

A comment on Thomas L. Friedman's *New York Times* article: "Donald Trump Voters, Just

Hear Me Out" (Friedman, 2016)

A. N. Essayist

### Abstract

Friedman makes an attempt to communicate with Trump's electoral base by appealing to rational arguments: Trump is not a decent person; his policies to help the working class are a façade, etc. I argue that he fails because, although his supposed target audience is "Middle America" (blue collar workers), his real audience is more intellectual – the kind of person who would read *The New York Times*. Friedman falls into the same trap that led to Hilary Clinton's defeat by preaching to the converted: a middle-class America that might appreciate Friedman's invention of the word "STEMpathy". Trump voters voted against "the establishment"; Friedman is getting his articles read by it.

*Keywords:* Trump, Middle America, establishment, sloganizing

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My main reason for choosing this article for commentary is that the opinions expressed correspond broadly to those that I hold. Both candidates are portrayed as "flawed"; in fact, the American electorate was given a choice between the lesser of two evils. But my opinion is what the Americans would call "liberal" – a word that should not be confused with the European meaning, which refers to an opposition to government interference in the economy (*laissez faire*).

The "Just Hear Me Out" part of the title is particularly resonant because, in these elections, perhaps much more than in others, the willingness to engage in rational argument took a back seat to the mud-slinging, name-calling, dirty-tricks campaigning that dominated the race for the White House, not just in the end, but in the lead up when Trump astounded everybody by becoming the Grand Old Party (GOP) option. Few escaped his insults – from "lying" Ted Cruz to John McCain, the war hero who was not really a war hero in Trump's books because he had been captured by the enemy – and we imagine that other presidential candidates would have been crushed by the constantly emerging scandals – from the Trump University scam to the "pussy grabbing" racist persona that Trump is not ashamed to show.

The scandals which would have nipped the political careers of other potential candidates in the bud did nothing to diminish the support of "Middle America", where Trump has his grassroots support. The polarizing discourses that have dominated this election are what have differentiated it so much from other elections where the media have played a vital role in making politics something which should interest the man in the street. But the tone has been noticeably unstatesmanlike especially on the Republican side. Whereas Kennedy may be remembered for saying "Ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country", Trump will be remembered for the "Grab them by the pussy" remark. It

must be said that Kennedy was not shy when it came to members of the opposite sex, but in an age when every gesture of a celebrity will be subject to public scrutiny, Trump is brashly unconcerned about the way he might be portrayed. In fact, he can turn adverse publicity to his advantage by appealing to primal instincts.

The article is an attempt to use reason to persuade “Middle America” to not vote for Trump. In line with Democratic supporters and some well-known Republicans, Friedman argues that Trump is simply not a decent human being. Initially, the writer appeals to decency more than anything else. It is not about comparing political strategies to tackle unemployment, address the problem of healthcare in the United States or examine the role the US should be playing on the international stage. Friedman portrays Trump as the kind of person you would not want sitting in your living room let alone governing the most powerful nuclear nation in the world. But if Trump is unsavoury then, by extension, his supporters must be unsavoury; at least, that is what the Clinton supporters feel. Clinton herself, in uncharacteristically undiplomatic style referred to them as the “deplorables”. They are painted by comedians like, Bill Maher, as “rednecks” who live in trailers. So the challenge is to win over those voters who do not want to be seen as “deplorables” but who do not trust a woman who has been in the public eye for over two decades.

Friedman's second argument is that Trump's promises to the working class are a facade. Trump's argument that American jobs were given to the Mexicans and the Chinese is half-baked. It is interesting that Friedman does not play the racist card here; indeed, there is no mention of racism anywhere in his article, as he knows it would alienate most of his target audience. Friedman's strategy is to convince Trump's base that Trump's policies will not solve their problems – the loss of jobs in “Middle America” as a result of the 2008 crash being the most important because everybody knows that along with jobs go healthcare

guarantees and, in the United States, losing your job usually means losing the health insurance you had which came with the job.

To support the idea that Trump's promises are vacuous Friedman points out that, although manufacturing (the largest sector of the economy) produces double what it did in 1984, it employs one third fewer workers. The economic implication is obvious: the jobs did not go to the Mexicans or the immigrants; they disappeared because 21<sup>st</sup> century production requires fewer and fewer manual laborers. As Friedman correctly writes, the jobs did not go to the Mexicans; they went to the microchip. Not only production but human creativity is being given over to machines – he points out that a computer produced a song that won a Grammy. But this is where Friedman's argument will have fallen on deaf ears: he starts to get too technical, pointing out that, in the future, jobs will combine empathy with science, technology, engineering and mathematics and treats us to his own invented word – “STEMpathy”. To the average, unemployed, factory worker this intellectual posturing would not have helped. The last thing he would want to read is that the future is bleak and that there are pseudo-intellectuals writing for *The New York Times* who think they are very clever and whose job (yes, *they* are employed) consists of making up words that get published in a “liberal” newspaper. It is one thing to try to show that Trump cannot possibly live up to his promises because he would have to impose huge tariffs on things like imported steel and effectively build an impenetrable economic wall around the United States, and another to engage in intellectual posturing to make sure that your favourite Eastern Seaboard readers do not get bored.

Friedman in fact seems to lose track of his presumed target audience when he argues that nothing can be done to stop the economic changes that increase unemployment and the best strategy would be to re-educate workers so that they can develop the new skills required to compete in this new economic environment. He writes about “lifelong learning”. This is

probably the last thing that an unemployed steelworker in the “Rust Belt”, where low wages and unemployment have surged since the economic crisis of 2008, would want to hear. Your jobs have gone. You have to go back to school and learn something new in order to, hopefully, recover some buying power in the distant future. Friedman misses the mark in the same way that the Clinton campaigners thought that they could concentrate on contrasting Hilary’s personality with that of Trump. But Friedman does not really lose track of his target audience. At the beginning of the article, referring to Trump supporters, he writes: “a few of them will buy fish wrapped in this column, and they’ll accidentally peruse it!”

The target audience is the traditional centre-left leaning readers of *The New York Times*, and Friedman’s comments are in line with Bill Maher’s caricatures – Trump supporters are dumb, “rednecks” who never learnt to read. This condescension was not lost on Trump’s supporters, many of whom will have realized that they were the butt of the jokes made by “the establishment” (a fictional creation manufactured by Trump to get the working class to bet on him as the outsider).

Friedman fails to address the major reason why the working class would vote for a billionaire who clearly does not have the interests of his supporters at heart, but he puts his finger on the main issue which the Clinton campaign neglected: with the exception of Bill Clinton, Hilary’s campaigners failed to address the problems affecting working class Americans – the problems typified by the “Rust Belt”. Instead, Clinton’s campaign focused on the novelty of America electing a woman to be their president, and this failed to impress the voters who were more concerned about their own domestic problems than about whoever was living in the White House.

It is easy to criticise the Clinton campaign in hindsight but, in fact, there were signs that the electorate would not act in accordance with its usual docile self. Nigel Farage – the leader of UKIP, the extreme right-wing British party that spearheaded the Brexit vote – had

become a close ally of Trump. To the politically astute, the possibility of a right-wing landslide vote should have been discernible after the British voted to leave a market of over 500 million because they thought that, in so doing, they would get rid of the immigrants. Trump wants to deport eleven million illegal immigrants and build a wall on the border with Mexico – that is what resonated with the average Joe whose understanding of governmental policies is limited to sloganizing – “Make America Great Again”, “Let’s Take Back Our Country”, etc.

Sloganizing is a poor substitute for having real policies which can be operationalized. How do you deport eleven million illegal immigrants? How do you make Mexico pay for the building of a wall to stop Mexicans entering the United States? How do you ban all Muslims from entering the United States, bearing in mind that there are 1.6 billion Muslims in the world, that is 23% of the population of planet Earth? The logistics of the policies Trump advocated are surreal, but that was only to be expected from a man who relied on his own ability to improvise when speaking in public. Friedman’s article touches on the problem but, like Clinton’s campaign, does not get to the roots of it; Trump’s vacuous sloganizing did.

## Reference

Friedman, T. L. (2016, November 2). Opinion | Donald Trump Voters, Just Hear Me Out. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/02/opinion/donald-trump-voters-just-hear-me-out.html>