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University  
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**The role of the mainstream media in former Barack Obama  
voters' decision to vote for Donald Trump in the 2016 American  
presidential election**

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## ABBREVIATIONS

DNC	Democratic National Committee
ACA	Affordable Care Act

## ABSTRACT

Much has been made about Donald Trump's overwhelming media presence during the 2016 American presidential campaign. Indeed, Trump's volume of earned media was greater than his opponent, Hillary Clinton, and predecessor, Barack Obama. But how did that matter in terms of influencing voter behaviour? This dissertation specifically examines former Obama voters that voted for Trump to understand how the media played a role in their decision to vote for a candidate that differed from Obama not only in party, but in character and ideals as well. The research relies on responses from 27 Obama-Trump voters, encompassing seven interviews and transcripts of two existing focus groups of ten people each. Together, their responses revealed how participants relied heavily on their levels of trust, prior experiences and beliefs, group identity and how they felt about candidates on a personal level in interpreting media messages during the campaign. Their responses coalesced on three major themes, which demonstrated that the media mattered less than candidates' messaging and personalities. However, the media was important in terms of the negative attitudes participants held for it as an institution, and their beliefs that the media content was biased, which served to enhance existing negative attitudes towards Clinton and positive attitudes towards Trump.

## I. INTRODUCTION

On 9 November 2016 Donald J. Trump was declared the victor of the U.S. presidential election to the defiance of the majority of polls and to the shock of those within the country and around the globe. In the process of securing 304 electoral votes to Democratic nominee Hillary Clinton's 227, Trump succeeded in "flipping" 206 counties across 34 states that had voted for Obama in 2008 and 2012. This delivered him key, but slim, victories. For instance, he won the states of Michigan, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin alone by a combined total of 78,000 votes (Jacobson 2017).

Trump's surprise victory was marked by a hitherto unseen hybrid media campaign which used conventional means such as press conferences and interviews, but also the execution of "tweetstorms" on the social media platform Twitter to ensure Trump's narrative was consistently fresh and creating new stories when media attention through traditional methods was low (Wells et al. 2016). This helped drive earned media coverage in the amount of \$4.96 billion from November 2016 to November 2017, compared to \$3.24 billion earned by the Clinton campaign and the \$1.15 billion earned by Obama in 2012 (Harris 2016).

But how, if at all, did Trump's prominence within the media matter to his victory? Literature on media effects, which will be discussed in the subsequent section, would suggest that Trump's earned media, if positive, served predominantly to reinforce views of and mobilise partisan supporters or those leaning towards him as a candidate; if negative, partisan supporters' views and attitudes may be fortified still (Banducci and Karp 2003; Bennett and Iyengar 2008 p. 725). But what can be said for the former Obama voters that helped Trump secure the Midwestern states, and as a result, the Electoral College?

Having voted for Presidential candidates on the left and right of the American political spectrum, Obama-Trump voters demonstrate less partisanship and more independence. Indeed, as will be discussed, the

vast majority of focus group participants and interviewees for this research were independents and did not vote completely Republican or Democrat for all 2016 races. Research has shown independent voters are more moderate in their ideology with mid-level political awareness (Mayer 2007; Schill and Kirk 2014; Wolfsfeld 2011; Pew Research Center 2017). These are precisely the qualities that make individuals more susceptible to media influence (Wolfsfeld 2011 p. 115; see also Zaller 1992). As such, it is conceivable that media coverage during the 2016 campaign may have been a factor in Obama-Trump voters moving away from the Obama-Clinton camp to Trump. That is what this dissertation aims to uncover. Specifically, the research question is: to what degree did the mainstream media play a role in former Obama voters voting for Trump in the 2016 presidential election?

Firstly, it is important to establish how this research will define and distinguish “media”. As per the research question, the study of media in this case will be limited to mainstream media. That is, the traditional sources of television, newspapers and radio, though this research also accepts such sources may be accessed both online and in their traditional formats. While new media is important and will be touched upon, it was less of a focal point for most subjects of this research, who relied largely on mainstream sources even if they were accessed through new media platforms<sup>1</sup>. In line with these empirical findings, studies such as Mutz and Young (2011) have found television is still the primary source for news in the U.S. and that most news accessed online is that of “legacy” outlets (p. 1027). Furthermore, the terms “media” and “media coverage” will both be used, as attitudes towards the media as an institution and the content it supplies are both of significance in analysing voter behaviour.

This study aims to add to existing early research on what ways the media mattered in the 2016 election by examining media influence on a subset of voters that were key to Trump’s marginal victories in electorally important States. The research will take a qualitative

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<sup>1</sup> For example, one interviewee used news aggregators Yahoo News and Google News which collected online mainstream sources as well as new media outlets like Breitbart and Vox.

approach rather than attempting to quantitatively isolate specific media effects. It seeks to unearth Obama-Trump voters' perceptions of media coverage during the campaign and how such perceptions shaped voters' attitudes towards the candidates and ultimate voting behaviour.

To accomplish this, the research will first establish a theoretical framework that emphasises interpretivist and qualitative literature. Specifically, after a brief review of the history of media effects research, a literature review will examine how media messages are decoded according to individuals' levels of trust; perceptions of bias; prior-held experiences, attitudes and beliefs; group identity; and judgment of a messenger's characteristics. Each of these elements unleash various attitudes and behaviours towards the media itself, and the political actors that are media's focal point. These are important to understand in analysing Obama-Trump voters'.

Following the literature review, there will be an overview of the research's interpretivist case study strategy and the two methods employed: one, a content analysis on transcripts of existing focus groups with Obama-Trump voters; and two, interviews with seven Obama-Trump voters. This includes a description of the coding process, which I applied to my own interview transcripts and transcripts of the secondary focus groups. Next, the findings will be discussed in the form of a narrative, using excerpts from focus group participants and interviewees. An analysis will follow, and ultimately, the dissertation will discuss and offer conclusions for how the media mattered in Obama-Trump voters' selection of Trump. It will argue that voters' negative perceptions and distrust of the media, combined with their view of a pro-Clinton media bias, may have pushed former Obama voters away from Clinton. However, this appears to have been less of a factor compared to the candidates' messages and personality traits.



## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

### *2.1: A history of media effects research*

Media effects research was born from the aftermath of World War II in an effort to better understand the effects of propaganda. Yale University psychologist Carl Hovland launched a series of studies which began to gauge the likelihood of persuasion. His “message learning theory” measured persuasion by examining source expertise and objectivity, message rationality and quality of evidence, and exposure and acceptance (Iyengar 2014 pp. 2-3). This era of research was also marked by “hypodermic effects” and “magic bullet theory” (Owen 1991 p. 1), tied to Harold Lasswell<sup>2</sup> and his Columbia University studies, which held that so long as a message reached its intended targets, the persuasive effects would be “immediate and evident” (Neuman and Guggenheim 2011 p. 171). But as such research found its way to election campaigns, scholars had difficulty producing evidence of persuasion. Instead, as Hovland originally theorised, attentive and inattentive voters alike were not impacted by a campaign, and as such, there was no existence of “net change in vote” in a multitude of studies (Iyengar 2014 p. 3).

This lack of evidence of persuasion ushered in the minimal, or limited, effects model of research, which held that election campaigns do little to alter vote intentions and that prior held beliefs, socio-demographics, experiences, and partisanship outweighed the impacts of messaging through campaigns and the media (Neuman and Guggenheim 2011 p. 172; Hillygus and Jackman 2003 p. 584; Stroud 2014). Partisanship was of particular concern to such theories, as those most involved in politics are also the most partisan, and are thereby unlikely to be dissuaded from their views by media (Mutz 2012 p. 85). This also gave rise to the theory of partisan selective exposure, where voters

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<sup>2</sup> Neuman and Guggenheim (2011) and others (see p. 172) disagree with the origins and characterisation of the magic bullet concept, concluding that it served as a narrative to help introduce the minimal effects model.

consume media that is aligned with and reinforces their own existing political viewpoints (Perloff 2013 p. 330; Iyengar 2014 p. 9; Prior 2005).

Another theory to come out of the limited effects model was two-step flow: Lazarsfeld and Klapper found media messages were first interpreted by “opinion leaders” who passed on these interpretations to friends and/or those within their interpersonal networks (Neuman and Guggenheim 2011 p. 172). Thus media content takes two steps – through the media channel itself and opinion leaders – before it is received by the consumer. The rise of cable television and the internet has brought new significance to both two-step flow and selective exposure, as will be discussed later.

New research throughout the 1960s, 70s and 80s transitioned to a third wave which went back to effects, but through the indirect means of agenda setting, framing and priming. Cohen’s 1963 hypothesis – that the media may not be able to tell people what to think, but are successful in telling them what to think about – set off a flurry of studies that perpetuated the agenda setting theory. Among the most notable were McCombs and Shaw (1972) and Iyengar and Kinder (1987), both of which showed that the greater the media coverage on a given issue, the greater participants are concerned about that issue. Such issues are “framed”, or presented, to help the audience to make sense of the issue in a particular way, and people are more likely to be influenced by framing when the tactic is unnoticed (Valentino and Vandebroek 2014 p. 456; Wolfsfeld 2011 p. 101). Frames can also be presented episodically or thematically, each of which help to render different attitudes and opinions (Iyengar 1994; Wolfsfeld 2011 p. 101).

Priming, an “extension” of framing, is the “process by which individuals assign weights to particular issues” (Iyengar 2014 p. 5). That is, which issues carry the most importance when evaluating a candidate or political actor. For example, Miller and Krosnick (1996) demonstrated that participants who watched news stories centred on President Jimmy Carter’s energy policy weighed their judgments of Carter “more strongly” with regards to his performance in the area of energy (p. 85). Yet priming is unlikely to be effective if it does not

enable people to access and activate attitudes that are most top of mind (Miller and Krosnick 1996 p. 81; Wolfsfeld 2011 p. 115; Hayes 2008 p. 135).

While the field of media effects research has been copious and diverse over the last several decades, the shared conclusion among scholars today is that media's effects on voter behaviour are weaker than common knowledge or campaign practitioners would hold (McNair 2011, p. 28; Bennett and Iyengar 2008, p. 714; Mutz and Young 2011, p. 1019). Indeed, it is critical to understand voters not as passive, but active consumers, prone to interpreting messages through the lens of their own identities, position, values and experiences (Woodstock 2016 p. 399; Feldman 2014 p. 560; Neuman et al. 1992). These predispositions interact and compete with media effects. Media systems' have the ability to construct messaging, which Morley (1993) argues is more "powerful" than the active interpretations of the audience (p. 16). Yet, Taber and Lodge (2006) point out how media messaging can be altogether rejected if the audience doubts and/or distrusts the source (p. 767).

Debates on the strength of media's effects withstanding, the goal of this research is not to isolate a media effect to make a conclusion about Obama-Trump voters voting behaviour. Rather, it seeks to reveal these voters' perceptions of media's coverage of Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton during the campaign in order to understand to what degree the media played a role in voters switching from Democrat to Republican. To that end, the research will prioritise factors that impact voters' interpretations of campaign media coverage, specifically: trust, bias and partisanship; prior-held beliefs, attitudes, experiences, and group identity; and personalisation of political candidates. These factors by no means encompass the totality of what guides voters' interpretation of media. However, they are the major elements that came to light through conducting interviews and analysing existing focus group data.

Before discussing each of these factors, Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model will briefly be reviewed to understand how people interpret media messages using their prior-held experiences,

beliefs and position in society, and the resulting attitudes towards media that are produced from these interpretations.

## ***2.2: Encoding/decoding of media messaging***

Stuart Hall's (1980) theory sought to explain how a media message is produced, received and deciphered, specifically through television. On one side of the model is the encoding of the message itself, in which a "distinctive" moment is constructed and packaged into a message according to the "meaning and structures" of the broadcaster, such as professional and technical practices, ideologies, and assumptions about the audience (Bødker 2016 pp. 412; Hall 1993). In turn, the audience decodes the message according to their own meaning and structures, such as "social and economic relations", which shape how the message is perceived and used for social or political practices (p. 93). Messages may be interpreted in light of a person's own identity, experiences and societal positions; yet if there is no meaning found in the message, it cannot be consumed (Bødker 2016 p. 413; Woodstock 2016 p. 399).

Once the content is consumed and interpreted, people may take three different positions in how they receive and use the content: dominant, negotiated, or oppositional. A dominant position would see someone decode a message as the encoders intended it to be, whereas a negotiated position recognises the encoder's predominance in the message, but incorporate "exceptions and alternative views" (Woodstock 2016 p. 401; McNair 2011 p. 28); or as Hall (1990) states, the negotiated position "accords the privileged position to the dominant definitions of events while reserving the right to make a more negotiated application to 'local conditions'" (p. 102). An oppositional position recognises the message's dominant definitions but neither accepts nor negotiates with them, instead offering a contradictory explanation altogether (p. 103; Woodstock 2016 p. 401; McNair 2011 p. 29).

Using Hall's encoding/decoding model as a framework, the following sections will examine a select number of factors, pursuant to the results of this research, that shape voters' interpretations of media

messages and influence their positions of accepting the dominance of the message, negotiating with it, or opposing it.

### ***2.3: Trust and partisanship***

According to studies from the Pew Research Center, trust in the media has faltered, particularly with Republican voters who are more likely to view news organisations as one-sided (Mitchell et al. 2016). In a survey of 36 news sources, liberals trusted 28 out of 36 sources, whereas conservatives *distrusted* 24 out of 36 sources (Mitchell et al. 2014). More recent research in 2017 found 87% of Republicans surveyed said news organisations tend to favour one side compared with 53% of Democrats (Barthel and Mitchell 2017). The same survey found only 11% of Republicans trust the information they get from national news organisations “a lot”, compared with 34% of Democrats.

The decline of American’s trust in the press has been ongoing since the 1990s, and that lack of trust plays a significant role in how voters interpret media messaging (Ladd 2010 p. 568; Bennett and Iyengar 2008 p. 712). The core media effects of agenda setting, framing and priming were nullified in subjects that distrusted the media in studies done by Miller and Krosnick in 2000, Druckman in 2001 and Tafati in 2002 (Ladd 2010 p. 572). Indeed, the acceptance of a message hinges on source credibility (p. 571): if the consumer does not trust the source, there is little chance the information will render a change in attitude. This has much to do with partisanship, which exacerbates the degree to which voters will be hostile to news content (Feldman 2014 p. 550, 553). Arceneaux et al. (2012) found participants agreed with messaging aligned with their views and disagreed with that which was unaligned, but participants also viewed “discordant television news [...] as less trustworthy” (pp. 179-181).

Heightened partisanship and distrust of certain media connects to selective exposure. In an effort to avoid media that contradicts their views and breeds distrust, partisan voters consume media that is aligned with and reinforces their existing political beliefs, making it difficult for political actors to persuade voters with contrasting ideology (Perloff

2013 p. 330; Iyengar 2014 p. 9; Prior 2005). The advent of cable television and new media has fuelled selective exposure to a greater degree, and as a consequence, political polarisation and extremist views increase (Mutz and Young 2011 p. 1025; Bennett and Iyengar 2008 p. 720). Such fragmentation reduces the likelihood of media inducing attitude change; even when voters consume media that contradicts their existing beliefs, it will reinforce those partisan views further (Bennett and Iyengar 2008 pp. 724-5; Stroud 2014 p. 540; Meffert et al. 2006 p. 40). Woodstock (2016) even found those who distrusted media took “pleasure” in resisting it (pp. 404-5). Additionally, increased partisan selective exposure, in tandem with new media, has brought fresh relevance to the two-step flow theory. With the likes of Facebook, Twitter and other social networks, people are able to act as opinion leaders themselves by sharing news stories and political opinions. However, due to the homogeneity in one’s social network, such new media opinion leadership has the potential to strengthen political polarisation in the same vein as selective exposure of traditional media (Mutz and Young 2011 p. 1038).

Distrust in the media has even manifested in voters that appear nonpartisan. While most scholars agree that partisan, high-information voters are more likely to be hostile towards the media, other studies have demonstrated this same hostility in “the general population [and] moderate partisans” (Feldman 2014 p. 550). This seems to be the case in the most recent (at the time of writing) Pew Research Center data: independents – who have been shown to be more nonpartisan and moderate in their ideology (Mayer 2007; Schill and Kirk 2014; Pew Research Center 2017) – showed low levels of trust in news organisations, close to that of Republicans, in 2017. In fact, in 2016, independents were *less* trusting of news organisations than Republicans (see Figure 1 below). While independents do not have an outright allegiance to either major U.S. party, they can demonstrate partisanship when it comes to particular issues, primarily when such issues are relevant to their personal and social values. It is around these specific

issues then that moderate voters may demonstrate hostility towards the media (Mayer 2007 p. 364; Feldman 2014 p. 550).

**FIGURE 1: Trust in the news media by party**

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**Trust in the news media**  
*% of U.S. adults who trust the information they get from \_\_\_\_\_ a lot*

	<b>2016</b>	<b>2017</b>
	%	%
<b>National news organizations</b>		
Republican	15	11
Democrat	27	34
Independent	13	15
<b>Local news organizations</b>		
Republican	23	24
Democrat	29	36
Independent	18	20
<b>Friends, family, and acquaintances</b>		
Republican	16	18
Democrat	16	13
Independent	11	14
<b>Social networking sites, such as Facebook and Twitter</b>		
Republican	2	3
Democrat	5	6
Independent	5	5

Note: Trust in social media was only asked of web users in 2016 (N=4,339).  
 Source: Surveys conducted March 13-27, 2017, and Jan. 12-Feb. 8, 2016.  
 "Americans' Attitudes About the News Media Deeply Divided Along Partisan Lines"

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Even when in an environment that encourages objectivity, the motivation to preserve one's political predispositions is often greater than the motivation to interpret media messages in a balanced way (Ladd 2010 p. 571; Feldman 2014 p. 560). As Taber and Lodge (2006) stated: "[the] tension between the drives for accuracy and belief perseverance underlies all human reasoning" (p. 756). In their study on policy arguments on gun control, Taber and Lodge found that although participants "tried to be evenhanded [...] they found it impossible to be fair-minded" as a result of prior attitude effect (p. 767). To that end, the next section will examine such "belief perseverance", and corresponding attitudes and lived experiences, and their role in voters' interpretations of media messages.

#### ***2.4: Beliefs, attitudes, experiences and identity***

Voters' beliefs, attitudes and experiences are what make them an active audience of media messaging. People do not simply receive media content, but interact with it through their lived experiences, leading voters to interpret messages in light of their own values and attitudes (Feldman 2014 p. 560; Just et al. 1996 p. 14). Indeed, the lived experiences of voters affect the "selection, perception, acceptance and recall of messages" and influence the way in which voters "use and transform" media messages accordingly (Meffert et al. 2006 p. 28; Taber and Lodge 2006 p. 767; Neuman et al. 1992; Just et al. 1996 p. 166). These pre-existing perceptions influence what voters expect of media content altogether. They make judgments of "substance, reliability, and salience" which in turn favour or hinder the efforts of campaign communication (Owen 1991 p. 14). To that end, a good deal of a candidate's success depends on their ability to centre messaging and around "compelling narratives" (Perloff 2013 pp. 321-2) featuring salient issues that resonate with voters' values (Perloff 2013 pp. 326-7; Iyengar 2014 p. 5; Just et al. 1996 p. 170).

Pre-existing experiences and beliefs can lead to especially "crystallized" attitudes that make accepting media content difficult, let alone being persuaded by it (Taber and Lodge 2006 p. 757, 767; Feldman 2015 pp. 550-1). Taber and Lodge's (2006) study showed that people to a great extent lead with their prior attitudes and beliefs when processing new information (p. 767), thereby challenging the influence of the media in shifting political attitudes. Furthermore, when a strongly held attitude is "activated", it will spread to other lesser yet linked attitudes (Miller and Krosnick 1996 p. 83), setting off a chain reaction of feelings about a particular issue. Arceneaux et al. (2012) demonstrated that those that watched "counterattitudinal" media found the information to be "unfair, hostile, bad, and quarrelsome" whereas those who watched "proattitudinal" media rated the content as "fair, friendly, good, and cooperative" (p. 179). In addition to ascribing negative connotations to counterattitudinal media, subjects in the Arceneaux et al. study were also more likely to disagree with the



information from that media; by contrast, subjects agreed with information from proattitudinal media.

Positive and negative feelings towards the media are facilitated especially by group identity, with media hostility increasing when it is perceived to be counter to a group identity and decreasing when media and group identity are perceived to be aligned (Feldman 2014 p. 553). If media messages are framed around issues that illicit identity, corresponding attitudes can be activated and used in the interpretation of the message and evaluation of political actors or policy that the message is about (Valentino and Vandebroek 2014 p. 456; Stroud 2014 p. 535). Media and candidates alike use frames to help form voters' understanding of issues. It is therefore common for elections campaigns to employ framing of "competing group interests" to appeal to certain groups, particularly through the emotional triggers of hope, pride and anger (Valentino and Vandebroek p. 456, 459). This "group priming" (p. 453) was seen with white, socially conservative Democrats in the 1980 presidential election who felt isolated in a party that had grown with minority activist groups. Their group-isolation helped them, in part, to vote for Ronald Reagan, who was more in line with their group identity (Mayer 2007 pp. 364, 366-7). Results from Taber and Lodge's (2006) experiment showed "respondents selected arguments from like-minded [political interest] groups 70-75% of the time" (p. 764). Specifically, those opposed to stricter gun control measures selected a majority of arguments from the National Rifle Association, illustrating how "members of issue publics or groups [...] select information relevant to their issue-public membership more frequently" (Stroud 2014 p. 535).

Yet, much of the influence that the media can effect through group priming and tapping into the lived experiences is dependent on the "perception of the messenger" (Ladd 2010 p. 572). Candidate characteristics are key to this. How a voter feels about a candidate on a personal level can unleash certain emotions that connect to prior-held attitudes, beliefs and experiences as well as trust. The next section will

examine the personalisation of politics and how candidate personalities interact with voters' interpretations of messaging.

### ***2.5: Personalisation of politics***

Candidate characteristics are a major focus in presidential systems like the United States due to the prioritisation of the individual over party, but growth of media's significance in elections has made this the case to a greater degree (Kriesi 2011 pp. 826-8; Street 2004 p. 441). This was, and still is, especially helped by the reliance on television, a medium which has an "intimacy" that draws viewers' attention to "politicians' 'human' qualities" (Street 2004 p. 439; Mutz and Reeves 2005 p. 2). These human qualities have been proven to influence voting intentions, as they are useful and easily accessible information shortcuts which voters can rely upon in making their decisions (McNair 2011 pp. 32, 36; Just et al. 1996 pp. 188-191; Hardy 2014 p. 441). Indeed, regarding the extensive focus groups that Just et al. (1996) conducted on the 1992 presidential campaign, the authors conclude:

"Previous studies have shown that voters' decision making is powerfully linked to their assessments of the candidates as persons, rather than to political considerations such as party, policy, or ideology. The same is true of our findings [...] when people talk about candidates, they overwhelmingly talk about them as people" (pp. 209, 215).

Yet like much of what transpires in politics, the personality traits that matter are contextual. Characteristics also interact with media coverage and corresponding attitudes towards the media (Hardy 2014 p. 447). For example, Hardy (2014) points to how during the 2008 presidential campaign many people saw the trait of leadership as an ability to inspire change, which the media helped to frame (p. 447). This gave an advantage to Obama, whereas if leadership had been framed around military qualities, McCain, a Vietnam War veteran, may have had an advantage. These "qualities of character", in voters' minds, are

often the best way to gauge how the candidate will perform once they hold the office (Just et al. 1996 p. 234). As will be discussed later, Trump's anti-status quo, change agent personality was a major factor in his successful campaign.

### ***2.6: Obama-Trump voters and the media***

In sum, in analysing how voters react to media coverage during a campaign, there is a lot more going on than the general media effects of agenda setting, framing and priming. Though there are a multitude of studies that have proven media's effects on voter attitudes and behaviour, there are countless other studies that demonstrate how voters actively consume media. This activeness includes the filtering and interpretation of media messaging according to a variety of preconceived factors. Media helps to activate these elements, which are in turn used to make judgments. Furthermore, while policy is by no means irrelevant in a presidential contest, voters have been shown to judge candidates by their personal qualities. Thus, while a candidate's stance on certain issues is important to voters, so too is their character, which voters use to forecast how a candidate would lead and act once in office.

As will be discussed more thoroughly in the next section, this research on Obama-Trump voters took an inductive approach, making observations through first-hand interviews and secondary focus group transcripts. From this, patterns surrounding trust, attitudes and experiences, identity, and personalities of the candidates came to the surface; these were the primary elements that interacted with voters' consumption and interpretations of media during the campaign, and thus give the richest insight into how and to what degree the media played a role in their voting behaviour. To that end, the above literature on these elements of active media interpretation were selected. This analytical framework will be used to unpack respondents' perceptions of the media, and ultimately, make conclusions about how such perceptions mattered to switching from the Obama-Clinton camp to Donald Trump.

### III. METHODOLOGY

#### *3.1: Methodology and Strategy*

As stated previously, the goal of this research is to uncover what role the media had in former Obama voters' decision to vote for Donald Trump, and to do so, will take a qualitative approach to understanding how these voters perceived the media during the campaign. Methods will attempt to gain rich voter insights of how the media made them feel about the candidates. Descriptive data will be used to explore concepts, make observations about behaviour, and link back to what the literature says on the decoding of media messages and voting behaviour, thereby revealing just how much media mattered for Obama-Trump voters during the 2016 campaign.

The research will use an interpretivist ontology and constructivist epistemology. This methodology emphasizes subjective meaning and the perceptions of individuals; it prioritises ideas, beliefs, and shared understandings as determinants of behaviour, as opposed to quantitative survey methods that isolate agenda setting and priming media effects and connect them to individuals' attitudes or behaviours. While there have been interviews with Obama-Trump voters undertaken by journalists (see for example Scherer 2016 and Dias et al. 2016, both for *Time Magazine*), there is scant constructivist research that explores voters' uses and perceptions of the media – and their experiences that construct those perceptions – in the context of voting for Trump after voting for Obama. To that end, this research aims to collect rich data about Obama-Trump voters' perceptions and experiences to shed light on how the media did or did not help lead them to vote for Donald Trump.

The overarching research strategy that will be used is an interpretive case study, particularly since case studies enable a researcher to examine social phenomena in depth and within their contextual influences (Hartley 2004 p. 323; Vennesson 2008 pp. 226-7). Using the methods described below, qualitative data will be collected,

examined and analysed within the theoretical framework from the previous chapter to make evaluations and conclusions about the social phenomena: specifically, the media's role in voting Trump after having voted Obama. As outlined by Vennesson (2008), case studies are focused, structured, and "provide a narrative explanation of a causal path that leads to a specific outcome" (p. 235) – precisely the strategy this research aims to utilise. As such, qualitative data will be laid out in a narrative and include an analysis that connects back to the literature to explain the outcomes.

The research will be carried out using two methods. First, primary interviews with Obama-Trump voters, and second, a content analysis of focus groups with Obama-Trump voters completed by secondary sources. Interviews attempt to understand both the how and why behind an individual's perspective on a situation, and through the interactions between the interviewer and interviewee, construct meaning behind a phenomenon that can be used for analysis (King 2004; Roulston et al. 2003). As such, they will be useful in this research that seeks to understand *how* the media played a role in Obama-Trump voters' voting decision and *why* it did or did not help lead them to vote for Trump over the Obama-endorsed candidate, Clinton. While an interview transcript cannot be substituted for an Obama-Trump voter's real experience with the media during the 2016 campaign, the interviewee and interviewer alike take active roles in the process that co-constructs meaning behind a topic (King 2004 pp. 11-13). It is unearthing this meaning – the meaning of the media in the context of an Obama-Trump voter's 2016 vote for president – that is pivotal to the research.

The second method used is a content analysis of transcripts from two focus groups carried out by the University of Virginia Center for Politics' *Sabato's Crystal Ball* publication and Public Opinion Strategies, a polling firm. The focus groups were conducted on 10 April, 2017 in Canton, Michigan and Oak Creek, Wisconsin and consisted of ten Obama-Trump voters in each group. When using focus groups themselves as a primary method, the interaction among the participants

is a critical source of data (Morgan 2012 p. 3). However, as this research's method will be an analysis of the transcripts, the strategy will be content-oriented rather than conversation-oriented and will look for key themes in the discussions that can be tied back to the literature (p. 4). Additionally, like interviews, focus groups have an advantage of identifying why participants think a certain way (p. 5), but they also facilitate a narrative of collective experiences between participants (Stanley 2016 p. 244). Indeed, transcripts of the Michigan and Wisconsin focus groups reveal participants' collective experience of using the media during the 2016 campaign in tandem with their thoughts and feelings about the candidates. Such data is useful in drawing conclusions about the media and voters' switch from Obama to Trump.

### ***3.2: Recruitment***

Interviews were carried out in person, via video-conference (Skype, Facebook Video, or equivalent), and over Facebook chat and email from June to August 2017. In total, seven interviews were conducted with Obama-Trump voters. In the following passages they will be referenced by pseudonyms and at times the state they live in (see Appendix C). Participants were first recruited using organic and paid Facebook marketing originally targeting Maine's second congressional district, which was to be used as a case study of sorts for Obama-Trump voters generally<sup>3</sup>. Recruitment methods also included contacting professional and academic colleagues and asking them to help recruit for interviews via their networks. Additionally, a recruitment post went out via the state-wide newspaper *The Bangor Daily News*' political newsletter, of which 1,500 people subscribe to. However, after difficulty recruiting enough interviewees in Maine, I expanded recruitment beyond the state to any U.S. citizens who fell into the Obama-Trump voter category. This was done mainly by looking across the digital platforms Reddit and Twitter for threads related to Obama-Trump voters. Upon finding

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<sup>3</sup> This was because Maine is my home state and the second congressional district contains eight counties that "flipped" from Obama to Trump.

individuals on these threads that confirmed they voted for both Obama and Trump, I reached out to them, explained my research, and asked if they would be willing to participate in an interview.

### ***3.3: Ethics***

An ethics application was submitted to and approved by the University of Glasgow's School of Social and Political Sciences ethics committee. To summarise the ethics application, participants were given a written consent form and plain language statement that outlined the process and objectives of the interviews and made clear their participation was voluntary and could be ended at any time. The contents of both the consent form and plain language statement (Appendix E) were summarised orally to participants as well, and I made sure to give participants time to address any questions or concerns. Furthermore, to protect privacy, all participants have been given pseudonyms and all recordings and transcripts of recordings are kept on a password-protected MacBook and iPhone. All data, including any online correspondence with participants, will be deleted following the completion of this dissertation.

### ***3.4: Interview and focus group questions***

An interview guide was created to instruct questioning of participants. The main themes covered types of media used and which outlets, what political issues were most important to the participant, how media made them feel about candidates, what media enabled them to learn about candidates, and 2016 candidate comparisons to Barack Obama. Additionally, various media sources from the time of the campaign -- primarily television clips from CNN and Fox News, but also articles from state and national newspapers -- were used to probe interviewees and examine in depth how the media made them feel about candidates. For further details, refer to Appendix A for the complete interview guide. Interviews were recorded with a password protected MacBook and iPhone, transcribed, and coded. The focus groups' major themes included opinions and attitudes towards Trump, Clinton and Obama

(particularly through characteristic descriptions), candidates' slogans, campaign issues that were most important, and how the mainstream media made participants feel about Trump<sup>4</sup>.

### ***3.5: Data analysis: coding***

To analyse data from the interviews and focus group transcripts, an inductive coding strategy was used in line with grounded theory. Although my research relies on a theoretical framework to analyse and make conclusions about data, it does not offer any hypotheses or expectations based off those theories. Rather, the research aims to discover patterns from the data, link patterns back to existing theory, and make conclusions that build upon literature and offer new insights to the topic at hand. Grounded theory follows this “sequence” and analyses data by sorting it into codes through an inductive process, emphasising what “patterns or conceptualizations can be ascertained” (Bryant 2014 pp. 119-20, 129).

Alternatively, a deductive approach would require a hypothesis be made, based off of the literature, on what the role of the media was in Obama-Trump voters' decision to vote for Donald Trump. This approach runs counter to what my research aims to prioritise: the thoughts, feelings and perceptions of the Obama-Trump voters. While there is ample literature on vote switching, independent voters, and media effects, I could not make hypotheses on Obama-Trump voters' behaviours specifically without studying them first. Indeed, my theoretical framework is one that emphasises how voters play an active role in interpreting media messages. It aims to make conclusions by unveiling their perceptions and connecting them to existing theory. As such, it is critical to first gather data on Obama-Trump voters' media interpretations rather than make hypotheses, which is why an inductive approach is better suited.

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<sup>4</sup> Focus group transcripts available online, under “Trump-Obama voters”, at: <http://www.centerforpolitics.org/crystalball/articles/taking-the-temperature-on-trump-part-2/>



The coding process was applied to transcripts of interviews and transcripts of focus groups (for further details see Appendix B). It first consisted of open coding, identifying a variety of themes dealing with trust, bias, perceptions and feelings towards messaging, and feelings towards a variety of personality traits. These were then combined to produce three selective codes, which are as follows:

1. A distrust for the media and belief that the media had an anti-Trump / pro-Clinton bias.
2. An identification with Trump's core campaign messaging and/or unawareness or aversion to Clinton's core campaign messaging.
3. A connection with Trump and / or disconnection with Clinton on a personal level; and attraction to Trump's characteristics / unattraction to Clinton's characteristics.

A fourth code was used to identify characteristics participants used to describe Barack Obama and Mitt Romney. These major themes were analysed to make judgments about the media's role in respondents' vote switching from Obama to Trump.

### ***3.6: Limitations***

There are limitations to a case study strategy and using interviews and a content analysis as methods. First, there is the challenge of unearthing rich enough data regarding the media's role in voting behaviour, especially since I am a novice interviewer and the decision to vote for someone is multi-faceted. Indeed, in conducting the primary interviews, participants talked about a range of reasons for their vote which made it, at times, difficult to isolate the media's role. In that vein, another limitation is that of cognitive bias, in which case data is used to confirm the belief that media helped former Obama voters select Trump, rather than explore other explanations. To that end, the analysis will thoroughly consider elements other than media influence which were brought to light by interview and focus group participants.

Additionally, as this was my first time conducting interviews for academic research, my inexperience with the method could have prevented me from securing the high amount of rich, descriptive data which this research design demands. On top of that, gaining access to participants for interviews can be difficult and proved to be so with this research. Those I did speak with admitted that both themselves and fellow Trump voters were hesitant, even post-election, to admit they voted for Trump out of fear of backlash from peers. The same sentiment was echoed in the focus group transcripts.

The biggest limitation may be the divergence between conducting interviews while also relying on text of focus groups conducted by secondary sources. Primary interviewing enables active participation, control of the flow and questions, and the ability to dig deeper into topics. By contrast, while containing useful, descriptive data, the focus group transcripts must be taken at face value; topics cannot be delved into any deeper because they have already been completed. This may limit the significance of the themes that emerge between interviews and focus groups.

Despite these limitations, the interviews that were conducted did produce a significant amount of rich data. Those that I spoke with were open, forthcoming and detailed in their responses to my questions. Furthermore, despite the face value limitations of the focus group transcripts, there were evident connections and commonalities between what focus group respondents and interviewees said.

The next section will discuss the findings from the interview and focus group data. This discussion will be broken down according to the three coded themes outlined above and using excerpts of interviewees and focus group respondents' statements.

## IV. FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

As described in the previous section, the coding process revealed three major themes from the dialogue of focus group and interview participants. First, a distrust for the media and belief that the media had an anti-Trump/pro-Clinton bias. Second, an identification with Trump's core campaign message and unawareness of or aversion to the equivalent for Clinton. And third, a superior ability on Trump's part (and inferiority on Clinton's) to connect with voters on a personal level and leverage authentic and strong characteristics that respondents were attracted to. These will each be discussed in turn. While focus group data does not give pseudonyms for participants, interviewees do have pseudonyms which are listed in Appendix C, along with their political party affiliation, state residence and media preferences. In total, this research encompasses seven interviews and focus group responses from 20 individuals, representing 27 Obama-Trump voters in total.

### *4.1: The media*

The clearest theme echoed by interview and focus group respondents alike was a distrust and animosity towards the media. Respondents were united in their belief that the media is biased on both ends of the political spectrum. However, the vast majority of participants focused on their perception that the mainstream media was biased as anti-Trump and pro-Clinton during the campaign. Focus group respondents especially centred on their pre-election belief that Hillary would win due to what the media was saying. For example, one man in the Wisconsin focus group said:

“[T]hey had it all the time that there's no way he can win the blue wall. He has to win this state, this state, this state, this state. You know, so you automatically in your head thought the guy can't win, but we'll go for it, try voting for him anyway.”

Respondents from the Michigan focus group said media coverage was skewed towards Hillary Clinton so that “you’re going to out and vote for her just because she’s already winning. You know, and that’s not what happens”. Others agreed and used it as justification to brand the media as “fake news”.

Individual interviewees were in line with the opinions of the focus groups. John felt the media was “definitely anti-Trump” and that they were “trying to portray Hillary as being great and awesome and everything else”. He also admitted to resonating with the right-wing narrative of the mainstream media attempting to prop up Clinton. There was a clear disconnect in John’s mind between what the media was reporting and what he was seeing and feeling: “The media was saying [Hillary] was the second coming of Obama, but clearly from what we saw she wasn’t”, he said. Carlos said “there is an incredible amount of bias” in the media. Much like focus group respondents, Carlos believed the media was in Hillary’s corner, stating:

“[A] large portion [of the media] were trying to get Hillary Clinton elected and that’s why everybody was shocked in the end, because, I think if they kept saying it enough they thought it would happen”.

Brian agreed, saying the “mainstream media thought Clinton had it in the bag” and were constantly showing images of “how great she was doing [on the] campaign trail”. Tom’s opinion of the mainstream media during the campaign was “horrible”, and he said “CNN has turned into an all Trump all the time left wing bashing of the right wing. Fox is just as bad”. David answered “yes” to whether he thought the media was biased in favour of Clinton, and Joanne was of the same opinion, saying the mainstream media was “extremely biased favouring Hillary and demonizing Trump and his followers”, and that the media broadcast mostly negative news about Trump and positive news about how Hillary was leading in the polls. Norman was not as critical, but did not admit to explicitly trusting the media: “I used the media to make my own

decision and judgments about those candidates”, he said. Norman also stated that there is no neutral news anymore and that everything has an agenda, and pointed to CNN’s coverage of Hillary Clinton’s email scandal as a portrayal that he did not trust.

In addition to distrusting mainstream media and feeling that it had a bias against Trump and in favour of Clinton, respondents were turned off by a perception that the media constantly spins and dramatizes stories rather than simply reporting the facts. Michigan focus group respondents characterised the media as “having some weird spin on everything”, “drama”, “negative” and going “on and on”. Other participants went on to say that the media is “out to paint [Trump] badly...whether it’s the truth or not” and that the media “don’t report the facts” and put a spin on the facts “so people will watch their network”. Tom agreed, saying networks push their own views onto their viewers and do “whatever gets them more ratings”.

Carlos said much of the same, stating “everything is dramatized” and that the media has a low standing in the world now because there is no objectivity anymore. Brian touched on this too, saying the media would a lot of the time not verify sources on Trump, but ran the stories anyway “because it was a negative knock on Trump”. Joanne echoed these comments, but in respect to both candidates, saying “The media did not focus on the most important issues [...] and focused more about how horrible each candidate was instead of the policies”. Yet Joanne also added “a lot of the news was biased against Trump and untrue”. Both Carlos and Norman harkened back to the past when there were journalists they could trust, with Norman stating, “[What] they presented [was] fair and pretty unbiased, neutral”.

David and Tom, who unlike the majority of respondents did not rely on mainstream news media, used Reddit, a news aggregator and discussion website. But even there they admitted finding non biased or manipulated news can be difficult. Regarding mainstream news specifically, David said sources such as CNN and Fox are “fine for a headline, but their commentary is so obviously biased”. Additionally, similar to other respondents, he sensed a motive with the mainstream

press when it came to Trump's coverage. While he thought a lot of the critiques of Trump were warranted, he also said:

“[A]fter a while it got old. It felt like it went past the point of being a story and into territory where it seemed like there were other motives, a ‘narrative’ I guess you could say”.

Additionally, across traditional and new media, respondents lacked faith in what they could believe. As one woman in the Michigan focus group put it: “Yeah, you get all this fake news. You get things you don't know what beliefs are true”. A man in the same focus group agreed with her, stating “you don't know what they're feeding you is true or what to believe”. John, Norman and Carlos all talked about the issue of navigating what they knew to be fake news on Facebook and Twitter, though none of them branded the mainstream media as fake. Although, Carlos did reiterate his belief that there is no objective media anymore and that the media is “show business now, it's not news”. David said Anderson Cooper (CNN anchor) and the “60 Minutes crew” are all that is left of what he thinks journalism should be. In addition, Brian, Carlos and Joanne all spoke about how they would consume left- and right-leaning media sources and judge for themselves what was true. A Wisconsin focus group member said something similar by stating “how different Fox and CNN is, and then you think, wow, I'd better watch both to find out who's bullshitting”. Participants did not trust a mainstream source in and of itself.

Thus, respondents are wary of the media as an institution, largely branding the mainstream media as distrustful and/or biased, but also believe the media content to be biased in favour of Hillary Clinton. So how, if at all, did this animosity towards the media play a role in these former Obama supporters gravitating towards Trump? There are a number of preconceived experiences, attitudes and beliefs – using Hall's encoding/decoding model – that lead participants to take an oppositional position to the media messages favourable to Clinton/unfavourable to Trump and reject them. For example, as will be discussed more in the

next section, there appears to be breakdown between Obama-Trump voters' identification with being middle-class and what Clinton is saying; her messaging not only fails to appeal to their group identities with the middle class, but participants perceive her messaging as *against* the middle class. This appears to be exacerbated by the fact that there is a deep-seated distrust for the mainstream media, and Hillary Clinton, in general. While this in line with literature that links acceptance of a message to source credibility (Ladd 2010), it runs counter to what we know about independent voters. While Arceneaux et al. (2012) found participants agreed with messaging that is aligned with their views, Obama-Trump voters are meant to be more moderate and thereby less resistant to media persuasion. Participants do show moderation, at least in the case of interviewees, in their lack of partisan selective media exposure. Interviewees actively tried to consume news from a variety of media outlets in a nonpartisan manner. Yet at the same time, they outright rejected pro-Clinton messaging from the media and appear to have an antipathy towards the media as a system. Both of these phenomena seem tied to their moving, if not wholly towards Trump, then definitely away from Clinton.

For instance, the majority of Michigan and Wisconsin focus group respondents said the mainstream media's criticism of Trump makes them think he is "on the right track". Similarly, Carlos admitted that the majority of the country's newspaper editorial boards backing Clinton made him more supportive of Trump. John stated that the "cognitive dissonance from what we were hearing in the media and what we were seeing [about Clinton] made me not want to believe the [media's positive portrayal of her]". And Brian was so loath of Clinton because he associated her with the corporate, big money of the mainstream media; by contrast, he was pulled towards Trump because he perceived Trump to be actively separate from such a system.

David's reasoning differed somewhat. He felt the media gave fair coverage to Trump and even gave both candidates' scandals an equal amount of coverage. However, he felt "a lot of what Hillary did, or had done, was just ignored". Specifically, David felt like what the

Wikileaks hack revealed through the DNC and Clinton campaign staff emails (BBC 2016a; BBC 2016b) did not get adequate or correct attention: “instead of covering what the leaks revealed, the focus was on who did it”, David said. Tom agreed, saying that if the media had focused on more important issues there “would have been an investigation into [Trump’s] ties to Russia and the DNC’s robbing of [Bernie] Sanders’ nomination”.

This bitterness and distrust with the media, which empowered residents to reject pro-Clinton messages and gravitate towards Trump, is not unusual when *partisan* voters encounter information contradictory to their political beliefs (Bennett Iyengar 2008 pp. 724-5). But the majority of focus group participants and interviewees identified themselves as political independents and/or centrists. As such, this may be illustrative of how, despite no adherence to the Democratic or Republican party, independents can be partisan around certain issues, especially when they are relevant to personal and social values (Mayer 2007; Feldman 2014). For example, when asked to read a *New York Times* article on Clinton and Trump’s tax plans, John responded with a multi-teared argument for why he disagreed with the *Times*’ endorsement of Clinton’s plan over Trump’s. This was surprising since John admitted to being less attached to policy elements of the campaign. Yet his response appears to be evidence of a non-partisan attached to a partisan belief (Zaller 1996). In John’s case, he was attached to GOP ideals around tax reform, which connects back to his own values and professional experience.

Carlos exhibited this behaviour as well, saying he would “triangulate” what he was hearing about policy through the media with other sources through his own research. He also spoke confidently about issues such as trade deals, which connected back to Carlos’ professional experience in trade and economic development. He was originally leaning towards Hillary Clinton, primarily because he thought she would be similar to her husband’s (former President Bill Clinton) record on trade and economic issues, which he supported. But once Carlos perceived Hillary to be “waffling around” trying to be “progressive” on



economic issues, he gravitated away from her, believing “nothing about her was real in terms of what she really believed”.

Brian, too, was attached to an issue that impacted him personally: reform of the Affordable Care Act (ACA). Specifically, Brian spoke of how the ACA was financially detrimental to middle class voters like himself, saying “people just simply realised that ‘this is hitting my wallet pretty heavily’, and there is no sign that Hillary is going to try to help us”. Brian saw Clinton as trying to continue the Obama legacy rather than improve upon it, and thus, disconnected with her in terms of an issue that was affecting him, and other middle class voters, personally. The same was true for Joanne, but regarding manufacturing job losses, which she witnessed personally when working in a Wisconsin factory in 2003. “The families who lost their jobs were heart-wrenching to see”, she said, illustrating why she was attached to Trump’s campaign promise of bringing jobs back to America. But this past experience of Joanne’s also demonstrated why she was frustrated with the mainstream media’s criticism of Trump, as she said she was disappointed that the media “could not see past partisanship in order to report on the truly important parts of this election”. David had a variety of issue concerns that fell on both ends of the political spectrum, making him feel like “a man without a party”. But he also felt “betrayed” by the Democratic party. Such feelings of dissatisfaction and distrust are common among people who switch their votes from one party to another (Dassonneville 2012 p. 23), and in David’s case appear to be, like other participants, linked to personal experiences which are detailed in the next section.

These issue concerns help to explain why independent voters are showing more partisan tendencies with their attitudes towards the media: they are seeing pro-Clinton media messages that do not match up to how they feel Clinton would act on economic issues personally relevant to them. This largely enables interviewees to decode media messaging in an oppositional manner according to Hall’s encoding/decoding model. As such, the media seems to “matter” to voters’ behaviour in that it serves as a conduit to pushing them away

from Clinton: the media, perceived as untrustworthy and biased in its own right, fuels voters' aversion to Clinton by giving her positive coverage, particularly concerning issues that voters do not agree with her on. John may have summed up this phenomenon best when he said there was a "cognitive dissonance from what we were hearing in the media and what we were seeing [about Clinton]". Thus, these voters' antipathy towards the media, combined with this cognitive dissonance, outweighed any persuasive power the media had with its perceived pro-Clinton messages. This is not exactly surprising. If participants do not trust news sources and believe them to be biased, then how is there any chance at persuasion?

Yet this disconnect between media messages and voters' attitudes and values did not impact Obama-Trump voters in and of itself. Voters' disconnect with Clinton and identification with Trump is helped significantly by campaign messaging and candidate personalities, which will be discussed in the following section.

#### ***4.2: The messaging and the personalities***

##### **4.2.1 – Clinton's messaging:**

Clinton's downfall with participants seems to rest upon inferior messaging on the part of her and her campaign, as well as character traits that people disliked and distrusted. This is in contrast to the simple yet superior messaging of the Trump campaign, and a personality that resonated with interviewees and focus group participants.

Interviewees could easily recall Trump's "Make America Great Again" campaign message, but only two could recall what the equivalent was for Clinton. In thinking back to 2008, John remarked "everyone still remembers 2008's message: hope. Right? Hope and change. But, to be honest I'm having a hard time even remembering Hillary's". Brian said he did not remember Clinton's slogan, saying "he gave up watching her rants". Carlos, after being asked what Clinton's core message was, and struggling to remember, had to be reminded of the "I'm with Her" slogan. He then remarked "Yes! And that just pissed

me off. ‘I’m with her’, you know, is like again it’s the gender and identity politics of it”. John elaborated further on the contrasting messages, stating:

“[Trump] did have a simpler message and that is definitely a reason why he connected with me [...] Do this, this will happen. Much easier to follow. Clinton’s stuff – they were trying to hash out every little thing, where there wasn’t just a simple campaign message”.

Norman said Trump’s messaging resonated with him as part of the “silent majority” and as a “middle class working guy”, whereas Clinton’s did not:

“[T]here wasn’t a sound message that she conveyed to me as a middle-aged, middle-class, um, white male that was like – okay, how is she going to lead this country to a better place?”

For Joanne, the issues that were most important to her matched up to Trump’s messaging: preventing jobs from leaving the country, reforming Obamacare, and clamping down on illegal immigration – and she had personal experiences that spoke to why those issues were of such importance. But above all, all interviewees resonated with Trump’s message of “shaking up the system”, which ran counter to that of Clinton’s messaging, which for interviewees, represented the status quo.

While not asked specifically if they could recall Clinton’s campaign slogan, focus group participants were asked if they could recall Trump’s (they all could) and what the slogan meant to them. Responses centred on economic issues, primarily bringing jobs and manufacturing back to the United States, “taking care of America first”, and the resurgence of the middle class. Responses also focused on the family, particularly nostalgia for an era when a mother did not have to work and the father’s single income was enough for the family to lead a

good life on. People even mentioned things like kids playing outside, neighbours and neighbourhoods, and manners. Like interviewees, they also latched onto Trump's message about shaking up the system, which they viewed as the antithesis to the status quo Clinton.

Per existing data, jobs and the economy were the most important issues to white, rural voters in districts that flipped for Trump (Morin 2016). Indeed, John, Carlos and Tom cited jobs and the economy as their top issues; Joanne said "the most important factors are preventing jobs from leaving the country". Norman cited, similarly, the resurgence of the middle class and Brian also focused his responses around the middle class. Focus group participants spoke frequently of those issues as well (though when asked by the moderator to rank their most important issue, national security and terrorism were their top priority). Yet Clinton seems to have failed to convince them with her economic messaging. Carlos, who was begrudgingly leaning towards Clinton for most of the campaign, even stated:

"Hillary in my estimation was always a moderate. In fact, probably political beliefs and policy beliefs I'm probably fairly close to her. Except in this election she all of a sudden started waffling around: 'I'm a progressive' [...] Nothing about her was real in terms of what she believed".

John spoke to this as well in the context of Clinton next to her more leftist primary opponent Bernie Sanders: "When you compared those two, Hillary looked like: A. She was a neo-con; and B. She was a corporate hack that loved Wall Street. That was who Hillary was when you put her against Bernie." Norman pointed more to middle-class Americans like himself having felt "taken advantage of for eight years" and voting against Clinton because it would have been "status quo" and akin to putting the middle class "on the brink of extinction". Brian also mentioned how he believed Clinton would continue the status quo whereas Trump would shake up the system, and pointed to how Clinton

was only reaching out to voters in metropolitan areas and ignoring those in “the middle of the United States” that had been “forgotten about”.

All of this was in spite of Clinton having a platform that communicated “fairness”, “tax relief to working families”, and “an economy that works for everyone” – seemingly ideals that empower the middle class (Hillary for America 2016). Still, post-election research found Clinton and Democrats’ economic message “did not break through”, and that Obama-Trump voters do not believe Trump and the GOP’s economic policies will favour the wealthy over other groups. That is on top of 50% of these voters feeling that incomes are falling behind the cost of living (Global Strategy Group and Garin Hart Yang 2017).

The same phenomenon seems to be in play here. In the case of interviewees, they are decoding messages according to their middle class identities and concluding that Hillary’s messages do not match up to this identity and its corresponding values. In the case of focus group participants, Trump’s message connects with their middle class identities and enables them to perceive him as someone who will put America first and bring jobs back to the US, which will mainly benefit middle class citizens like themselves. By contrast, interviewees and focus group participants alike do not perceive this in Clinton. Whether they see her as too progressive or too tied to Wall Street, they certainly do not see her as a champion for the middle class.

Clinton’s messaging is also interacting with racial and domestic identities. For Carlos, Clinton’s “basket of deplorables”<sup>5</sup> comment pushed him towards Trump. Indeed, the vast majority of flipped Obama voters are white, and it appears tensions around being branded as racist or discriminatory towards minorities was at least a small factor in their distancing themselves from the Clinton campaign. Carlos stated:

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<sup>5</sup> Clinton’s full quote at a September 2016 fundraiser in New York City was: “You know, to just be grossly generalistic, you could put half of Trump's supporters into what I call the basket of deplorables. Right? The racist, sexist, homophobic, xenophobic, Islamaphobic—you name it. And unfortunately there are people like that. And he has lifted them up.”

“[P]robably what was the pivotal thing with me was the deplorable comment. Because having grown up in rural Maine and knowing the people she was talking about, I couldn’t accept that [...] I really felt that as a white man, even an older white man they didn’t like me very much, you know?”

John touched on this as well, appearing turned off by the media’s focus on Trump’s controversial statements on social issues, saying “the racist stuff, homophobic stuff, and sexist stuff” was “overblown” by the media and not grounded in what Trump would actually do as President. David did not explicitly find fault with the media, but expressed frustration with liberals who have made him feel unwanted and thereby turned off to the Democratic party. He was called a racist at a Black Lives Matter march for not joining in activities that would congest traffic, and was also told “white people aren’t welcome” at a different march a few days later. He said:

“I’m tired of identity politics and the polarization of politics in this country and the hypocrisy of so called open-minded liberal who will shun you the minute they find out you don’t agree with them on everything.”

His feelings are on par with Carlos’ who also admitted to being frustrated with identity politics.

Several focus group members had concerns about broadcasting their support for Trump publicly, in fear of facilitating racial tension with minorities or being branded racists themselves. Some even seemed disgruntled with race relations: one woman complained about “black power marches” (“I mean, if we did that, people would like disown me”) and another blamed the media for creating racism (“[t]hey look for it to be a white cop shot a black person”). While not disgruntled with race relations, a woman from the Wisconsin focus group said that her vote for Obama was in an effort to make “colored people feel better, like they have a black person in office”, whereas voting for Trump was a vote for

“normal people like us [...] Now he’s able to give the normal people, everyday people a voice”. Michigan focus group members also expressed a frustration with Obama always worrying about what “others” will think and trying to appease everybody, implying what Brian put more directly when he said Obama was concerned with “helping everybody out including the minority of the minorities”. Brian felt Clinton would continue this lack of attention to non-minority voters.

There is also racial tension in the way many focus group participants take a sense of ownership in getting Trump elected. Specifically, in that minorities did not come out in droves to vote for Clinton as the media predicted, whereas they (whites) got out and voted for Trump. For example, this exchange from the Michigan focus group:

MAN: The minorities and blacks, they didn’t get out. They don’t get out and vote. All of us went out, and we wanted to vote, and surprised her.

MAN: Now when Obama was running, they all came out to vote, because they wanted him in there. And you, you know, Hillary is thinking that the same thing was going to happen for her. She was dead wrong.

For some respondents, messages found meaning through geographic location. In addition to decoding Clinton’s messaging through the lens of a white man, Carlos also stated:

“This election was urban versus rural. That’s really what it was [...] And the media is...you know...in the urban areas. Uh, and, they declared war on, you know, rural America. Tried to make them all out to be bigots”.

Brian shared these sentiments, often reiterating how Clinton focused only on wealthy, metropolitan areas of the country during the campaign while Trump reached out to the rest of the country, mainly working-class voters. He said Hillary “wasn’t trying to go above and beyond to

go to small town cities; to go to the Midwest”. Brian was also frustrated with the mainstream media in this regard, which he perceived to be reporting Clinton’s focus on metropolitan areas in a positive light, while Brian saw people complaining on outlets like Reddit and Facebook that “she wasn’t going to any other place other than large metropolitan cities [...] so it was frustrating for many Americans that she just refused to acknowledge their existence”.

Thus, much like being middle-class, group identification with being white and/or rural areas influenced how participants interpreted messages from Clinton. On the part of focus group participants, there seems to be a tension with a perceived appeal to minorities from Clinton and Obama, which Brian and Carlos bring to light as well. Also, in the case of David and Carlos, there is a perception that liberals within the Democratic party are too concerned with identity politics and political correctness, which is in turn worsening relations within the party and between races. As such, it seems Clinton’s messaging failed to produce a compelling narrative that resonated with these voters’ white, middle class identities (Perloff 2013; Iyengar 2014; Just et al. 1996). Most respondents perceive Obama and Clinton to prioritise minorities over voters like themselves (“normal, everyday people” as one focus group participant put it). This is key, as the last four to eight years of Obama ignoring the plights of white, middle class voters is a lived experience that has led to a strongly held belief that Clinton would be “status quo” and thereby continue the neglect of this majority population. These group identities matter in triggering emotions – i.e., frustration with identity politics; anger at being branded racist; anger at lack of attention to the middle class – which impact voting behaviour (Valentino and Vandebroek 2014 p. 453).

In sum, participants in this research were for the most part tied to middle class, white, and/or rural identities. These group identities, and past experiences under the Obama administration, helped to produce crystallized attitudes on economic issues, mainly that Clinton would be status quo and produce no benefits or improvements for middle class,



non-minority voters. These group identities, past experiences, and attitudes were used to decode and oppose Clinton's messaging.

#### **4.2.2 – Clinton's personality:**

On top of messaging, Clinton's lack of authenticity that Carlos touched on ("nothing about her was real") was majorly repeated by focus group participants. Descriptors included: "hate her", "can't stand her", "annoying", "she never went away", "didn't like the way she talks – it's fake", "anything she said just turned me off", "she didn't inspire people", "she didn't care what she said to people", and the biggest characterisation: "you couldn't trust her".

Thus, not only did Clinton lack central and identifiable campaign messaging, but respondents were deterred from any Clinton messaging in general because: one, they did not trust or believe it; and two, because of what they perceived as character flaws within Clinton. For example, in comparing Clinton to Obama, John remarked:

"[Hillary] was well-spoken and intelligent and everything, but she wasn't the same quality politician [as Obama]. One, because of her background and two, no charisma really, to speak of [...] Clinton was not charismatic or believable".

Focus group respondents touched on similar character flaws. A Michigan man said "I don't even like the way she talks. It's just fake"; another man from the same group asked "what people would vote for a liar to begin with? She was, she lied about everything". A woman, also from the Michigan group, said, in reference to a cabinet appointment Hillary allegedly would have made, "She's lied again. She's just awful". David said much of the same, stating, "I think her email scandal, and the DNC leaks show that she is a dishonest, status quo politician". Tom viewed her as a "part of a bogus political system that needs to go".

The lack of believability was a big issue for many, specifically around Hillary's email scandal. Norman, Brian, and Joanne all mentioned how there was a lack of truth and clarity around Clinton's

use of a private email server while Secretary of State and subsequent deleting of several thousand emails. It became an issue they could not move beyond. For example, Joanne said: “The mainstream media acted as if [the use of an unsecured private email server] was not a big deal when others like her have gone to prison for lesser crimes”. Norman actually admitted there were things that he admired about Hillary Clinton. However, in discussing Trump versus Clinton’s scandals – mainly the leaked Access Hollywood tape and Clinton’s emails – Clinton’s outweighed Trump’s due to the recency and lack of clarity around the emails. He stated:

“The dude said something bad [...] That’s done. There’s a button on it. We know that’s what happened. However, with the email scandal I think it was so much more complicated, and for me I didn’t trust [CNN’s] portrayal and we still don’t really know what happened”.

Joanne’s reasoning matched up with Norman’s, as she also pointed to how much time had passed since the Access Hollywood tapes: “I found the mainstream media’s denigration of Trump’s bad manners 11 years ago on the Hollywood Access tape outrageous”. Brian believed Clinton to have lied about the entire incident, saying “it was an absolute disregard for the facts that these emails were deleted”, citing his professional background in I.T. for why he believed that to be so. Brian also said the media did not give enough weight to Clinton’s scandals because the media had “blatant favouritism for Hillary’s campaign”.

There is a perception of inauthenticity and clear lack of trust towards Clinton coming from interviewees and focus group participants; a perception that seems so significant that, like voters’ distrust of the media, it leads to a wholesale rejection of what Clinton was saying on the campaign trail. But what is more, as evidenced from statements above, is that many respondents are linking their aversion to Clinton with their aversion towards the mainstream media. Once again, there is a disconnect between what the media is reporting and what these

respondents perceive and value. For respondents, the mainstream media and Clinton seem to be jointly complicit in perpetuating dishonest messaging, mainly with a lack of clarity and honesty around Clinton's email scandal, but also content of emails produced through a Wikileaks hack of the DNC. Focus group respondents are much more transparent with this sentiment, with many linking the popular expectation of a Clinton win to: "fake polls, fake news", and a media system that is purposely "out to get" Trump. They cite the examples of the media (allegedly) underestimating Trump's inauguration attendance numbers, and Hillary getting debate questions ahead of time.

Respondents' linkages of distrust between Clinton and the mainstream media is unsurprising if group identity, as discussed in the previous section, is factored in. Group identity has a large role in facilitating feelings towards the media: when the press is perceived to be in contradiction with one's group identity, hostility towards the media increases (Feldman 2014 p. 553). Thus, since participants: one, perceive Clinton to be incompatible with their identities as white, middle class voters; and two, perceive the mainstream media biased in favour of Clinton, the hostility born from group identity may extend to the press as well.

#### **4.2.3 – Trump's messaging and personality:**

On the contrary to lacking a clear, identifiable message and being perceived as inauthentic and untrustworthy by respondents, Trump's messaging was perceived as simple, and this resonated with respondents. Respondents also found him to be an authentic and relatable candidate. John, like many focus group participants, relied on the debates to come to "know" Trump. In particular, John pointed to the debates as a way he could "get more on the character of people". With Trump, he liked his winning attitude, ability to constantly prove people wrong, and how he beat establishment politicians in the Republican primaries:

“It definitely impacted me continuing to see him prove people wrong. It seemed like there was power behind it [...] I didn’t really have that many issues I was super passionate about at the national level. So that’s maybe why I was really open to Trump, just on the basis of his personality and his winning attitude”.

John also stated that it was through his impressions of Trump in the debates that he was able to reject the media’s opinions about Trump making racist, homophobic, and sexist comments. Norman, like John, spoke to Trump’s winning attitude and ability to beat establishment characters, saying these factors “resonated with voters like myself”. He also stated that Trump’s ability to beat opponents like Ted Cruz and Jeb Bush meant there was something “substantial” about Trump that should be admired from a nonpartisan angle: “[W]hat he did in that aspect was incredible”.

Carlos also touched upon Trump’s characteristics by saying he liked the idea of Trump being able to shake up the system, which outweighed his controversial statements:

“I felt that a lot of what was coming out of Trump’s mouth was rhetoric, in terms of what was disturbing people. But I thought things needed to be shaken up and that the system we have now is broken”.

Brian’s statements were aligned with Carlos’. He stated:

“I basically chose [Trump] because I really wanted to see someone shake up the White House to a degree that hadn’t been seen in a while. And even though he is a hot head, even though they call him ‘Mr. Orange’ and all of these other negative connotations through the mainstream media, I think he has a chance to make some changes for the good to shake up the status quo”.

David likewise said he hoped Trump “would provide some change in Washington”. Tom was more issue specific, saying he wanted a “complete revamping” of Obamacare and voted for Trump “on the basis that he was going to repeal and replace [it]”.

Indeed, the clearest trend among all participants was their desire for change, and they saw Trump as the candidate that could deliver it, unlike Clinton who they viewed as status quo. In coding the characteristics that people used to describe both Trump and Obama, trends emerge that show respondents view Obama as warm with strong political aptitude, but too careful or timid. By contrast, Trump’s descriptors coalesce around aggression and noise, and initiative and confidence. For example, respondents saw Obama as tender and Trump ferocious; Obama as sugar-coating things and Trump as blusterous and head-strong; Obama as too worried what others think and Trump as being able to get things done (for complete coding of these trends, refer to Appendix D). In essence, Trump with the qualities that can bring about action after an administration which respondents viewed as too careful to deliver action. This is exemplified by the following exchange in the Michigan focus group:

WOMAN: Trump has got a backbone.

WOMAN: Right, he’s more aggressive.

WOMAN: Evidently.

MAN: Yeah, he’s not worried what people are going to say about him. Obama, well, if I do this, what’s people going to think? What’s everyone going to do?

MAN: Yeah, for him, it’s not the popularity contest.

There were commonalities between Trump and Obama, however, mainly in the way respondents felt they “knew” them personally, unlike Clinton and also Mitt Romney in 2012. For example, when asked about their votes against Romney but for Trump, Michigan focus group participants said the following:

MAN: I don't know a whole lot about Romney.

WOMAN: I didn't know enough about [Romney]. He wasn't out there enough. I didn't hear that much about him.

MODERATOR: Anything else?

WOMAN: He didn't have like that forceful presence. Do you know what I mean?

Wisconsin focus group participants pointed to the normalcy of Obama, which other respondents brought up for Trump as well:

WOMAN: And he had like he would use slang sometimes like he was a normal person like us. And, you know, he didn't seem to hold that power like on the President like, you know, where other people do.

[...]

WOMAN: ...[A] good speaker, very confident, portrayed himself very well, you know, and you felt good with him.

[...]

WOMAN: And then when it came to Trump, I liked the fact that he didn't have all the political background. He didn't have that stacked against him kind of thing. He didn't have a lot of history. He was just, well, like I said, a businessperson, so I think voting for him I looked at Trump being more of a normal person like us.

John, who relied primarily on debates to get to know Trump on a personal level said much of the same about 2012:

“I felt like [Obama] was a lot better than Romney, and I didn't like Romney on a personal level. Never met him, but I didn't like him just from watching the debates. I liked Obama as a person from watching debates.”

Norman echoed John's sentiments, saying there was not anything "charismatic" about Romney, nor a bluntness like Trump's, that could "cut through to defeat Obama".

Carlos said Romney was "boring" and a "boy scout" in comparison to Trump. And while Carlos did not admit to feeling like he "knew" Trump better over Hillary, he did consistently say that he thought Hillary would say anything to get elected and he never got a sense of what she truly stood for. This is similar to what a Michigan focus group respondent said when he stated "[Hillary] just didn't care what she said to people [...] And, you know, it was all sideline, political bullshit". With Trump, however, Carlos bought into the believability that Trump would really shake-up the existing political system. On Clinton, Carlos stated:

"But it's part of a larger thing with her. It's one thing to flip flop politically where you have to, to get elected. But I just never felt overwhelmed that she had a, she had core things she was running on."

The appeal of Trump's personality traits for participants lies in the fact that traits serve as heuristic shortcuts to how he would lead in office. Indeed, human qualities influence voting intentions *because* they serve as easily accessible means through which to make a decision about someone (McNair 2011; Just et al. 1996; Hardy 2014), and Trump's characteristics matched up to what participants wanted the next President to be and achieve: aggressiveness, bluntness, and a winning attitude in order to "shake up the system". Furthermore, these characteristic-based assessments have been proven to be so powerful that they may outweigh considerations based on party, policy, or ideology (Just et al. 1996 pp. 209, 215). Hence why it was apparently so easy for participants to reject the negative media coverage they were seeing about Trump. Much like their levels of trust, prior experiences, and group identities, their affinity for Trump's personality and enmity for Clinton's work together as elements participants use in decoding

media messages; and it is these elements that enable them to take an oppositional position to what they saw from the mainstream media.

The same can be said for Trump's messaging, which hinged on his "Make America Great Again" slogan. As illustrated especially by focus group participants, the slogan and Trump's overall campaign messaging enabled them to access attitudes and feelings about an economically prosperous middle class in America. This included imagery about family and neighbourhoods which participants associated with a time when the middle class was flourishing. Reactions to such messaging is illustrative of how compelling narratives are those that reach the most accessible and top-of-mind information in these voters' heads, which drives their decisions (Miller and Krosnick 1996 p. 81; Kuklinski and Hurley 1996 p. 135 re. Zaller 1992 study; Diamond and Cobb 1996 p. 230; Wolfsfeld 2011 p. 115; Hayes 2008 p. 135). For many participants, their most top-of-mind information was thoughts and attitudes about middle class prosperity, which in their view, had stagnated under Obama. Trump's messaging activated these thoughts, and his anti-status quo character enabled voters to see him as the preferred candidate on middle class issues.

#### ***4.3. Analysis and discussion***

The vast majority of Obama-Trump voter interviewees and focus group participants identified as political independents, and 80% of focus group respondents did not vote a straight-party ticket in 2016. Per existing literature, such voters have been shown to be less partisan, less interested in consuming political news, and less resistant to media persuasion (Miller and Krosnick 1996; Wolfsfeld 2011; Bennett and Iyengar 2008; Mayer 2007; Schill and Kirk 2014; Pew Research Center 2017). While participants did not exhibit any partisan selective exposure tendencies, they were for the most part regular news consumers. But interestingly, participants were very resistant to media coverage which they perceived as having a pro-Clinton bias. To use Hall's encoding / decoding model, participants certainly did not decode messages according to the dominant encoding of the media, nor did they negotiate



with the messaging (accepting some parts while offering alternative explanations for others). Instead, participants took oppositional positions to the mainstream media's campaign coverage, which helped them to resist and reject pro-Clinton and anti-Trump messaging. But how did this matter in these voters gravitating towards Donald Trump and away from Obama and his endorsed candidate, Hillary Clinton?

To answer that, it is important to reiterate that the majority of respondents, although having voted for Obama at least once before, felt the state of the country had stagnated or gotten worse under Obama's presidency. They expressed this clearly by explaining how a vote for Clinton would have been the "status quo" or "more of the same", which they could not accept. Even participants like John and Carlos, who did not completely write Hillary off until the very end of the campaign, were drawn to the idea of Trump as an anti-status quo candidate who would "shake up the system". Thus, Clinton's chances with research participants were already hindered due to their experiences during the Obama administration and attitudes towards Obama, who many viewed as not aggressive enough and too concerned with pleasing everybody. But with these voters, the media certainly did not help Clinton and seems to have played a role in furthering participants' indisposition towards her. The reasons why centre on trust, messaging, and personalities, all of which the media is intertwined with.

Participants have a strongly held mistrust for the mainstream media as an institution. This is backed up by Pew Research Center data, which found political independents' trust in national news organisations to be less than half that of Democrats' in 2016 and 2017 (Figure 1). Participants also held a deep mistrust towards Clinton and an aversion towards her personality. Furthermore, participants' lack of faith in both the media and Clinton overlapped. For many, the two were interlinked – many participants spoke as if there were a media conspiracy to deliver Clinton the presidency; for many of them, it went beyond simple notions of bias. This was, for participants, evidenced by the media constantly giving Clinton positive coverage, particularly her lead in the polls; the media's failure to fully unearth details, or give enough critical coverage,

of Clinton's email scandal and the DNC leaks; and the media's overwhelming critique of Donald Trump.

Participants' strongly held distrust with the media and Clinton thereby acts as a barrier to accepting the media's campaign coverage. Such predispositions, or prior attitude effects, were shown by Taber and Lodge (2006) to prevent fair-mindedness when interpreting messages, even when participants try to be "evenhanded" (p. 767). Research done by Woodstock (2016) demonstrated those that distrusted the media took "pleasure" in resisting it (p. 404). As such, there is a greater motivation to reject rather than consider messaging one distrusts. This helps to explain why participants were so resistant to accept what the mainstream media reported about both Clinton and Trump.

But according to Zaller's (1992) RAS model, for media messages to persuade attitudes or behaviour, voters must receive, accept, and sample the message by relating it to pieces of information that are most accessible or "on the top of their heads" (Wolfsfeld 2011 p. 114). In the acceptance stage, if source credibility is compromised, it "induces 'partisan resistance'" (Ladd 2010 p. 571). Clearly the source credibility of the media and Clinton are compromised with participants of this research, but how could it have induced partisan resistance if they are nonpartisan voters? The answer lies in the fact that, even though participants were politically moderate and consumed media in a nonpartisan way, they demonstrated partisan tendencies around specific issues which furthered their hostility towards the media. Focus group members and interviewees expressed concern about middle class economic issues, and focus group members were also very concerned with national security and terrorism. These issues matter because they are relevant to participants' personal and social values and helped produce the partisan resistance that Zaller speaks of, which in this case, takes form in participants' "resistance" to positive messages about Clinton and negative messages about Trump.

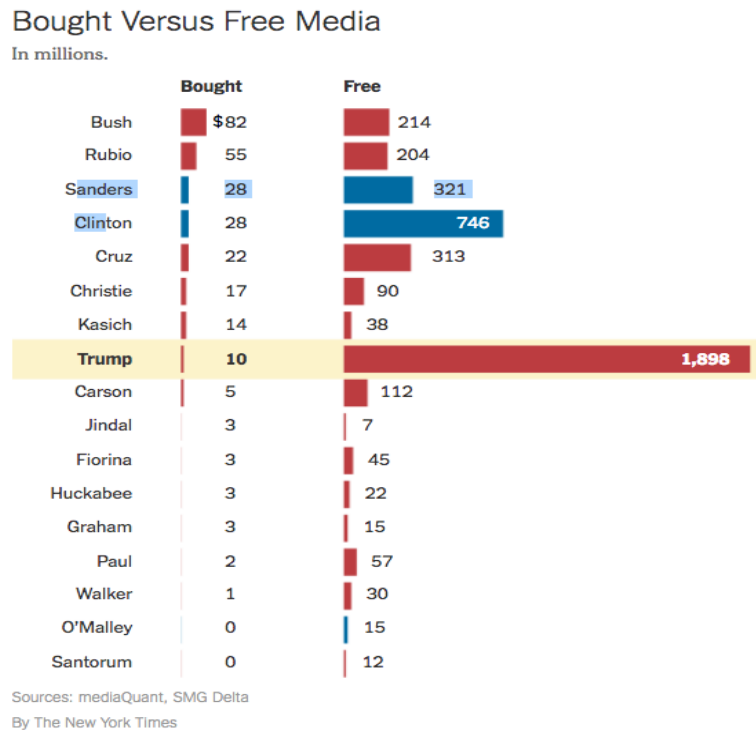
This is where Clinton's messaging and character, interlinked with media coverage, come into play again. The participants viewed Clinton as status quo and thereby unable to deliver on middle class

issues, among others. This was not helped by participants' group identifications around being white and middle class, which they felt Clinton ran counter to. By contrast, participants were attracted to Trump's aggressive character, which they used as an information shortcut for judging how he could succeed in "shak[ing] up the system". His message was also simpler and resonated with respondents who wanted to see more done for the middle class and non-minorities. Thus, participants demonstrated the importance of "compelling narratives" (Perloff 2013 pp. 321-2) and communication around salient issues that resonated with them (Perloff 2013 pp. 326-7; Iyengar 2014 p. 5; Just 1996 p. 170). Trump's "Make America Great Again" message, particularly with focus group participants, enabled voters to access thoughts and feelings about jobs and economic prosperity – the number one concern in white, rural districts that flipped from Obama to Trump. Hillary's messaging, however, was implicated by participants' distrust and aversion to her as a person. Yet, as reported by participants, they saw overwhelmingly positive coverage of Clinton by the mainstream media and negative coverage of Trump. This only furthered participants' resentment towards the press and belief that there was a deep bias against Trump.

In essence, and as stated before, the media was acting as a conduit. Obama voters in this research were already prone to dislike Clinton based on past experiences and fortified attitudes, and the media intensified this. More critically, participants came to view Clinton and the mainstream media as interlinked: in their view, the mainstream media gave positive coverage to a candidate mired in scandal, lies, and personality flaws. This "cognitive dissonance", as one interviewee put it, served to further respondents' belief that the media was biased. This also furthered their dislike for Clinton.

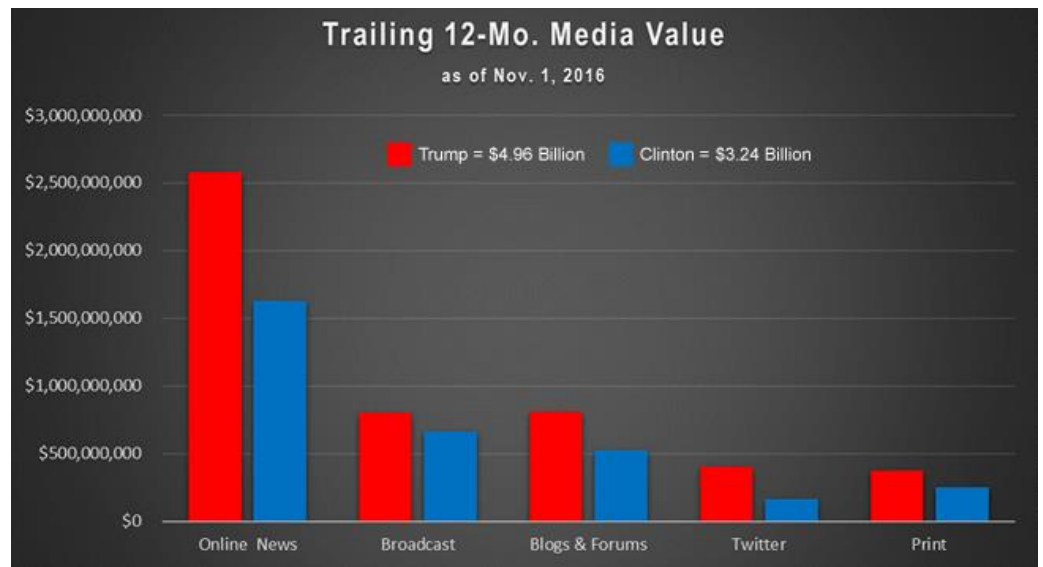
The media's role as a conduit is also important when considering Trump's messaging and personality, as it is through the media that these two elements were channelled. Indeed, this is particularly relevant since Trump prevailed over his primary opponents and Clinton in earned media, as illustrated in figures two and three respectively. To that end,

**FIGURE 2: Trump versus primary opponents bought and earned (free) media values February 2015 – February 2016**



Available online: <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/16/upshot/measuring-donald-trumps-mammoth-advantage-in-free-media.html? r=1>

**Figure 3: Trump versus Clinton earned media values, November 2015 – November 2016**



Source: MediaQuant 2017, available online via: <https://www.mediaquant.net/2016/11/a-media-post-mortem-on-the-2016-presidential-election/>

if higher proportions of media content are more likely to breed influence (Zaller 1996; Miller and Krosnick 1996), would Trump's message and personality have resonated so much with respondents if his presence in the media was less than that of Clinton's? From what participants were saying, the answer is no, particularly since they perceived the vast majority of mainstream news coverage to not be in Trump's favour. The issue with Clinton is not that she failed to make her message and character more prevalent than Trump's, it is that Obama-Trump voters did not resonate with her messaging and were disapproving of her character. If this is the case, greater earned media coverage for Clinton may have hurt her *more* if one assumes her flawed messaging and character traits would have been amplified through increased press attention. Recent scholarly dissections of the 2016 campaign have said much of the same, stating that though the media was key in disseminating Trump's messaging, it was the message itself that was indispensable to his campaign victory, as well as Clinton's inability to connect with white voters (who make up a major segment of the Obama-Trump voting block) (Azari 2016; Jacobson 2017).

As such, the media cannot be credited as a mechanism for persuading former Obama voters to vote for Trump. But as a conduit, the mainstream media was key in delivering what participants perceived as pro-Clinton content which, thanks to distrust, prior held attitudes and beliefs, and group identities, ran counter to how participants viewed Clinton. According to Hall's encoding / decoding model, these elements enabled participants to take an oppositional stance to pro-Clinton media messages. Would their opposition have been as strong if the pro-Clinton content came from non-mainstream sources? Perhaps, as their wariness with mainstream sources, and perception that such sources are interlinked with the Clinton campaign, seem to have furthered animosity towards Hillary. But what matters is that the media, by (as perceived by the participants) broadcasting pro-Clinton content, reinforced the existing negative attitudes towards Clinton and the press that existed within participants; the media did not *create* hostility towards Clinton,

but by seemingly hopping on the Clinton bandwagon, it *intensified* the hostility.

The same phenomenon can be said for the media's role in participants' attitudes towards Trump. The mainstream media was a conduit of Trump's messaging, and as such, played a role in participants coming to know Trump as a person and develop a liking for his aggressive personality traits. Some of this has to do with participants' nonpartisan, moderate tendencies, which enabled them to consume media outlets from both political spectrums and analyse content in an independent way. Hence why, even though participants reported seeing so much anti-Trump spin from the mainstream press, they were able to judge on their own what they liked about Trump and thereby reject the media's characterisations. But more important, once again, are these voters' levels of trust, prior held attitudes and beliefs, and group identities. Participants distrust the mainstream media and believe it to be biased, and so they do not give credence to what they perceive to be negative press coverage of Trump. They also have strongly held attitudes, connected to their group identities, about middle class economic issues, which Trump's message and personality resonate with. As such, in the way that pro-Clinton media coverage induced anti-Clinton sentiments in participants, so too did anti-Trump media coverage induce pro-Trump sentiments.

## V. CONCLUSION

This research aimed to uncover to what degree the mainstream media played a role in former Barack Obama voters voting for Donald Trump in the 2016 American presidential election. It relied on the responses of 27 Obama-Trump voters, which encompassed primary interviews with seven voters and an analysis of existing transcripts of two focus groups with ten voters each. The study used an interpretivist ontology and constructivist epistemology, prioritising research participants' ideas, beliefs, and shared understandings as determinants of their behaviour. The methods of interviews and content analysis of focus group data were also key to understanding the how and why behind participants' behaviour. An inductive approach to using interview and focus group transcripts yielded three major themes on participants' thoughts, feelings and perceptions about the 2016 presidential candidates and the media. These themes highlighted how voters' prior experiences, attitudes and beliefs, levels of trust, group identities and the personalisation of politics played large parts in their active interpretation of media messages. A literature review examined each of these elements in turn, along with a history of traditional media effects research, to establish an analytical framework that underscored voters' active interpretations when consuming media.

The findings reveal that the mainstream media did play some role in participants' voting behaviour, but not in the influential and persuasive way that common knowledge or political campaigns would hold. Rather, the media matters in its role as a conduit of candidates' messaging and personalities which activate various existing attitudes within participants. These attitudes, along with prior held experiences, beliefs, levels of trust, group identity and how participants viewed the candidates as people, were the lenses through which participants actively decoded messages. For example, their experience under Obama helped them to see Clinton as status quo and Trump as a change agent; their distrust towards Clinton and the media caused them to see the mainstream press as largely biased against Trump; group identities

around being white and middle class enabled Trump's messaging to resonate but Clinton's to be off-putting; participants disliked Clinton on a personal level and believed her to be a liar, whereas they were attracted to Trump's aggressive personality. Together, these elements aided participants in taking an oppositional stance to the messages they were decoding from the mainstream media.

In this regard, the media's role in Obama voters voting for Trump in the 2016 election appears to matter less than the candidates' messaging and personalities. Yes, the media acted as the channel through which voters came to know and understand the messages and characters of each candidate, but at the same time, voters perceived the mainstream media's reporting to be biased in Clinton's favour. This helped, in part, to enhance existing anti-Clinton sentiment in participants. If the media had been influential in terms of persuading voters' behaviour, then participants would have been receptive to the pro-Clinton messages they were seeing. This was not the case.

Yet, it is this phenomenon which should encourage future research on the implications for political non-partisans' attitudes towards news media. Numerous scholars, as well as organisations like the Pew Research Center, have charted American voters' levels of trust with the mainstream press, but many of the inferences have to do with partisanship<sup>6</sup>. Yet it was moderate (as evidenced by their cross-party voting behaviour and nonpartisan media consumption) Obama-Trump voters that helped deliver Trump key victories by a margin of 78,000 votes in three Midwestern states. Electorally, these voters matter, and thus communicating with them is key, in part, to a successful campaign. Despite their moderation and lack of partisan selective exposure of news media, independent voters have demonstrated low levels of trust in the media on par with that of Republicans. The Obama-Trump voters in this research demonstrated the same. To that end, how will the perception of positive media endorsements impact candidates in future races? Is there

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<sup>6</sup> See for example Pew Research Center studies: Barthel and Mitchell 2017; Gottfried et al. 2017; and Barthel et al. 2017



a new trend of positive mainstream coverage of a candidate inducing negative attitudes towards that candidate even among non-partisans? If so, this certainly has implications for political campaigns and how they communicate to independent voters moving forward.

While this research may help justify future studies on political independents and their trust in the media, it is worth repeating that, although participants' expressed negative attitudes towards the mainstream media as an institution, their negativity towards the content they were seeing appears to be strongly tied to Clinton's messaging and personality; and their ability to reject content they were seeing appears to be largely helped by an affinity for Trump's messaging and personality. In this sense, the mainstream media's role in Obama voters voting for Trump appears to matter less, but it was still an important conduit that, thanks largely to notions of trust and bias, seems to have produced anti-media feelings within participants that reinforced their attitudes towards both candidates.

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## APPENDICES

### Appendix A: Interview guide

Welcome

Explanation of what will be done – objectives, process, etc.

Participant consent (plain language statement and consent form)

Questions from participant?

#### *Ice breaker question*

Were you surprised when Donald Trump won the election?

#### *Questions*

Are you Dem, GOP, Independent or other?

(Feeling thermometer, 1-100, about Trump and Clinton?)

Between all outlets – television, internet, newspapers and so forth, what did you rely on most and why?

Existing research has shown Trump voters largely relied on Fox News as an information source. Was this true for you? Why?

(If not) / (Besides) Fox News, what other media did you use during the campaign? Why these and not others?

What do you remember as some of the biggest topics media covered during the campaign? Do you think these were also the most important?

What were the most important issues for you?

[Depending upon what media source group is gravitating towards, pull out television clip / article for group to review – possibly lead with Fox clip re. Trump bringing back jobs]

I want you to take a few moments to (read this article) / (watch this news clip). Feel free to write down your thoughts as you (read) / (watch). Pay attention to how you feel the media characterises the Presidential candidates.

<https://youtu.be/2q3Upmx1lDs>

Fox News – Trump win debates on economy; watch first 3 mins

How did this media source make you feel about Donald Trump?

*\*\*If participants talk about personal experiences in relation to issues, make sure to ask them to expand on those\*\**

I am going to play you a clip with Hillary Clinton as the main focus now. Watch and then we will discuss.

<https://youtu.be/Q124hZLKpeQ>

CNN – Hillary Clinton flip-flop on TPP

How did this make you feel about Hillary Clinton?

And one more on Donald Trump, which you should be familiar with.

<https://youtu.be/XHScNvPqfVE>

Fox News – Donald Trump ‘Access Hollywood’ incident; watch first 4 mins.

How did this make you feel about Donald Trump?

Do you recall, when watching such clips during the campaign, what if anything you learned about Donald Trump or Hillary Clinton?

If the media helped you to learn things about the candidates, in what way did this persuade you to vote for Donald Trump?

Do you remember Donald Trump's campaign slogan? How did it make you feel?

Do you remember Hillary Clinton's campaign slogan? How did it make you feel?

[Potential jobs/economy questions depending on focus]

- How did you come to learn that Donald Trump would be the best candidate to create jobs and for the economy overall?
- What helped you believe he would be better at job creation than Hillary Clinton?

Taking yourself back to 2008 or 2012, what was it that you liked about Barack Obama and made you vote for him?

Would you say that Clinton's platform was closer to Obama's?

Did you see anything in media portrayals of Donald Trump that reminded you of Obama?

We are running out of time, so as we end, let's talk about more generally your switch from the Democratic candidate to the Republican candidate. Why make the switch to someone so different than who you voted for in the previous two elections?

**Closing statements**

## **Appendix B: Coding used on interview and focus group**

### **transcripts**

Code 1: A distrust for the media and belief that the media had an anti-Trump/pro-Clinton bias.

Code 2: An identification with Trump's core campaign message and unawareness of the equivalent for Clinton.

Code 3: A connection with Trump / disconnection with Clinton on a personal level; and attraction to Trump's strong characteristics / unattraction to Clinton's characteristics.

Code 4: Obama or Romney characteristics

**Appendix C: Interviewee details**

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>State of residence</b>	<b>Political party affiliation</b>	<b>Media used most during campaign</b>
John	Male	Maine	Independent	Google and Yahoo News, which aggregated mainstream television and newspaper sources, but also online outlets like Vox and Breitbart.
Joanne	Female	Florida	Registered Republican this year, but independent previously	Cable television – Fox, MSNBC, and CNN
Brian	Male	California	Independent	Admitted to tuning into mainstream media sources somewhat, but relied on “direct feeds” for campaign information. For example, watching candidate speeches or rallies via live online broadcast.
Norman	Male	New York	Independent	Television – ABC, Fox and CNN
Carlos	Male	Maine	Republican, but identifies as	Television – Fox and CNN, sometimes MSNBC Radio – Howie Carr

			a centrist / moderate	Newspapers online such as <i>The Wall Street Journal</i>
David	Male	Illinois	Democrat	Reddit mostly for campaign news. Likes 60 Minutes and Anderson Cooper. Thinks CNN, Fox and mainstream sources are fine for headline but have “obviously biased” commentary.
Tom	Male	Minnesota	Democrat	Mainly Reddit. Believes mainstream media to be biased but that Reddit can be manipulated as well. As such, also got information directly from candidate sources to see positions.



**Appendix D: Trump and Obama character traits, as used by research participants, coded**

**DONALD TRUMP**

**AGGRESSION / NOISE**

Aggressive  
 Ferocious  
 Fierce protector  
 Claws in everything  
 Stubborn & thick-headed  
 Powerful  
 Not the biggest but acts like it  
 Loves to show his roar  
 Makes a lot of noise  
 A lot of bluster (but no results)  
 Blowhard  
 Hot headed  
 Scrappy  
 Will shake up / blow up the system

**INTELLIGENCE**

**Smart**

**INDEPENDENCE**

'Take me as I am, this is what I'm going to do'  
 Not worried about what others say

**UNTRUTHFUL**

Sneaky  
  
 Shifty and will screw you over if it's better for him  
 Liar  
 Contradictive  
 Divisive  
 Plays on people's fears

**INITIATIVE / CONFIDENCE**

Takes Control  
 Gets things done  
 Has a backbone  
 Impulsive  
 Head-strong  
 Proves people wrong  
**Winning attitude**  
 Will be able to figure it out and make it work  
 Pedal to the metal  
 Can never count him out  
 Always surprising people  
 Goal-oriented

**FAMILY**

**Family-man**  
**Supports his family**  
**Family-oriented**  
 Good father  
**A normal person like us**

**BARACK OBAMA**

**WARMTH / CAREFUL**

Nice  
 Like your best friend  
 Sugarcoats things  
 Popular  
 Happy  
**A normal person like us**  
 Positive  
 Tender  
**Family-oriented**  
 Charismatic  
 Liked him as a person  
 Worries what people will think  
 Timid

**APTITUDE**

Captivating  
 Entertaining speaker  
 Good speaker  
 Talked well  
 Easy to understand  
 Comfortable  
 Confident  
**Intelligent**  
 Well-spoken  
 Believable  
 Thoroughbred  
**Winner**  
 Perfect politician

**Appendix E: Interview consent form and plain language statement**



School of Social &  
Political Sciences

**Consent Form**

**Title of Project:** The media and swing voters in the 2016 U.S. presidential election

**Name of Researcher:** Matthew McLaughlin

I confirm that I have read and understood the Plain Language Statement/Participant Information Sheet for the above study and have had the opportunity to ask questions.

I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving any reason.

I consent to focus group or interviews being audio-recorded and transcribed using a password protected iPhone and/or laptop. I acknowledge that copies of transcripts will be returned to me, *upon request*, for verification.

I acknowledge that participants will be referred to by pseudonym.

I acknowledge that a final copy of the researcher's dissertation may be made available to me upon request.

I agree to take part in this research study

I do not agree to take part in this research study

Name of Participant ..... Signature  
.....

Date .....

Name of Researcher ..... Signature  
.....

Date .....



University  
of Glasgow

School of Social &  
Political Sciences

## **Plain Language Statement**

**Project Title:** The media and swing voters in the 2016 U.S. presidential election

**Researcher:** Matt McLaughlin, Postgraduate Student in Political Communication

### **INTRODUCTION**

You are being invited to take part in a research study. Before you decide it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Ask me if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether or not you wish to take part.

### **PURPOSE OF STUDY**

The purpose of this study is to examine if and how the media played a role in the decision of former Obama voters to vote for Donald Trump in 2016. The purpose of this study is not political, but academic, and as such is completely nonpartisan.

### **WHY HAVE I BEEN CHOSEN?**

You have been chosen because you identified yourself as an Obama voter in 2008 and/or 2012 and Trump voter in 2016. This is precisely the type of voter the research seeks to study.

### **DO I HAVE TO TAKE PART?**

No, participation in this research is completely voluntary and you do not have to take part. Furthermore, if you agree to take part and wish to end your participation part-way through the research, you may do so.

### **WHAT WILL HAPPEN TO ME IF I TAKE PART?**

You will either take part in a one-on-one interview with me, the researcher, or a focus group with 7-11 other U.S. citizens who, like you, voted for Obama in 2008/2012 and Trump in 2016.

In either scenario, you will be asked questions about what media you relied on during the campaign, how media coverage made you feel about candidates, and what you may have learned about candidates

through media coverage. I will use various television clips and newspaper articles from the 2016 campaign as “prompts” to help facilitate conversation.

I will look to you to elaborate on certain policies, characteristics, or observations the media makes about the candidates and how they make *you* feel about that candidate.

You will also be asked to take a short political news questionnaire to measure your awareness of current national and global topics.

It is important that you know this research is completely nonpartisan and not associated with any political party at the local or national level. This research does not aim to make any political judgments, and seeks to provide an environment where you can express your opinions freely and honestly.

### **WILL TAKING PART IN THIS STUDY BE KEPT CONFIDENTIAL?**

Yes. All information will be kept on a password protected laptop, and pseudonyms (fictitious names) will be given to each participant. These pseudonyms will be used in the dissertation to refer to statements you may make in the focus group or individual interview, so nobody would be able to recognize you. In any case, research will be read only by myself, my dissertation supervisor, and one other university lecturer (see below).

**Please note that assurances on confidentiality will be strictly adhered to unless evidence of wrongdoing or potential harm is uncovered. In such cases the University may be obliged to contact relevant statutory bodies/agencies.**

### **WHAT WILL HAPPEN TO THE RESULTS OF THE RESEARCH STUDY?**

The results of the research study will be incorporated into my final dissertation. This will be submitted to my supervisor, Dr. Ana Langer, as well as another yet to be determined University lecturer, for grading.

My final dissertation will be submitted on September 4, 2017. After this date, you may contact me for a copy of the dissertation.

### **WHO HAS REVIEWED THE STUDY?**

The researcher’s supervisor: Dr. Ana Langer, senior lecturer in political communication, University of Glasgow.

Another University of Glasgow lecturer, to be determined, will also review the study.

### **CONTACT FOR FURTHER INFORMATION**

If you have any concerns regarding the conduct of this research project, you can contact:

**University of Glasgow School of Social & Political Sciences**

Ethics Officer: Professor Keith Kintrea      Email:  
[Keith.Kintrea@glasgow.ac.uk](mailto:Keith.Kintrea@glasgow.ac.uk)

Dissertation Supervisor: Dr. Ana Langer      Email:  
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