

State of the Country

A lifetime ago, on Sept. 14, Greg Vanlandeghem sat outside a café in Holly, Mich., and explained to me that he planned to vote for the President's re-election because he saw the race as a contest between two bad options. "We've got a guy trying not to die," he told me, "and we've got Trump."

The candidate Vanlandeghem described as "trying not to die" was Joe Biden, the 77-year-old former Vice President, who's been dogged by right-wing attacks on his mental acuity. But now, the "guy trying not to die" might well be the 74-year-old President, who was being treated with supplemental oxygen and a battery of drugs after contracting COVID-19, a lethal virus that can cause everything from pneumonia to strokes to neurological impairment. Vanlandeghem, a 37-year-old home builder, is a social and fiscal conservative, but he didn't vote for Trump four years ago and considers the President a "buffoon." If anyone's mind was going to be changed by Trump's diagnosis, I thought perhaps it might be him.

Vanlandeghem was unfazed. "I think it's unfortunate," he said, after I called him back to ask his opinion on the latest updates. "But it's something that a vast majority of the population is going to come down with at one point or another." He still isn't considering voting for Biden.

I wasn't surprised. Once again, history was unfolding in Washington; once again, voters seemed to be reacting with a collective shrug. If there is one constant in this extraordinary presidential election, it's that every time the political class declares that a news event will permanently reshape the race, it usually seems to evaporate into the ether. The President could be impeached for abuse of power, publicly muster white supremacists, tear-gas peaceful protesters for a photo op, pay less than his employees in taxes, declare that he'd refuse to accept the results of the election, hold a possible superspreader event at the White House—and millions of Americans will ignore it. To half of us, all this is an outrage; to the other half, none of it matters.

How voters are processing Trump's behavior at this fractured moment may be the most important question of the 2020 election. But it's a tricky one to answer in the midst of a pandemic that has turned the campaign into one interminable Zoom call. It's hard to get a read on a race that has limited travel for both candidates and reporters, a contest with countless polls but few insights, lots of speeches but few crowds, plenty of talking heads but few ordinary voices. So in September, after recovering from COVID-19 myself, I spent three weeks driving across the battleground states of Wisconsin, Michigan and Pennsylvania, trying to get a fix on what's happening between the ears of the people most likely to determine the winner on Nov. 3.

The more people I met, the more I detected something deep and unpredictable lurking beneath the surface, something that I wasn't sure was reflected in the polling data, something that maybe couldn't even be measured at all. My phone was filling with news: news about wildfires engulfing the West Coast; news about Trump reportedly calling fallen soldiers "losers" and "suckers"; news about the death toll from COVID-19 passing 200,000; news of Trump's admitting to journalist Bob Woodward on tape that he had intentionally downplayed the virus, purportedly to avoid causing a panic. But almost nobody seemed to be talking about these headlines, and when I asked about them, people often didn't believe them or didn't care. I felt caught in the chasm between the election as it was being reported by my colleagues in the press and the election as it was being experienced by the voters.

Most Trump voters I met had clear, well-articulated reasons for supporting him: he had lowered their taxes, appointed antiabortion judges, presided over a soaring stock market. These voters wielded their rationality as a shield: their goals were sound, and the President was achieving them, so didn't it make sense to ignore the tweets, the controversies and the media frenzy?

But there was a darker strain. For every two people who offered a rational and informed reason for why they were supporting Biden or Trump, there was another—almost always a Trump supporter—who offered an explanation divorced from reality. You could call this persistent style of untethered reasoning “unlogic.” Unlogic is not ignorance or stupidity; it is reason distorted by suspicion and misinformation, an Orwellian state of mind that arranges itself around convenient fictions rather than established facts.

At its most acute, unlogic manifested as a belief in dangerous falsehoods, from the cult of QAnon to the conviction that COVID-19 is a hoax. But the milder forms of unlogic were more pervasive: believing that most reports about the President were fabricated by lying reporters (they aren’t) or that Biden is a socialist (he isn’t) or that the coronavirus is no worse than the flu, as Trump keeps insisting (it’s far more deadly). Unlogic erupted on the left after Trump’s COVID-19 diagnosis, with liberals online speculating that Trump is faking his illness (he isn’t).

With so many voters ignoring the headlines, it became increasingly hard to tell where most Americans fall on the continuum from reason to unlogic. In the absence of agreed-upon facts, the possibility of consensus itself seemed to be disappearing, and the effect was unsettling.

Most of the time, voters reacted to news events in ways that conformed to what they already believed. When I first met Eddie Kabacinski, a city-council member in Warren, Mich., in mid-September, he gestured to my mask and said, “So you’re saying the air that we breathe outside, there’s something wrong with that? That’s kind of like, you’re not all there.” I nodded and tugged my mask under my chin to appease him. “We need to get back to reality,” he added.

When I called Kabacinski back after Trump’s hospitalization, he was in the middle of a “MAGA drag,” a procession of cars waving Trump flags as they cruised down I-75. “It does no good for our Commander in Chief to be showing cowardice and wearing a mask,” he told me. “He’s the President of the United States. Nobody has the right to question him.”

Democracy, at least in theory, relies on a rational electorate acting in response to credible information. Since the dawn of mass media, elections have been shaped by voters’ reactions to the news. But as I drove through the three states that decided the 2016 election by a little less than 80,000 votes, I sensed a glitch in the information loop, like a scratch on an old-fashioned record. People kept repeating things that were false, and dismissing things that were true.

Over the course of three weeks, I spoke to nearly 200 people of all political persuasions. There were Biden diehards and Trump Republicans, tepid Democrats, old-fashioned conservatives, even the elusive undecided voter. I spoke to Wisconsinites in the conservative suburbs of Milwaukee and the streets of Kenosha, where the windows downtown were boarded up and spray-painted with phrases like “Love is the Answer” after nights of racial-justice protests; Michiganders in the swingy counties surrounding Detroit and in red-to-blue districts near Flint; Pennsylvanians in the suburbs around Pittsburgh and bellwether Luzerne County. I approached voters on sidewalks and in grocery stores and as they waited in line for restaurant tables. I was kicked out of Target parking lots and shopping malls. My diet consisted mostly of egg breakfasts, granola bars and dirty looks. I learned to say, “Hi there!” with an extra chirp, smiling with my voice since nobody could see my mouth behind my mask.

Much of the time, I got back into my white Ford rental with a pit in my stomach. Conspiracy theories like QAnon—the perverse delusion that Trump is the final defense against a “deep state” cabal of Democrats and Hollywood elite who traffic and rape children—kept cropping up in my conversations. Two women in Cedarburg, Wis., told me the “cabal” was running tunnels under the U.S. to traffic children so elites could torture them and drink their blood. When I checked into an airport hotel in Kalamazoo, Mich., the night manager made small talk about politicians running a pedophile ring as he directed me to the elevator.

The day after Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg died, I asked two women carrying Trump face masks in Mt. Lebanon, Pa., what they thought of the late Supreme Court Justice. They would only give me their first names, Kelly and Karen, because they did not trust the media. “I think we’ve been lied to: she died last year,” Kelly said. “I’m furloughed, so I have a lot of time to research things.” Karen added that they both watch OANN, a pro-Trump news network, because “I’m fed up with being blasted every day, people telling me how I should think, how I should feel.” OANN, Kelly added, is “like dry toast. They just give you the facts.”

As he returned his shopping cart after a trip to a Walmart in Sterling Heights, Mich., Michael Thomas, a 41-year-old who works in automotive-paint delivery, listed all the reasons he planned to vote for Trump again: he’s a Christian who opposes abortion and backs the Second Amendment. But also: “I believe in Q [and] Pizzagate,” he said, referring to the conspiracy theory that Democrats trafficked children out of the basement of a D.C. pizza parlor. Where does he find this information? He shrugged as he pulled out his keys. “The Internet,” he said simply.

The fact that a growing segment of the electorate has gone off the deep end is as much of a concern to many Republicans as it is to Democrats. “The only constant for a lot of voters has been ‘choose your own reality,’” says Tyler Brown, a former digital director for the Republican National Committee who is now president of Hadron Strategies. “Broadly speaking, Republican voters are less likely to accept what they read in the mainstream media on face value,” he adds. “I can see how that worldview can start to make people feel like they’re existing within two different realities.”

Kaitlin Martin, a 30-year-old nanny in Macomb County, Michigan, a politically purple region north of Detroit, was one of the few people I met who professed to be truly undecided about how to vote this year. She dislikes Trump: “I don’t respect someone who can be so unkind to people,” she says. On the other hand, she’s seen some things online that give her pause about Biden. “I don’t know what’s real and what’s photoshopped,” she said. “Is it dementia? Or is it his stutter? In a year or two, is he going to deteriorate? Now everybody is out there saying he’s a pedophile.” She’s not sure that she believes any of it.

All of these suspicions are like swirling clouds in a monster hurricane, tearing through the possibility of consensus in American democracy, chewing up the guardrails, ripping out the precedents; a hurricane going nowhere, with nothing at its center. The chaos and confusion can feel overwhelming, says Rolando Morales, a stay-at-home dad who’s retired from the medical-software industry, pausing on his way out of a Jimmy John’s sandwich shop in Racine, Wis. “You’re so sick of everything, you don’t know what to trust anymore,” he said. Morales voted for Hillary Clinton in 2016, and his wife and father-in-law are pro-Biden. But the violence over the summer in Kenosha made him wonder if he should vote for Trump. He doesn’t even know what to think anymore.

“It feels like there’s a new America being created, and I don’t know who’s cut out to deal with it,” he said. “We’ve headed somewhere different right now. And I don’t know where.”

Distrust of the establishment has always existed in America; historian Richard Hofstadter famously called it “the paranoid style.” But now it’s amplified by social-media networks whose algorithms reward extremism, and championed by a misinformation warrior who happens to serve as the President of the United States. In a study of more than 38 million articles about the pandemic, researchers at Cornell University recently found that President Trump was the single biggest driver of false information about coronavirus. A major Harvard study released in October found that Trump had perfected the manipulation of mass media to spread false information about mail-in voting, and that the President was an even bigger source of disinformation than “Russian bots or Facebook clickbait artists.” No wonder, then, that so many Americans are caught in the confusion, unsure what to believe.

When I asked David Cracchiolo, a Michigan land developer, about a report in the Atlantic that Trump called American war dead “losers” and “suckers,” Cracchiolo explained it was “a complete lie”: “He didn’t say it.” Karen Martin, a registered nurse who works in Pittsburgh, said she was skeptical of all the “hype” around COVID-19. People die of the flu, too, she reminded me. “I think the media overblew a lot of it,” she said. Why else had her hospital been bracing for an influx of critically ill patients that never came?

When I called Martin back to ask about Trump’s health, she said the diagnosis changed nothing for her. “I don’t think you could really blame him,” she said. “I’m not sure what other precautions we could have been taking.”

“He’s clearly made some mistakes,” Tom Schettino said when I asked him about the President’s handling of the pandemic. Schettino and his wife Grace are senior citizens who have lost four friends to COVID-19, and they were wearing masks when I encountered them in a Wilkes-Barre, Pa., mall. “I don’t know if anyone could have done it better,” Schettino shrugged.

I called Schettino back recently to see if his thinking had changed. “It is what it is,” he said, inadvertently borrowing a phrase the President used to describe the pandemic’s death toll. “He’s probably not prudent doing all these rallies and stuff, but he’s gotta live with it, and hopefully it gets better.” He still plans to vote for Trump again in November because he opposes Democratic economic policies.

And then there is Greg Vanlandeghem. After Trump was inaugurated, “I prayed that he would say something unifying, be a leader, instead of being a spoiled brat,” he said. He was one of the rare people I spoke with who did, in fact, change his mind. When I called him back after the President’s diagnosis, he informed me that he no longer intended to vote for Trump—but not because of the frenzy around his COVID diagnosis. After watching his obnoxious antics at the first presidential debate, he had decided he probably wouldn’t bother voting at all. Still, he said, the President’s conduct “doesn’t really affect our lives as much as our government telling us to shut our business down for no reason or shelter in place.”

Biden’s campaign is built on the opposite premise: that a President’s character is as important as his politics. Since launching his bid for the White House, the Democratic nominee has positioned himself as the antidote to Trumpian chaos, the steady leader who can guide the nation back to sanity and stability. His pledge to “restore the soul of America” promises a return to a time when Republicans and Democrats could be civil, even friendly, as they vigorously debated matters of great importance. The apple-pie vision did little to excite progressives enthralled with candidates like Senators Bernie Sanders or Elizabeth Warren, who promised “revolution” and “big structural change.” But while his primary opponents raced to the left to argue over who could change America faster, Biden won over the many voters at the end of their ropes. “I wish everything could go back to normal,” sighed Gwen Bogan, a Biden supporter shopping in the hardware aisle of a Walmart in North Milwaukee.

The polls kept showing Biden with a sturdy lead, but you wouldn’t know it from driving through the neighborhoods that make up Biden’s path to victory. Out in the battleground states, Biden’s statistical advantage seems muted compared to the ostentatious displays of Trumpian devotion. After four years of mobilizing grassroots armies that helped elect Democratic governors in Wisconsin, Michigan and Pennsylvania, and flip six House seats in those states, I expected to see more visible enthusiasm for Biden. Instead, everywhere I looked I saw Trump memorabilia: flags strapped to boats bobbing in Racine Harbor, trucks in Michigan parking lots with massive signs reading “Trump: No More Bullsh-t.” At a pro-Trump gathering in Kenosha, a week after the shooting of Jacob Blake, I saw a young woman, barely a teenager, in a T-shirt that read “Trump 2020: Because F-ck You.” I saw more Biden signs in one afternoon in Mt. Lebanon, Pa., than in eight days of driving through Michigan.

That's partly because the Biden campaign, in a nod to public health, had until the final stretch focused almost entirely on digital organizing and phone banking instead of traditional canvassing. At two Biden events, I saw pro-Trump protesters show up with flags, while Biden supporters were few and far between. The Biden campaign says all this is intentional: they are seeking to keep events small to curtail transmission of the coronavirus. Only in the past week or so has the Biden campaign embraced on-the-ground campaigning, with teams of canvassers knocking doors in key states and a socially distanced crowd greeting Biden on a recent train trip through Pennsylvania.

But the battle for the nation's future isn't just about public shows of force from the rival campaigns. It's playing out in intimate conversations all over the country, as Americans struggle to preserve what feels like an increasingly fragile union.

Jackie Brown and Josh Scott had been engaged for less than a day when they explained their diverging political views to me outside a Pennsylvania mall. Brown, who is Black, thought Trump was racist, sexist and erratic on foreign policy. "I think that Biden is a candidate who can work across the aisle," she said. Scott, who is white, voted for Trump in 2016 and was considering voting for him again, because "I'm not for the social programs Biden has laid out," which he thinks would require more taxes. The couple had been dating a year and a half; he proposed that morning.

After Brown, an attorney, rattled off her indictment of the Trump Administration—from the politicization of the Supreme Court to violations of the Hatch Act—I asked how their political conversations usually go. "Poorly," Scott said, "but we respect each other's opinions." Brown looked at him sideways and, twisting the new ring around her finger, said, "He's trying to convince me less than I'm trying to convince him."