keep secret and cover up the truth, those are the ones that we really need out of the office and I think that's what Trump's trying to show us," said Carolyn Noble, 60, a social worker from Maine who watched Trump speak in Durham, N.H.

"You look at all the stuff that president Trump's been through, what they're doing to him now, you know it's all bogus," said Larry Chmelar, 66, a postal worker from Sigourney, Iowa, who said he believed the "deep state" will "control" the 2024 election.

To the voters who flock to see Trump, his long list of enemies has simply become proof of the righteousness of his cause.

"I liked him more as people kept pushing against him because they didn't like the way he talked. That's the only way he could get his message out, he had to rise above everybody," said Robert Wilson, 76, a painting contractor from Lee, N.H., who wore a T-shirt that read, 'Trump's the best, F*** the rest' in Durham.

Scott Brown, 32, a former Massachusetts resident who now lives in New Hampshire, said he did not initially support Trump when he first ran for president in 2016 — he backed a libertarian candidate instead — but that changed during his presidency.

“I saw how the media would constantly lie about him, misconstrue, like when he passed his tax policy. That was a big turning point,” Brown said. “Them saying it’s a tax break for the rich when literally everyone gets a tax break.”

Many of his voters are thrilled the rest of the GOP, after flirting with other candidates, appears likely to follow their lead — just as they did in 2016.

“It looks good,” said Wilson, the painting contractor from New Hampshire. “I think people have had enough.”

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