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Ideas

The section that asks “what if?” and “why not?”

The fallacy of thinking that Trump voters are probably racist

Liberals sometimes assume that many in the MAGA camp are motivated by racial animus — but the reality is more complicated.

By **Betsy Leondar-Wright** Updated October 21, 2024, 3:00 a.m.



Trump supporters waited for the Republican presidential candidate to arrive at a rally in Atlanta on Oct. 15. Kevin Dietsch/Getty

I was helping my friend Deborah weed her garden when she burst out furiously, “How can they possibly think that way?” Right away I knew who “they were: right-wing Republicans and Trump voters.

And I could guess what she meant by “that way.” Deborah prides herself on being a white ally against racism; to her, the racial inequities in our society are so glaringly obvious that only a hateful bigot could deny them. But she also prides herself on being able to communicate even with people she disagrees with; she longs for more civility in American politics. With the election looming, many people like Deborah continue to be concerned about the racism and xenophobia they fear motivates many Trump supporters, especially white voters. How realistic are these fears? One way to find out is to talk with conservative voters themselves. I and Jessi Streib, an associate professor of sociology at Duke University, recently interviewed roughly 125 white voters for our forthcoming book [“Is It Racist? Is It Sexist?”](#) And we found that very few of them harbored explicit racial hostility toward people of color.

A third of the people we interviewed fell into Deborah’s “they” category: self-identified conservatives and Trump supporters. The rest called themselves liberals or independent voters. We asked them all a long list of “Is this racist?” questions about hypothetical and actual situations.

For example, one interview question asked about a white police officer shooting a Black man — was it racist? Another was about whether Trump’s denunciation of NFL player Colin Kaepernick after he took a knee in protest — was that racist? About half our interviewees repeatedly said yes, they saw racism almost everywhere, and about half said no, they saw it almost nowhere. It was like [the dress](#) that some people saw as white and gold and others as blue and black. Those who said yes or no often tended to align along the divide between the familiar red and blue, but not always.

When we talked with the white people who gave mostly “no” answers, the ones Deborah fumed about, many turned out to sincerely believe in the value of being color-blind. “I don’t see color,” many said proudly. Of course, progressive discourse has evolved to discount color-blindness as obscuring unspoken and institutionalized racism. But many self-professed color-blind people had similar backgrounds: They said they were raised by prejudiced bigots and swore they would be different. If their parents forbade them to date people of color, they told their own children not to categorize people by race, or if their grandparents used the “n-word,” they avoided referring to race entirely. To them, the definition of racism was mistreatment based on someone’s race (any race, including white).

Therefore they tended to say no if overt racial hostility wasn’t a feature of the scenario we presented. For example, we asked whether a white person calling a Black speaker at a public event “articulate” was racist. The proudly color-blind people responded no, they didn’t think the white person was racist in that scenario, because race wasn’t mentioned and because the audience member had good intentions.

But whenever one of our questions focused on deliberate racial hostility, such as using a racial slur, these color-blind interviewees vehemently denounced the bigotry in that scenario. When I explained all of this to Deborah, she was enormously relieved, because she could relate to these interviewees more than she had imagined, even though she disagreed with most of their conclusions.

Another group of interviewees who consistently answered no, they didn’t see racism, were more ideologically motivated to deny racism, except for what they saw as racism against white people. They asked more skeptical questions than the color-blind group to probe each scenario for a nefarious or liberal agenda motivating allegations of racism. They believe that racism is rare and that liberals’ accusations of racism are a devious power play. Many of them would judge Deborah’s antiracism as a sign of the “woke” deterioration of American culture. But even these racism deniers had stories that would soften Deborah’s heart. Their biggest commonality was trauma, such as sexual abuse as children or combat experience. They identified as tough survivors and had an ethic of not complaining. That led them to scoff at allegations of cultural racism and microaggressions. When we brought up removing Confederate statues, a junk dealer we call Thomas said, “I never saw a 150-year-old statue hurt anyone.” But to my surprise, some of these ideologues had stood up against racism when they saw it. Before I interviewed dozens of white voters, I, like Deborah, had imagined white Americans on a tidy spectrum from outright racists to active antiracist allies, with the majority in the color-blind and/or uncaring middle. But some ideological racism deniers shattered that mental model for good.

One story in particular blew away my preconceptions. One Republican diner waitress in North Carolina repeated many right-wing talking points, such as that the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, historically Black colleges and universities, and the Black Lives Matter movement exclude white people; and that the existence of the Black Miss America

pageant and Black Entertainment Television is racist. But when a friend, who is Black, could no longer care for her daughter, Alice took her in and raised her for 10 years. When Alice's mother said she wouldn't visit as long as "that [n-word]" was in the house, Alice cut off her mother in favor of her foster daughter. Most of us, including liberal antiracists, have never sacrificed so much.

And this was not the only such example. The ideological racism deniers have a very narrow definition of racism, a definition that includes only explicitly hostile acts with demonstrable harm. But just one out of 60 racism-minimizing interviewees expressed hostility or bad intentions toward people of color. And more than a dozen of them have spouses or children of color, whom they defend against slights and slurs.

We also interviewed 42 people who identified as liberal, the political tribe that Deborah and I belong to. When we asked our 20 or so "Is this racist?" questions, almost all of them jumped to conclusions, saying yes, there was racism in the situation, without asking a single question. To their credit, they knew a lot about racial inequity in education, criminal justice, and housing; but without evidence, they assumed that every scenario we presented must fit the pattern. For example, a man we call Lewey assumed that racism had motivated his neighborhood corner store to not stock Newport cigarettes, a brand popular with African Americans — a judgment I found dubious. When asked whether they had heard racial slurs in their hometowns as children, many liberals said they didn't remember any, but they "must have" since such slurs are ubiquitous.

This approach can be counterproductive, leading to unnecessary reprisals or condemnation not based on evidence. While these liberals are more accurate about widespread racial inequities than the conservative racism deniers, their approach is also obviously flawed.

What's the alternative? Learn how systemic racism works and shows up in everyday life, as do those who consistently say yes, they see racism; but ask questions about individual cases, as do those who frequently say no, it's not racist — before coming to any conclusions. Or as I might say to Deborah, before writing off our fellow Americans as irredeemably racist.

Betsy Leondar-Wright is a sociologist and coauthor of "The Color of Wealth" and the forthcoming book "Is It Racist? Is It Sexist? Why Red and Blue White People Disagree, and How to Decide in the Gray Areas."
