

Trump call

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Donald Trump on the campaign trail in New Hampshire. [Some rights reserved](#) by [Michael Vadon](#).

For months pundits have been predicting—and Republican leaders have been hoping—that Donald Trump will self-destruct. Yet each time Trump makes another outrageous claim, his popularity rises among a certain sector of voters—mostly white, working-class Americans with less than a college education.

Trump fits the classic definition of a demagogue. A demagogue taps into widespread emotions, fears, and prejudices, channeling popular unrest for political gain. Rather than offer workable solutions to real problems, a demagogue promises rash actions which, if enacted, would endanger democratic governance—as in Trump’s suggestion, following the mass killings in San Bernardino, California, that all Muslims should be kept out of the country.

Columnist E. J. Dionne notes that Trump’s candidacy poses two threats. One is that people will take him too seriously. Though he stands at the top of the fractured field of Republican candidates, Trump’s appeal extends only to about 13 percent of the electorate, according to a recent *New York Times*/CBS poll. The media may have helped boost Trump’s rise by providing outsized attention to his colorful and sensationalist campaign. Trump has gotten far more press coverage than the self-proclaimed democratic socialist Bernie Sanders, for example, even though the size of their following among voters is similar.

The other danger, however, is not taking Trump seriously enough. Trump's candidacy should be taken seriously especially because of the way it highlights the growing disparity in wealth.

While hardly a man of the people, the billionaire businessman shrewdly captures the fears of working-class Americans who recognize the precariousness of their economic position and the constraints on their future. Their wages have stagnated for 15 years. New wealth is being funneled to the upper echelons of society, not to the middle or lower classes. Although Trump's policies don't offer solutions to these concerns, his rhetoric speaks to those struggling to make a decent living and who fear being left behind.

Trump's candidacy has also provided a wake-up call on religious liberty. Exploiting fear and ignorance, he works to undermine the rights of Muslims to equal treatment, and their ability to be welcomed in this country. As Brent Walker of the Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty comments, "It is wrong to scapegoat—to blame an entire religion for the despicable acts of a handful of murderous outliers who claim that religious affiliation."

Trump hasn't created Islamophobia in America, but he and other candidates have fanned the flame. He has created a moment in which those who truly care about religious freedom are required to stand up for their Muslim neighbors.