

The unbearable heaviness of thinking everything is good for Trump

Everyone knows that getting convicted of felonies is bad. But try telling that to nervous anti-Trumpers.



By [Ben Terris](#)

June 18, 2024 at 9:00 a.m. EDT

Carson Markley was on a train journey, traversing the Canadian Rockies with his family, when he learned that [Donald Trump](#) had been convicted in New York.

“I texted my mates,” says Markley, a Democrat who lives in Detroit. “And it was this joyous, very celebratory moment for all of us.”

And then?

“Then the anxiety started creeping in.”

He’d spent the trip in and out of cellphone service, compulsively checking his phone for updates. Now that the update he’d waited for had come, he was having invasive thoughts.

What if Trump finds a way to use this to his advantage?

“I’ve read the news, I’ve seen the polls, I’ve talked to guys at the bar who said they were once Trump supporters but that they can no longer support him,” Markley says. “Logically, everything I see makes it seem like the convictions weaken his chance of winning. But I can’t help think: What if it helps him?”

Markley suffers from what he called a sort of “PTSD” from years of scandals that have failed to remove Trump from public life. The affliction presents with an unusual symptom: It makes some critics of the former president believe that anything *bad* that happens to Trump may end up being *good* for Trump.

It's a shared worry among liberals and Never Trumpers who have seen so many supposedly damaging or disqualifying events come and go over the years. "Grab them by the p---y." "Very fine people on both sides." The first impeachment. The election loss. The election lies. The insurrection. The second impeachment. The criminal indictments. The civil cases. The damning critiques by former aides and advisers. The sinister rhetoric about "evil" Democrats, left-wing "vermin" and political "retribution." Nevertheless, he has persisted.

And now, conviction in a jury trial. On the day of the New York verdict, a nurse in Lorain County, Ohio, grew apprehensive after listening to her co-workers and patients talk about how Trump would motivate his voters by railing against a crooked judicial system. When the news alerts went off at a bar in Silver Spring, Md., a bartender asked a patron whether it meant Trump could no longer run for president. "Oh," the bartender said when he learned Trump was still eligible. "Then this will be good for him."

"I think it probably martyrs Trump even more," says Michael LaRosa, a former spokesman for first lady Jill Biden.

"He's running as the world's biggest victim," says Frank Luntz, a political consultant and Trump critic, "and Americans rally around victims."

Markley, on his family vacation in British Columbia, briefly wondered whether he should be scoping out Canadian apartments in case of an inevitable Trump victory.

Democrats are always "looking for the dark lining in the silver cloud at all times," especially with regards to Trump, says Dan Pfeiffer, former adviser to President Barack Obama and current podcast host, whose inbox and text messages filled up with this kind of anxious talk after the Trump verdict.

"It's only natural that people would become catastrophizers about Trump," Pfeiffer says. "But it's actually not true that he hasn't faced accountability. Every time he has been on the ballot since 2016, literally and figuratively, he has lost."

Mythologizing Trump as some kind of invincible monster who can absorb all attacks and only become stronger — *that* might be the thing that helps Trump and his Republican allies, Pfeiffer says. "When we pretend like he can survive anything, it imbues him with strength and gives him political advantage with a lot of people," he says. "But the reality is, how bad a criminal do you have to be to be one of the most politically connected and richest guys around, and still be convicted of 34 counts of falsifying business records? The truth is he's kind of a clown."

"If you actually think it's good to be convicted of multiple felonies, you probably need to go outside and touch grass," says Jesse Ferguson, a Democratic consultant and former spokesman for the Hillary Clinton presidential campaign. "He's far more Darth Vader than Obi-Wan Kenobi. If you strike him down, he doesn't become more powerful than you could possibly imagine."

To be fair to the worriers, there is a playbook for turning something as obviously bad as a criminal conviction into a political advantage. It just usually happens in other countries.

“This is a unique situation for the United States,” says Kateryna Odarchenko, a political consultant who worked for onetime Ukrainian prime minister and political prisoner Yulia Tymoshenko. “But in other countries where political persecution really exists, candidates use their criminal cases against them to say, ‘You see, I effectively fought the system, and they came for me.’” Trump has a potential opportunity, Odarchenko says, to try to use the case against him to cast himself as a “classical hero” fighting against a “big evil.” And he’s going there. “I was just convicted in a RIGGED political Witch Hunt trial: I DID NOTHING WRONG!” screamed a recent fundraising plea. In at least one way, it’s working: The Trump campaign used anger over the verdict to raise a staggering \$141 million in May.

The notion that a setback like this is electorally *good* for Trump — that might be anxiety talking. But the assumption that it *won’t hurt* Trump? That’s reasonable. Polls conducted since the trial ended have been inconclusive on the question of whether the guilty verdict will hurt him come November. Trump’s popularity remains relatively stable, though a New York Times/Siena College poll found a “small shift” in support toward President Biden. Pollsters at Monmouth University, meanwhile, have found that “almost nothing has changed in voter intentions about the upcoming election” since the Trump trial began, according to a June 13 release.

Na’ilah Amaru, a Democratic advocacy and policy strategist, doesn’t think Trump’s guilty verdict will help the former president, but she can understand how people might feel that way. A self-described “urban planning nerd,” Amaru had booked herself on a tour to celebrate the 40th anniversary of the “Juror’s Guide to Lower Manhattan” — a compendium of neighborhoods walking distance from the courthouse. When the conviction news broke, she just happened to be across the street.

Taking in the vibes, Amaru was struck by the joy from the anti-Trump crowd on one block and the anger from the Trump supporters on another. She watched as two men argued about whether the trial was “rigged,” and about who this would ultimately benefit in the November election.

Later, after she left the scrum near the courthouse, she would reflect on a few things she believed to be true: Trump’s base is going to love him no matter what, she figured. Persuading undecided voters will be just as important as mobilizing committed ones. And anyway, she couldn’t imagine swing voters deciding to vote for Trump *because of* his felony convictions.

But that sense of perspective was not immediately clear amid the noise. “When you are in the middle of it, the emotions are so intense, so strong,” Amaru says. “You can’t help but feel like, ‘Oh my goodness, this is huge, and people are upset, and Trump’s going to win all over again.’”

On July 11, the former president is due to be sentenced. Markley thinks jail time would probably be bad for Trump. But he’d rather not think about it at all.

“My current strategy,” he says, “is to pretend nothing is happening.”