Thomas D.Edsall, "The Trump Voters Whose 'Need for Chaos' Obliterates Everything Else"

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Over the four years during which he has dominated American political life, nearly three of them as president, Donald Trump has set a match again and again to chaos-inducing issues like [racial hostility](), [authoritarianism]() and [white identity politics]().

Last week, at the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association, the winner of the best paper award in the Political Psychology division was "[A 'Need for Chaos' and the Sharing of Hostile Political Rumors in Advanced Democracies]()."

The paper, which the award panel commended for its "ambitious scope, rigor, and creativity," is the work of [Michael Bang Petersen]() and [Mathias Osmundsen](), both political scientists at Aarhus University in Denmark, and [Kevin Arceneaux](), a political scientist at Temple.

It argues that a segment of the American electorate that was once peripheral is drawn to "chaos incitement" and that this segment has gained decisive influence through the rise of social media.

"The rise of social media provides the public with unprecedented power to craft and share new information with each other," they write. In the political arena, this technological transformation allows the transmission of a type of information that portrays "political candidates or groups negatively" and has "a low evidential basis." The "new information" transmitted on social media includes "conspiracy theories, fake news, discussions of political scandals and negative campaigns."

The circulation of this type of information (which the authors label "hostile political rumors") has been "linked to large-scale political outcomes within recent years such as the 2016 U.S. presidential election."

On a less cataclysmic level, the authors' analysis helps explain the intensity of anti-establishment voting that drove Trump's successful takeover of the Republican Party in the 2016 primaries.

The authors describe "chaos incitement" as a "strategy of last resort by marginalized status-seekers," willing to adopt disruptive tactics. Trump, in turn, has consistently sought to strengthen the perception that America is in chaos, a perception that has enhanced his support while seeming to reinforce his claim that his predecessors, especially President Barack Obama, were failures.

Petersen, Osmundsen and Arceneaux find that those who meet their definition of having a "need for chaos" express that need by willingly spreading disinformation. Their goal is not to advance their own ideology but to undermine political elites, left and right, and to "mobilize others against politicians in general." These disrupters do not "share rumors because they believe them to be true. For the core group, hostile political rumors are simply a tool to create havoc."

In the past, chaos-seekers were on outer edges of politics, unable to exercise influence. Contemporary social media — Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube and so on — has empowered this constituency, providing a bullhorn to disseminate false news, conspiracy theories and allegations of scandal to a broad audience. Examples include the lunacy of the Comet Pizza story (a.k.a. Pizzagate), the various anti-Obama birther conspiracies and Alex Jones's claim that the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting that left 20 children dead was a "complete fake" staged by the government to promote gun control.

How do Petersen, Osmundsen and Arceneaux measure this "need for chaos"? They conducted six surveys, four in the United States, in which they interviewed 5157 participants, and two in Denmark, with 1336. They identified those who are "drawn to chaos" through their affirmative responses to the following statements:

- I fantasize about a natural disaster wiping out most of humanity such that a small group of people can start all over.
- I think society should be burned to the ground.
- When I think about our political and social institutions, I cannot help thinking "just let them all burn."
- We cannot fix the problems in our social institutions, we need to tear them down and start over.
- Sometimes I just feel like destroying beautiful things.

  In an email, Petersen wrote that preliminary examination of the data shows "that the 'need for chaos' correlates positively with sympathy for Trump but also — although less strongly — with sympathy for Sanders. It correlates negatively with sympathy for Hillary Clinton." (After publication of this column, Petersen asked to clarify his comment. "The information given in the above quote," he said, "solely reflected an initial interpretation of a preliminary analysis, which is not part of the research on which the column is based.")

  In their paper, Petersen, Osmundsen and Arceneaux contend that "the extreme discontent expressed in the 'Need for Chaos' scale is a minority view but it is a minority view with incredible amounts of support."

  The responses to three of the statements in particular were "staggering," the paper says: 24 percent agreed that society should be burned to the ground; 40 percent concurred with the thought that "When it comes to our political and social institutions, I cannot help thinking 'just let them all burn' "; and 40 percent also agreed that "we cannot fix the problems in our social institutions, we need to tear them down and start over."

  The authors expressly caution that there "is a limitation of the study," pointedly noting that "we cannot claim" that substantial numbers of "American citizens are ready to go into actual fights with the police or commit other forms of political violence." Instead, they write,

this study provides insights into the kinds of thoughts and behaviors that people are motivated to entertain when they sit alone (and lonely) in front of the computer, answering surveys or surfing social media platforms.

In these circumstances, "a few chaotic thoughts that lead to a few clicks to retweet or share is enough. When the echoes of similar processes across multiple individuals reinforce each other, it can add up to cascades of hostile political rumors," conspiracy theories and fake news.

The intense hostility to political establishments of all kinds among what could be called "chaos voters" helps explain what Pew Research and others have found: a growing distrust among Republican voters of higher education as well as empirically based science, both of which are increasingly seen as allied with the liberal establishment.

In a paper that parallels the work of Petersen and his colleagues, Rose McDermott and Peter K. Hatemi, political scientists at Brown and Penn State, argue that Trump and other right-wing populist leaders have tapped into evolutionarily based "tribal sentiments and drives."

Trump's expertise, in this view, lies in his ability to capitalize on the fear of chaos. "Populist movements," McDermott and Hatemi write, "rely on inflammatory rhetoric to create a tribal 'us versus them' condition — this type of environment instigates neural mechanisms from the evolutionary desire to be part of the group."

The abrupt rise of social media has played a crucial role, they observe:

In many ways, as we have technologically advanced, we have also regressed to more immediate, emotional, and personal forms of political communication. And it is only in understanding the nature of that personal political psychology that we can begin to grapple seriously with the challenges of today, including the consequences of global populism.

In the 2016 campaign, Trump successfully elevated in the national consciousness the perceived threat of undocumented immigrants, a sense of a disordered country and a fear of random criminal assault on the streets of major cities.

In that election, Trump had a great deal to work with: residual anxiety over the 2007-9 recession; battles over the rights of transgender people; rising levels of social and economic inequality; employment losses driven by globalization; rampant automation; the deterioration of traditional family structures; climate change and extreme weather; and the prospect that whites would no longer be the majority.

Peter Drucker, the American management consultant, writing in 1968, 48 years before the 2016 election, anticipated the sense of chaos in the world to come:

> We face an Age of Discontinuity in world economy and technology. We might succeed in making it an age of great economic growth as well. But the one thing that is certain so far is that it will be a period of change — in technology and in economic policy, in industrial structures and in economic theory, in the knowledge needed to govern and manage, and in economic issues.
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> While we have been busy finishing the great nineteenth century economic edifice, the foundations have shifted beneath our feet.

While Trump's focus on disorder and chaos worked to his advantage during the 2016 campaign, there is no guarantee that he will benefit from it when he is an incumbent seeking re-election.

As the 2018 election demonstrated, Trump's personally chaotic approach to governance, his record of undermining relations with allies and strengthening ties to autocrats; his use of trade policy to heighten market insecurity; his aggression, his recklessness, his incessant lying; and his sneering contemptuous, bullying style, together worked against him and the Republican Party.

Bert Bakker, a professor of communication research at the University of Amsterdam and a member of the panel that awarded the A.P.S.A. prize, emailed me to discuss his views of the significance of the work of Petersen and his colleagues:

The authors set out to explore the psychological underpinnings of the tendency to share hostile political rumors online. The sharing of hostile political rumors has often been attributed to partisan motivations. Supporters of one party share this kind of information to mobilize voters against another political party. Yet, in the paper, Petersen et al. introduce a second motivation to share hostile political rumors and that is what they call 'chaotic motivations'.

Bakker continued:

It remains an open question whether those with higher chaotic motivations also turn their "motivations" into action. One could expect that those higher on chaotic motivations are more likely to protest and actually revolt against the political system. Moreover, I could see a role for chaotic motivations in understanding why people support populist politicians. Populist politicians share a message that the elites in, for instance Washington, Paris, Berlin and London, are corrupt, evil and self-centered. Perhaps this rhetoric resonates well with a tendency to like to see the democratic system go down.

he phrase "like to see the democratic system go down" is chilling — and raises the question: How worried should we be about a fundamental [threat to democracy](#) from the apparently large numbers of Americans who embrace chaos as a way of expressing their discontent? Might Trump and his loyal supporters seek to bring down the system if he is defeated in 2020? What about later, if the damage he has inflicted on our customs and norms festers, eroding the invisible structures that underpin everything that actually makes America great? political leader who thrives on chaos, relishes disorder and governs on the principle of narcissistic self-interest is virtually certain to find defeat intolerable. If voters deny Trump a second term, how many of his most ardent supporters, especially those with a "need for chaos," will find defeat unbearable?