

How our political vitriol harms dogs

By Kim Gavin

[Animalia](#)opinion

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Dogs seized from a puppy mill wait for dinner at an animal shelter in Texas in 2014. (Joyce Marshall/Star-Telegram/AP)

On a 69-degree Sunday in October in Waukesha, Wis., a woman saw a dog barking and distressed in a car. It continued for an hour, so she and her friends went to find the owner.

According to the police, [he called them](#) “liberals and Hillary supporters” and threatened to kill them.

That level of political vitriol about a dog may seem insane, but it didn’t surprise me. While reporting my [new dog book](#) across America, a Massachusetts woman responded to my question about kennels by calling Midwesterners “inbred hillbillies.” A Missouri man answered a dog question by decrying “women murdering babies with abortions.” I heard the word Nazi. I heard the other n-word.

And the hostility ratcheted louder during the election. The Humane Society Legislative Fund called Donald Trump’s candidacy “[a threat to animals everywhere](#)” about a month after [Politico reported](#) that one of Trump’s top candidates for interior secretary was Forrest Lucas, an oil tycoon and farmers’ advocate who has called animal welfare activists “terrorists.”

Our spheres are so polarized that simply trying to talk about dogs — in the most dog-loving nation on Earth — is nearly impossible. The severity of this divide, for me, was best summed up by the owner of America’s biggest legal dog auction. He was tired of people from blue states telling him how to live in his part of America, where Missouri, Kansas, Arkansas and Oklahoma meet: “I

don't have a problem with somebody in New York City or Boston being a vegetarian or not wanting to go hunting," he told me. "I'm not saying we should shove our lifestyle down their throat. But they shouldn't do the same thing to us, either."

The thing is, [close to half](#) the country's households have dogs — and they're not the same half who voted for Clinton or Trump. Shouldn't we at least be able to have respectful discourse about dogs, I wondered?

I tested that theory in July, when I toured a legal, commercial-scale kennel, one many people would call a "puppy mill." I suppressed my visceral reaction to seeing and hearing 165 dogs living two to three dogs per 3-by-4-foot cage. People like me are rarely in kennels like this one. I live in Morris County, N.J., in a town with a median household income near \$115,000. This kennel was in Holmes County, Ohio, where that number is about \$43,500. Down a lot of driveways here, behind the houses, are kennels just like the one I was inside, kennels that produce many of the 8 million pet dogs Americans acquire each year, kennels whose puppy sales put food on the breeders' tables.

This kennel was Ervin Raber's. He is 54 and, like me, wanted an option other than Clinton or Trump. His nickname, a top animal welfare advocate in Ohio told me, is "the kingpin of Amish puppy mills." He calls people like me, who prefer a primarily vegetarian diet, "grass-eaters."

Raber grew up working on farms and, early on, owned a woodworking business. He got into breeding after tourists stopped coming to buy Amish furniture following 9/11, and he succeeded, founding the Buckeye Dog Auction and becoming president of the Ohio Professional Dog Breeders Association. He's received enough failed inspection notices along the way that he landed on the Humane Society of the United States' ["Horrible Hundred" list](#).

The lobbyists he says he has encountered include everyone from the left-leaning Humane Society and American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to

Animals to the right-leaning National Rifle Association and American Kennel Club. Most recently, Raber has found himself caught in the wash of a Humane Society movement for “[pet store puppy mill bans](#).” Some 180 municipalities have enacted them so far. Many say that pet stores must switch from breeders to shelters as their source of dogs. The idea is that if the government is going to allow breeders like Raber to keep 165 dogs in cages for their whole lives, then Main Streets are going to respond by filling their storefronts with homeless dogs instead of puppies like his.

The irony of this movement to curtail Raber’s business is that he’d never heard the term “puppy mill” when he was starting out, selling puppies to families at his local flea market. Then the “animal rights wackos,” as he calls them, showed up.

“I can still vividly remember these little old ladies with big glasses coming over and complaining,” he said. “They said the puppies had no water. Now, those dogs were fine. They’d been fed and watered. They were playing with my kids. But I learned to put that bowl out, just to appease them.”

Eventually, the women pointed fingers and called him a “puppy miller.” At the same time, Raber would watch his neighbors who sold puppies from their back yards to pet store brokers. They shook the breeders’ hands and wished them a nice day.

“It just got too hard to deal with the ladies at the flea market. That’s why I went to the brokers,” Raber said. “If they’d just left me alone at the flea market, I’d be getting \$350 a puppy. I’d be fine with 15 breeding females. Instead, I had to go volume for the brokers. They’d give me only \$75 or \$100 [per puppy], so I needed three times as many [breeding] females.”

Raber's kennel now produces miniature Pinschers, Shih Tzus, poodles, Cavalier King Charles Spaniels, Yorkshire terriers, Dachshunds, Schnauzers, cocker spaniels, Boston terriers and other purebreds, plus crossbreeds. He tends to the dogs with a local Amish woman. They fill the hamster-style feeders and clear the feces that fall through the cage slats.

Raber's most recent U.S. Department of Agriculture inspection reports are clean — a sign, he says, that he has improved, just like the activists want. And demand for his puppies is strong: "This is a customer-driven industry. If we weren't satisfying the customer, we'd starve to death. I've never seen prices like the ones we're seeing now, in my whole career."

At the same time, he understands that society's attitude toward dogs is changing, and that his business has to change with it. When asked to rate his kennel on a scale of 1 to 10, he gave it a 3. He also said that among the more than 180 licensed high-volume breeders like him in his area, nearly 90 percent have kennels just like his.

"I'm old school," Raber said. "I was raised in agriculture. A dog is just like a cow or a pig or a goat. That's how I was raised. But I see where the business is going, and I'm going to have to wrap my brain around the idea that I need to spend \$50,000 to build a kennel that houses even less dogs. That's the future of this business."

While lobbyists often blame attitudes for the lack of change — the way Clinton and Trump supporters might — Raber and I talked economics. At \$50,000 per kennel, it would cost \$8 million to upgrade all 160 in his area that he says need modernizing. The AKC reported \$67.8 million in revenue for 2015. The Humane Society reported total revenue of \$194 million. Both have lobbyists waging political war over pet store puppy mill bans, but neither offers financial assistance for breeders like Raber, whose puppies are sold in those

stores. And the breeders say they can't afford major kennel upgrades, even when they want to make them.

"The improvements we need — there's only a little few of the slum holes anymore," Raber said. "We need the licensed, legal people to satisfy the demands of the customer. We have to go way above the regulations."

I felt winded when he said that. One of the most reviled dog breeders in America *agrees* with the welfare activists who want him to change. They just don't know it, because they and the breeders are too busy calling each other hillbillies and terrorists.

And so the dogs remain in the cages.

Kim Kavin is the author of "[The Dog Merchants: Inside the Big Business of Breeders, Pet Stores, and Rescuers](#)."