

Springer Studies on Populism,  
Identity Politics and Social Justice

Adebowale Akande *Editor*

# The Perils of Populism


The End of the American Century?

 Springer

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ISSN 2731-894X                      ISSN 2731-8958 (electronic)  
Springer Studies on Populism, Identity Politics and Social Justice  
ISBN 978-3-031-36342-9              ISBN 978-3-031-36343-6 (eBook)  
<https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-36343-6>

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*To ALL our Great Parents and Great Families  
for their wisdom, insight and inspiration.  
My Appreciation also goes to everyone who  
helps me create this volume.  
In God We **Trust!***

# Preface

## The Decline of American Politics

“The reader who opens a book entitled ‘Populism’ can have very little idea what to expect,” writes Margaret Canovan (1981, p. 3). The phrase is extremely ambiguous and relates in various contexts to a bewildering array of occurrences, despite being regularly employed by historians, social scientists, and political pundits. Indeed, each scholar defines populism according to his or her view and so populism becomes a kind of Cinderella’s shoe (Berlin, 2006) or a “Barbie or Cinderella system” (Akande, 2022). Laclau (1977, p. 143) assumes that “populism is a concept both elusive and recurrent” and that “few terms have been so widely used in contemporary political analysis, although few have been defined with less precision.” Thus, “we know intuitively to what we are referring when we call a movement or an ideology populist, but we have the greatest difficulty in translating the intuition into concepts.”

Populism, as a designation and a concept, was created in Russia in the middle of the nineteenth century by Herzen, “inspired by his precocious attempt to bring Socialism to the Russia of Nicholas I; by his enthusiastic participation in the intellectual life of Moscow before the 1848 revolution; by his support for this revolution in Italy and France.” (Venturi, 1960, p. 1). Then, the Narodniks believed “the Russian village community could provide the basis of a transition to socialism without prior disintegration through capitalist development.” (Hobsbawm, 2011, p. 49). The evolution of populism would prove that the initial good intention was just a utopia or a fallacy.

However, the true origin of populism comes from Greece, the birthplace of democracy. Indeed, populism can be regarded as a twin or a bastard of democracy (Pinto, 2017b), explaining why the Athenians were obliged to establish protective measures against those who used the democratic tools for fighting against democracy. Then, “any citizen entitled to vote in the assembly could write another citizen’s name down, and, when a sufficiently large number wrote the same name, the

ostracized man had to leave Attica within 10 days and stay away for 10 years.”<sup>1</sup> Being clear that ostracism was just a type of provisory exile, the ostracized citizen could return to Athens and recover his or her property, ten years after finding out more about the necessity of respecting the rules of the city.

In Athens, the type of democracy was the so-called democracy of assembly because it combined direct democracy with the election of representatives. Nowadays, almost in all the countries where representative democracy is the regime, the populist parties choose to follow the example of the Greek demagogues, but the mainstream parties, even when they decide to use a sanitary cordon toward the populist parties, cannot expel them from the system, unless they do not match the constitutional law. Thus, populist parties present themselves as anti-establishment and refuse to accept the representative model considering that the intermediate bodies—political parties, trade unions, and associations—do not represent the pure people. Instead, they serve the interests of the corrupt elite.

Pinto (2022) defends that there are seven modalities of populism according to the definitions of the people and the elite. However, all of them are critical about the functioning of the system accusing it of not respecting the people and blaming those who are in the power of being corrupted. Due to some scandals, namely at the financial level, involving those who have been elected, in an initial phase, it was reasonable to question if the populism represented a threat to democracy or an opportunity to improve the political system. However, after populist leaders reach power there are no doubts that populism is just a threat to representative democracy because the so-called illiberal democracy only justifies the first word of the designation. Governments led by populists have exacerbated corruption, weakened individual liberties, and done irreparable harm to democratic institutions and the rule of law (Morgenthau, 1949/1985; Zhou & Shaver, 2021). There is already considerable literature pointing out that governments led by populists have exacerbated corruption, weakened individual liberties, and done irreparable harm to democratic institutions and the rule of law (Morgenthau, 1949/1985; Zhou & Shaver, 2021). In fact, after destroying the intermediate structures, the populist leaders rebuild them according to the leader’s model. In a word, the new structures are under the direct or indirect supervision of the leader, and they are forced to spread his or her voice.

The emergence of populism is not uniform across the globe or even inside a single nation at any given time. Indeed, there are objective and subjective conditions constituting a fertile ground for the development of populism. Polarizing of the society is one of the main objective factors contributing to the rise of populism. Each society has its own problems, but when the gap between social groups becomes outrageous, populism can successfully ride the dissatisfaction wave. The social gap can be at several levels, involving ethical, sexual, cultural, and economic elements, and the polarization leads to dividing lines between the citizens belonging to the same country, but inside a country, it can also draw a line separating the citizens from the minorities, the strangers or foreigners, namely the immigrants and the

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<sup>1</sup> Available at <https://www.britannica.com/topic/ostracism>.

asylum seekers. This gap successfully profits whenever someone—obviously, a populist leader—can capture the mind and the heart of a significant part of the people—the subjective condition. Someone who presents himself as the sole person who can understand the people’s will and a charismatic leader who will return the power to the people.

According to several sources (Akande, 2022; Akande & Johansen, 2023; Akande & Lulat 2022; Akande & Goodman 2023; Baker et al., 2021; Brennan, 2016; Frank, 2020; Johansen & Akande, 2022; Hawkins & Littvay, 2019; Jones, 2020; Joustra & Wilkson, 2016; Landes, 2023; Lindsey, 2023; Moffitt & Tormey 2014; Mudde & Kaltwasser 2018; Müller, 2016; Naim, 2022; Nicolaisen, 2023; Orwell, 1946; Postel, 2007; Riker 1982; Rosenbluth & Shapiro, 2018; Skidmore, 2006), populism is seen as the Zika virus (a mosquito-borne infection) of world politics and the depressing topic of conversation in America. Populism has evolved into a biological phenomenon that symbolizes the rise of radical movements, social inequity, and sharp separation and is a widespread issue for both Americans and people across the world. In all matters of human and international affairs, populism is now a key concept. Populism is a prerequisite for the global abolition of democracy/globalization and is the root of every country’s ongoing battle with party polarization. However, populist parties regrettably follow their narcissistic leaders’ whims and caprices at the expense of party norms and structures, all of which are detrimental to the party’s interests. All the while claiming to be only for and frankly representing “the real people” and NOT “the cruel corrupt establishment or elite.”

As such, certain academics and commentators find far greater accuracy when they convey that populism can have a “conspiratorial and apocalyptic bent”—the conviction that a specific group of evildoers, such as corrupt elites, hostile foreign powers, or internal traitors—is responsible for the country’s impending destruction, or at least that of its decent majority. Because of this, populist supporters may experience paranoia, a sense of urgency, and moral panic. They may believe that they are involved in a cosmic conflict between good and evil. To support its arguments and enlist the support of its supporters, populism may also make use of “sacred, supernatural, or religious” components like myths, symbols, theology, religious fundamentalism, prophecies, or miracles (Baker et al., 2021; De Hanas, 2018; Packer, 2015; Schansberg, 2021; Talisse, 2019; Walker, 2013).

In this book, several chapters analyze the so-called Trumpism, i.e. the way Donald Trump exercised power when he became President of the United States of America. However, we should consider that Trump was also the result of a system that had been causing and deepening social gaps for a long time. A political system that has not properly prepared for the evolution of the population, as a cultural and ethical melting pot. Trump was not the first populist leader neither in America nor in the USA, but he was the first US president who tried to destroy the symbols of American representative democracy, explaining why former president Donald Trump, who has been twice impeached, and four times criminally charged, engages in vicious prejudice and harbors deep-seated anger.

The polarization of American society leads to acephalous support and this is the reason why, for example, in the QAnon movement, Donald Trump is a recognized

hero who embodies the messianic ideal. Some sections of the Republican Party are permeated with the cult mentality of QAnon. The crowds at the “Stop the Steal” protest included members and supporters of QAnon and Pizzagate, the Trump base, GOP extremists, and other believers in Trump-era conspiracies (cf. Arceneaux & Truex, 2023; De La Torre, 2022). This explains why Trump goes on being the favorite candidate for the Republican nomination. Moreover, like all the populist leaders, Trump is a master in the strategy of victimizing, presenting himself as a victim of a corrupt system, and exploring every situation to get money for his presidential campaign. A clear paradox, and a potential for trouble, for the use of a mugshot taken after Trump surrendered to the Fulton County Jail in Atlanta, Georgia, on merchandise being used to fundraise his campaign. It is now a case of somebody who got the prime-time coverage he so much craved—and the historic mug(rabilia) shot he so much desired to drive the news against democracy and a magic signature image for his 2024 American presidential campaign.

It was already known that Trump was mainly a brand, but even the brands should be under the law as they cannot deceive the public. The impact of Donald Trump’s victory in the 2016 U.S. presidential election is both intriguing and alarming. While we attempted to present a balanced perspective on the Trump presidency, the responses to it have generally been unfavorable. Recently, much ink has been spilled about his political scandal of “philandering and serial dishonesty,” in trying to comprehend the incomprehensible through humor, political satire, polemic, protest and dissent, deliberation, and democracy. The chapters in this volume explore the Trump phenomenon, its possible causes, probable outcomes, and potential long-term effects on all of us, not just in America but also around the globe.

Trump is a figure unlike any other in American history, and his four years in the White House exposed unprecedented social rifts in the country. Trump’s presidency has been a goldmine for satirists and the like, as almost everything about him, from his manner of speaking, his inauthenticity, to his body silhouette to his egotism to his hairstyle, has been the subject of continuous humor. Always wrong on the law and wrong on the facts! (Baker et al., 2021; De Hanas, 2018; Packer, 2015; Schansberg, 2021).

Trump is an opportunist who has ties to the GOP, a political party that regrettably sold its soul for short-term gain and is genuinely opposed to fundamental conservative beliefs. Populism poses a threat. If there is one thing that journalists, academics, and policy experts tend to agree on today, it is just this. Populism is viewed as a danger to the state of the economy, social harmony, national security, international harmony, and eventually, democracy itself. Politically, populism is still favored. Why are a large number of supporters willing to back populist candidates and ideas in opposition to what would seem to be the best advice?

Some presidents made an attempt to bring the nation together once they left the campaign trail and moved into the White House. But Donald Trump’s criticism, which he aired through the presidential megaphone, was directed at the news media, members of his own administration, elected politicians from both parties, and foreign heads of state. His more than 25,000 tweets during his tenure as president provided an unvarnished, real-time look at his ideas on a variety of subjects, and

eventually proved to be so inflammatory that Twitter (now called “X”) permanently banned him from its site. The first president of the country in nearly two centuries to reject to go to his successor’s inauguration was Donald Trump, who was impeached twice in his final days in office, the second time for inciting a riot at the U.S. Capitol during the certification of the election he lost to Joe Biden (Pew Research Center, 2021).

Populism is a spiritual style of doing politics. Populism is not a set ideological system, but rather a “political style,” as Benjamin Moffitt has outlined. The holy, the supernatural, and the apocalyptic are three quasi-religious characteristics of populist style that transcend beyond only rational objectives, as seen by examining a wide range of populist examples around the world (Moffitt & Tormey, 2014; Skidmore, 2006). These three spiritual aspects are not present in all cases, but each can help us understand the uncanny appeal of populism.

Momentous domestic and international changes were part of Trump’s record on policy. He accomplished a number of long-sought conservative domestic successes, such as the largest corporate tax cuts in history, the repeal of numerous environmental laws, and changes to the federal judiciary. In the international sphere, as part of a larger effort to address what he saw as obvious imbalances in America’s economic relationship with other nations, he enacted strict new immigration restrictions, withdrew from several multilateral agreements, strengthened ties with Israel, and started a tit-for-tat trade dispute with China. Trump appointed Supreme Court judges who opposed abortion and believed they would overturn *Roe v. Wade* in order to appease Christian Evangelicals. In June 2022, the U.S. Supreme Court reverses *Roe v. Wade*, terminating the decades-long protection of the right to an abortion.

In principle, Kamala Harris the first female ever, to become the vice president, and the highest-ranking female official in U.S. history, and Joseph R. Biden Jr. becoming the 46th president after their inaugurations afforded the United States a rational opportunity to move past the shameful Capitol riot of January 6, which deserves its own category of infamy. But what does this mean for the nation’s democratic foundation? Capitol Riot exposed the perilous seam where American democracy has been stitched together with the rest of the world (Baker et al., 2021; De Hanas, 2018; Packer, 2015; Talisse, 2019; Walker, 2013).

White supremacy is ingrained in American democracy’s institutions, laws, and methods of application. That was proven by the violent pushback against the movement for Black Lives and the expanding, multiracial coalition that supports it. American democracy is in perfect working order; it is not broken per se. When white people have access to land, money, education, and social standing, it works. Black Americans, Indigenous Americans, persons of color, non-white immigrants, refugees, “undocumented” migrants, the homeless, the underprivileged, and those who are incarcerated have never seen success with it, according to experts across the University of Pennsylvania (Baker et al., 2021; Schansberg, 2021; Talisse, 2019; Walker, 2013).

Concerning the relationship between the governmental system and the populist leadership we should note that after the independence, many American countries have opted for a presidential system. This choice can be related to the colonial

political model due to the presence of a governor representing the colonial authority. Many of the elected presidents of Central and South America reached power due to their populist discourse, based on the promise of a fair system in which the power would return to the people. The list is enormous from Cardenas in Mexico to Peron in Argentina, Vargas in Brazil, Chavez in Venezuela, Fidel in Cuba, and so on because the populist list is ongoing in many American countries.

There are many types of government systems. Some of the most common ones are democracy, republic, monarchy, communism, and dictatorship. In some countries we also have three variants of governmental systems: presidential system of government or single executive system, semi-presidential system, and parliamentary or parliamentary democracy system. And, despite a close relationship between presidential system and populism, namely in Latin America, in all of them, we can find populist parties playing an important role as incumbents or as one of the main forces of the opposition. For example, in Italy, parliamentary republic is the governmental system and the Government belongs to a coalition of three right-wing populist parties.

The option for the presidential model can become a threat to democracy whenever the political and social institutions are weak, and the checks and balances system does not work properly. In those cases, the president tries to interfere in the spheres of legislative and judiciary powers, and the politicization of justice is unavoidable. Moreover, the legislative Assembly acts as a sounding board for the leader's voice. The stability and normal functioning of the institutions can live together with the presidential term only in the countries where representative democracy is strong enough to control the rise of populist leaders, i.e. the countries where populism is the shadow and democracy is the reality.

Laclau (2005, p. 193), who shows a sort of benevolence toward the American socioeconomic modality of populism, due to several social measures improving the conditions of life of the lower class, also recognizes that "it was after the slump of the early 1930s, however, that Latin American populism became more radical" because "the redistributive potential of the liberal—oligarchical states was drastically curtailed by the crisis, and the political systems became increasingly less able to absorb democratic demands" leading "to a sharp chasm between liberalism and democracy which would dominate Latin American politics for the next twenty-five years." Then, "Vargas and the Estado Novo in Brazil, Peronism in Argentina, the governments of the Movimiento Nacional Revolucionario in Bolivia, would implement redistributive programs and democratic reforms under political regimes which were anti-liberal, and in some cases overtly dictatorial."

Laclau's vision is better perceived when compared with that one defended by Guillermo O'Donnell concerning Kirchnerism, the type of populism that emerged in Argentina from 2003 to 2015. While Laclau "views Kirchnerism as a healthy wind that blew away some questionable features of Argentine politics," O'Donnell "simply saw in it the continuity of harmful yet ingrained political styles and behaviors." For Laclau, Kirchnerism "represents an effort to leave behind the limited parameters of the liberal institutional framework that structured Argentine politics since the transition from authoritarian rule, to promote a more radical form of populist



democracy.” For O’Donnell, the period of Kirchnerism represents yet another “cycle of delegative democracy that confirms the inability of Argentine society to break free of the damaging dynamics of such a problematic form of polyarchy.” (Peruzzotti, 2017, p. 48). It is noteworthy that this discrepancy is still alive and gives origin to the fallacy defending the existence of a bad populism linked to the right and a good populism connected with the left.

Later, it is evident that the populist snag has expanded from its original Latin American domain to a new region in Europe, where it had previously struggled to gain traction (Akande, 2023; Jacobs & Milkis, 2023; O’Byrne & Hensby, 1998; Pinto, 2017b; Zingher, 2022). In party politics, populism is not a recent development. Global politics are progressively becoming dominated by the so-called anti-system, populist movement, which is on the increase. O’Byrne and Hensby (1998) contend that both the West and globalization in general are seriously endangered by the demagogues.

Politicians in the populist camp are dishonest. As it was already said, upon assuming the reins of power, they transformed the country into an autocratic regime. The state’s opponents are identified by authoritarians, and those individuals are barred from participation. Hungary is the best example of this strategy because Orbán, once in power, changed the previous system according to his own interests, namely persecuting all those who were against him, and restricting the freedom of expression through the establishment of the Central European Press and Media Foundation (KESMA), a state-controlled foundation resulting from the transfer made by media owners who were affiliated to Fidesz and offered Orbán their ownership rights of media holdings.

Orbán’s politics show that the decline of neoliberal representative democracy could have unfavorable implications, including a war on human rights and authoritarian political development in Europe in the twenty-first century.

Fortunately, a burgeoning progressive movement has coincided with the rise of the populist movement. Movements have emerged calling for respect and fairness for all human beings, from Black Lives Matter to efforts to abolish wealth disparity, to welcoming immigrants from the Ukrainian war to the white helmets in Syria, and the yellow vests in France, proving that many citizens continue to believe in Western principles or values and are willing to fight for them. Citizens who are aware that the rise of the new authoritarian, xenophobic, nationalistic, and right-wing populism as a threat to human rights within the framework of globalization is particularly remarkable.

Indeed, the demise of old sectors, the loss of well-paying jobs, and economic dislocation are all effects of globalization that are being resisted by authoritarian populism. People who are adversely affected by globalization in terms of their economic and political standing are turning against anyone who is non-white and outsider, especially Muslims in Western nations (Christensen, 2021; Geissel & Newton, 2017; Norris & Inglehart, 2019; Orwell, 1946; Zhou & Shaver, 2021). Due to allegations that mass immigration, cultural liberalization, and the apparent ceding of national sovereignty to “out of reach” regional and international bodies result in lower wages, weaker unions, and higher social welfare costs, the public has

a strong dislike for immigration and migrants. Populists openly criticize the human rights movement, and they also hold elites accountable for failing to exert control over everything from national economies to borders (see Legutko, 2016; Zhou & Shaver, 2021).

In 2013, Anders Hellström wrote an article titled: Help! The Populists are coming! Indeed, the populists are not coming because, as it was already said, populism is a twin or a bastard of democracy and it “accompanies democracy like a shadow.” (Canovan, 1999, p. 16).

Thus, as Pinto (2017, p. 315) states, the existence of democracy without populism is almost impossible because there will be some popular demands requiring satisfaction, questioning the differential logic, and leading to the refusal of the authority of the representatives. However, the existence of populism without democracy is a hypothesis, and a real threat once the populist leader becomes incumbent. Moreover, he explains that whenever democracy is in peril it will have nowhere to turn but the rules of the democratic system.

To that end, the depth and breadth of the populist literature are reflected in the NINE sections that make up this book, *The Perils of Populism: The End of the American Century?* The chapters differ partially because each topic molds and limits what may be discussed about it, and partly because the various authors have varied perspectives and conceptions about how to fulfill the topics and goals stated for each chapter. The writing is strong because the contributing authors approached their work with newness, enthusiasm, and focus and because they were passionate about the subjects they covered. The thematic treatise brings freshness to the crisis of truth and the slew of misadventures of Donald Trump and populism and the commentary displays freshness of insight. We hope this has led to a stimulating overview of a diverse and complex phenomenon.

The original 22 chapters of this volume offer a thoughtful, intellectual, and persuasive examination of the Trump’s U.S. populism both before and after he took office. To explain the current status of populism in light of Trump’s unusual presidency, it also covers theory and research, historical perspective, contemporary analysis, case studies, and respective disciplines.

The volume truly challenges and helps us gain cross-cultural insights, making fresh discoveries accessible and useful to a community of public opinion scholars, researchers, students, and practitioners whether political behaviorists and theorists, comparatists or comparative philosophers and Americanists in related fields. And indeed, researchers/populism observers, applied professionals, the general public in the United States, global North, and global South. Furthermore, it will shift the focus to implications and findings that are compelling, practical, and relevant to the reader across nations and cultures and particularly a required reading for Trump-watchers everywhere.

However, it also serves as a forward-looking and backward-looking assessment of where democracy is in the world. This groundbreaking volume is about what political and literary giants who shaped and helped the growth of American and World democracy like Harriet Jacobs, W.E.B. Du Bois, Elizabeth Freeman, George Mason, Olympe De Gouges, William Wilberforce, and Martin Luther King Jr.,

Malcolm X, H. M. Turner, Rosa Parks, Harriet Tubman, Diane Nash and Mathama Gandhi, Karl Heinrich Ulrichs, . and Charles Grafton, Bea Oranyan, Nelson Mandela, Mother Theresa, Abraham Lincoln, James Baldwin, and John O. Killens will unapologetically declare “awesome,” “liberates the reader into life,” and “a study of life amid “a new civil war,” chaos, deep division, partisan resentments, and post-truth.”

Because populism and democracy are both ultra-highly topical issues in our existence, they are actually “part of the making of each other. In addition, this book assesses in opening our eyes about tribalism, racism, islamophobia, Afrophobia, Asiaphobia, and the anti-globalization, cult politics via a range of historical and contemporary investigations along three major reasons laid down by Jamieson—”an independent judiciary protected basic constitutional freedoms; the press remained free and diligent; and individuals used their voices to “advance the cause of justice.” (Baker et al., 2021). More importantly, as Schanberg (2021) observes, the Founding Fathers treated all political systems, including democracy, with great suspicion and devised a complex political system to mitigate its weaknesses” This is consistent with progressive ideology, including its anti-populist bent and a comfort in using democracy to capture power writes Scott (1999).

This volume’s nine-part structure aids the reader in organizing and conceptualizing the content. Political science is the primary area of interest in the book, but other disciplines are also covered in order to provide a comprehensive picture of the debate and controversy. Strong theoretical and empirical works with a social focus make up this collection. However, a few of the chapters could theoretically belong in more than one part or section. Given how the world has changed since our earliest observations, every chapter and subject includes new research findings as well as the most recent populist problems and applications in the relevant domains. The authors of the 22 chapters have all amassed a wealth of expertise in the field of populism and its related areas, and they were all chosen primarily for this one factor. Additionally, it provides reviews of research, theory, and themes related to the Donald Trump phenomenon, partisanship, and a variety of important topical issues and dimensions in exploring the historically situated and sensitive nature of the danger of populism, with all of its reflective angles in a changing world. We have a difficult task ahead of us as scientist-practitioners as we try to understand populism, disinformation (fake news), presidentialism, and how to deal with problems of American and global governance, government, and power rivalry at all stages of party politicking.

It further describes the social construction of Donald Trump’s discourse and politics with bitterness and polarized racism, the linkage between partisan polarization, misinformation, hate crime, violence, xenophobia, and the dynamics of power and oppression in various forms.

## Implications

To put together, regardless of their political inclinations, most people in America and across the world have high expectations for democracy, at least if they can influence the power structures. In the midst of the unparalleled divisiveness and deadlock in Washington, DC, U.S. Congress seems to be mired in an endless conflict and unable to do anything meaningful for the nation. Many Americans as well as the rest of the world, believe that the U. S. political system is irreparably broken due to its irrationality and disorder. Hence a clarion call for an urgent reform with a post-colorblind political discourse for a people living amid a new civil war may be needed.

Although right now the United States is rather exceptional like its partisan/political divide. One of the greatest dangers for liberal democracies is the rise of populism, yet despite the extensive corpus of research, the bigger picture is still difficult to discern, as revealed by this book.

As such, De Hanas (2018) was correct to have made the case that populism is harmful. The lives of other people can be dismissed as either an existential menace to be eliminated or as little more than collateral damage by an ambitious religious, supernatural, or apocalyptic populism. That is where the real danger lies. Populism appeals to the general public while demonizing elites.

First, former President Donald Trump’s unexpected victory in 2016 shocked the nation and the entire world. Now, he has faced four criminal indictments since leaving office, but these accusations haven’t done much to sway his supporters, many of whom believe the accusations are nothing more than malicious lies. That made us question why these people are still so smitten with the reality television star-turned-politician.

In the decline of American politics, the book offers several specific tactics for dealing with populists and, in particular, how to refute their assertions that they only speak for “the silent majority” or “the real people.”

Americanists can benefit from the conceptual and theoretical insights presented in this book’s chapters authored by comparatists, contemporary politics experts, seasoned political scientists, historians, sociologists, communicators, cultural behaviorists, and social psychology scholars. Reading and applying the book’s highlights, practical and theoretical lessons, and insights can also aid US scholars, students, political pundits, pollsters, policymakers, and activists in putting events in perspective.

Democracy is still strong in the face of populism.

Vancouver, BC, Canada  
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Jose Felipe Pinto

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# Acknowledgements

I am grateful to all who provided invaluable assistance in the preparation of this volume. I would like to express my gratitude to all of the people who have contributed to this volume; they have taken on a pretty difficult task of thinking and reasoning beyond the state of the art. Bravo to each and every one of the authors who contributed to the book's chapters.

Profound thanks to my immediate family and extended family. I owe them a lot for believing in my work and for their vitally needed calming influence. You are the most adorable people I know, and I love you to bits more than you can ever imagine. Without you (MM, Dr. Ikie, Dr. Lola, Tit, Bro Y, Sis Aj, and Sis B), my days cannot be complete.

Without mentioning editors Johannes Glaeser, Niko Chtouris, and the Springer Nature Production team (G. K. Parthiban), who have been innovative and helpful and have provided me with so much encouragement and support throughout, it would be impossible to complete the acknowledgments.

Each and every one of you is appreciated. I'm grateful that I was able to work with all of you. Blessings!



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# Part I

## Introduction: The Rhetoric and Myth of a Diffuse Concept—Populism

### Prologue

#### *The Danger of Trumpian Populism*

The study of populism, both as a theoretical concept in political science (plus in several other allied fields) and as a heuristic descriptor of political regimes, has evolved over the past couple of decades to become nothing less than a small cottage industry in academia. Populism in contemporary political science has, to say the least, increasingly become a popular subject of study, but this is not without a legitimate, albeit tragic, reason. For, in terms of actual political practice, populism has, first, turned out to be a highly perilous toxic development from the perspective of democracy (generically but holistically understood to comprise both procedural and substantive democracy); second, it is a relatively global phenomenon that has gripped both industrially advanced nations and those seeking to follow in their footsteps; and third, it is a seemingly surprising development when viewed in terms of the post-World War II, as well as, later, post-Cold War trajectory of globalization of liberal representative democracy under Western sponsorship. In response to this global populist moment, which however one may look at it does not augur well for the future of peace and democracy in the world at the very time when it is beset with a number of serious challenges, including one that is of cataclysmic proportions (climate change), we felt it is necessary to advance the study of populism by putting together several books on the subject. This book is one of them, though in this instance, its geographic focus is primarily on a country that has had and continues to have determinative political and economic influence across the world, namely the United States of America (USA), and which also happens to be the country that first “gifted” to humanity the potential scourge of a nuclear Armageddon via the trigger-happy fingers of a rabid demagog. (Other published titles are *Handbook of Racism, Xenophobia and Populism*; *Globalization, Human Rights and Populism*; and *Politics Between Nations*, all published by Springer.)

The resurgence of populism, specifically right-wing populism, in the United States is unprecedented when viewed in terms of its national and to some extent even global impact. In its current virulent manifestation it has taken the form of what is generally referred to as “Trumpian Populism,” meaning it is right-wing populism that has, obviously, the demagogic colorations of Donald J. Trump, that is, someone who starts off his quest for the U.S. presidency as a political neophyte who has never held political office before, but by virtue of his presence on television as the host of a nationally popular reality TV show, coupled with possession of seemingly considerable inherited wealth (though falsely parlayed as the returns of a highly successful exemplary self-made businessman, notwithstanding a series of bankruptcies and questionable business practices), commands considerable public attention and eventually wins the U. S. presidency. At the same time, with buffoonery as one of his calling cards, his populist imprimatur on U. S. politics has been dictated by a biography characteristic of an unrepentant glory-seeking narcissist, but who has been shrewd enough to be able to cultivate via the mass media the pseudo image of “a man of the people.”

It must be conceded, however, that U.S. political scientists have been generally slow to react in scholarly terms, failing to foresee or gauge the relevance of populism on Trump’s appeal and much less provide practical policy suggestions to grapple with it. The study of populism, in contrast, has long been a priority for political scientists who focus on other geographical areas, particularly, South Africa and Europe. Against this shortcoming, in the chapters that follow we put the scholarly scalpel to Trumpian Populism before, during, and after he took office, via a range of subtopics, even as Trump makes a bid for the U. S. presidency for the third time with a backdrop of four indictments, making him the only president in U. S. history to face criminal charges (not to mention the two presidential impeachments): (a) the March 2023 indictment in New York involving the so-called hush-money payment to a porn star in 2016; (b) the June 2023 indictment in Miami relating to his theft of classified national defense documents upon leaving office; (c) the August 1st, 2023 indictment in Washington, DC, relating to Trump’s January 6th effort to illegally nullify the 2020 election results; and (d) the August 14, 2023 indictment in Fulton County, Georgia, for attempting to overturn the Georgia state elections in pursuit of his Big Lie of stolen elections.

The contributing authors, via 22 original chapters that make up this work, have approached their subject with analytical originality and scholarly enthusiasm. It attempts to grapple with the causes and workings of populism by exploring the interconnectedness of political intolerance, ego-identity seeking, hyper-anger, and phobia/fear.

What Donald is really composed of is explored in this book besides his vulgar declaration that he is “the master of the art of the deal.” However, Donald Trump’s true magic, conceit, or superpower is his ability to wriggle out of responsibility after sailing dangerously close to the law, accepted norms, and rules of politics, business and human life in a way that would have long since destroyed most public figures and nascent politicians.

“The Perils of Populism” is a thorough and well-respected work that is a priceless tool for academic researchers, decision-makers in government, graduate students, well-informed laypeople, and anyone else seeking a thorough grasp of Trumpian populism. This relevant, excellently written and readable book, makes a must-have for individuals willing to delve into the world of populism and international politics because its subject matter shines through.

This book is incredibly up-to-date, it discusses the current state of U. S. democracy and the threat posed by populism as well a new chapter that has emerged as the story of all of Trump’s legal woes deepen and intensify. There are many uncertainties surrounding the future of democracy in the United States and the liberal international order as 2023, the third year of the Biden administration, comes to a close.

A case in point is how a small group of far right G.O.P. led by Matt Gaetz backed by Trump threw the House of Representatives into chaos after Speaker Kevin McCarthy was ousted by his own party for the first time in the history of American politics. We need to note that bitter lopsided divisions within the Republican conference torpedoed California Republican Kevin McCarthy’s speakership after 269 days, less than 9 months in office and exactly 1000 days after the 2021 attack on the Capitol, and the third shortest term in US history. Thus, the unprecedented removal of the speaker, an enormously important position in the US government, deepens US political crisis. As some commentators observed, although the January 6 coup was not able to restore and keep Donald Trump in power, “more than two years later the forces behind it (the coup plotters) are emboldened and pressing the offensive.”

Republicans are stalemated over finding a new House speaker. GOP nominated its majority leader Steve Scalise and Judiciary Committee Chair, Jim Jordan, but their path to win the gavel and officially become the US House Speaker is uncertain. Jim Jordan (Trump’s key contact in Congress) might not be the heir apparent to Kevin McCarthy in being elevated to the position of House Speaker, denoted in the US Constitution as the second in line to the presidency after the vice president. As Liz Cheney and Cassidy Hutchinson put it, the gentleman from Ohio, Rep. Jim Jordan was “privy to about everything, if not everything, pertaining to January 6”, as one of the main actors in the Congress plotting with Donald Trump to overthrow the results of the 2020 US Presidential election.

And indeed, as Republicans search for a way out of the Speaker crisis, House Republicans Patrick McHenry, the (interim) Speaker pro tempore has no expanded power to consider any legislation to aid Israel in its Gaza war against Hamas or pass any appropriate bills or a deal to avoid a disruptive government shutdown and fund the federal government after November 17, 2023. The House of Representatives is now in a state of paralysis as it is not able to conduct legislative business or even pass a rules package for the first time in American history.

Some CNN commentators suggested as the House is on fire, why not a person like Liz Cheney as consensus centrist speaker?

A glaring example of the dangers of populism is shown as Republicans fail to coalesce around speaker choice, leaving US House in limbo. Instead of turning to



social media for propaganda war, “our fiercest fight and furious battle” of the twenty-first century is to save democracy. Democracy is the best international community has got, a contemporary democracy can be a good democracy, despite the global decline of presidentialism, rule of law, electoral and voting rights efficacy, freedom of the press. . . ., there is hope for our democracy to be resilient, if we are ready to fight for it, and we do things right. This is the mightiest cause of our times.

To that end, a number of perceptive chapters from this important book, which will be released in November of this year, can aid us in understanding where we are and where we might be going or “where we stand and might be headed” in these challenging times.

This book tells a compelling tale about defending a democracy that is under assault and provides a cohesive framework for comprehending these turbulent and political unpredictable times. A call to action for modernizing stale or outdated U. S. political structures or institutions in the United States political system. As the information is presented in a fair, objective, and coherent manner with sound-reasoning, readers with varying levels of prior understanding of American politics and populism can comprehend the essentials.

Let us end this piece by the words of Barrack Obama on Christiane Amanpour’s CNN world exclusive interview.

Despite populists easy exploit, democracy will win “if we fight for it.” On reacting to Trump’s four criminal indictments, former U.S. President Barack Obama says he’s optimistic that global democracy can win, but “our existing democratic institutions are creaky, and we’re going to have to reform them,” he says.

You can’t kill a nation but you can fix democracy to enhance democratic institutions in serving their citizens, for a just and free society.

A. Akande  
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# I the People, the Rhetoric of a “Would Be/Wanna Be” Goliath (Trump): On Populist Watch



Adebowale Akande , Jose Felipe Pinto, Ester R. Shapiro, and Titilola Akande

**Abstract** American style representative democracies that place a strong emphasis on individual freedom and capital have grown in popularity around the world during the so-called “American century”. Liberal/neoliberal democracy’s future appears hazy (with a chance of thunderstorms or tornadoes). Numerous international observers from all political spheres—activists, commentators, citizens, and academics documented the decline of democratic institutions, civil liberties, and norms alongside the startling rise and unexpected success of authoritarian populism, specifically its cultural and socioeconomic modalities. Trump built on a singular career at the intersections of money, media, and impunity to amass wealth and profit, through monetization of his impeachment trials, flirtations with autocrats (Putin) and White Nationalists, inciting insurrection, and numerous civil and criminal charges, most recently interfering with voters’ rights to illegally remain president. Convincing a lot of the rather naive Americans that the 2020 U.S. Presidential election was taken or “stolen” from the just President and concealing his affluence, promising to remove the corrupt political establishment and its swamp. Trump urges people who are now unable to live the “American dream” to increase their entitlement while making (racialized, feminist, or LGBTQ) scapegoats out of them by using fiery speech, dissident appeals, and plebiscite-style links. In order to achieve this goal of sowing seeds of mistrust, suspicion, and resentment, Trump repeatedly used Twitter (now rebranded “X” by Elon Musk) as a weapon to blame-

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mock ‘others’ and held campaign rallies during his presidency in order to maximize “entertainment/spectacle” while concealing how he made money from the position. Racial injustice and its script, which includes segregation, economic and educational disparities, and the dehumanization of “others,” continue to draw sharp divisions in American political worldviews. Populism is harmful in democracies everywhere. However, it can be the pharmakon of democracy but we need intensive education to ‘diagnose’ and resist lying politicians and “mind-manipulators.”

**Keywords** Donald Trump · Art of Falsehood-Fakery-Mockery · Jan 6 Capitol riot · Impeachments · Democracy · Big Lie · 2020 US Presidential Elections · Truth · Manhattan district attorney’s office · Stormy Daniels · USA · Hush Money · George Orwell · Wokeness · QAnon · Fantasy · Invasion · Trumpism · Criminal indictments or Criminal charges · Populism · Fifth wave of global terrorism · Cultural populism · Pharmakon · I The People

## Introduction and Background

We sub-titled this book *The End of the American Century?*, intentionally questioning the self-appointed, self-promoting positioning of the United States as Western world savior during the Wars that were European for the motivations and world for the consequences, and subsequently become the house on top of the hill, i.e. “the world’s policeman” bringing its profitable weapons to world-wide conflict zones (Rana, 2020). Henry Luce, Time magazine publisher, introduced this term in 1941, when the political and economic benefits of war-time mobilization were becoming visible, what General and then President Dwight Eisenhower termed “the military-industrial complex” as a destructive force in U.S. life. In fact, some of us date the start of the “American Century” with the U.S. “fake news” in 1898, accusing Spain of blowing up the ship USS Maine in Havana Harbor, providing an excuse to launch a war with Spain. Under the guise of fighting Colonialism in the hemisphere, the Spanish American war in fact resulted in acquisition of selected “protectorates” or colonies in the Caribbean (especially Cuba and Puerto Rico), and in Asia (especially Guam and the Philippines). Although our book is focused on Trump’s variant of populism and the U.S. experience, we find it useful to apply global perspectives which help us to avoid the “American exceptionalism” (as if all the Americas belonged to the United States) resulting from U.S. dominance in so many academic disciplines (for this critique of ethnocentrism (see Christopher et al., 2014).

After many years of studying how to get away with economic crimes, and closely observing how to best use media to position himself as a celebrity (Haberman, 2020, M. Trump, 2020), Trump gained close allies and a platform with television reality show “The Apprentice” which built on myths of his great business management acumen and extraordinary wealth. Once elected President, he continued to use these sources, including the National Enquirer and Fox News, while showing immense skill in exploiting Twitter (“X”) and other social media to amplify political tribalism

(Tufecki, 2018; Young, 2021). In the 2018 Special issue of MIT Technology Review (Kelly & Francois, 2018). A Vision of Division vividly illustrates the multiple players in U.S. media, politics, and chillingly, foreign powers including Russia and Iran.

The United States of America developed its current status as the world’s most dominant economic and military power through the 20th century, enduring even through the destructive actions of Trump’s Presidency and challenges of a global pandemic, caused in Trump’s words, by the Chinese virus. The global standing of the United States has improved on average, since Biden took office (Akande, 2023). However, the United States is no longer the sole major power on the new geopolitical blocs that will govern the future (Burns, 2019; Friedberg, 2023; Swanson, 2023). The world is on the threshold of “vertical globalization” with fragmented global production giving corporations greater control of products and markets, creating new geopolitical blocs emerging world-wide.

With these emergent developments, the world seems to be ‘dashing’ out from globalization’s fantasied ‘one group for all’ to a world of opposing geopolitical, economic, and ideological blocs. Moreover, more than a multipolar world the coming world order will be a multi-order world in which every order will define its own principles (Pinto, 2023a). China’s Xi Jinping and his suddenly, and obviously momentary, close friendship with Russia’s Vladimir Putin of Russia was based on belief that “American wants to block the revisionist ambitions and deny them a sphere of influence commensurate with their power” (Friedberg, 2023; Swanson, 2023). Putin and Xi have developed “intense animosity to the ideas and the governing principles behind the functioning of liberal democracies” (Friedberg, 2023; Swanson, 2023). To counter the West both leaders have developed their own programs combining authoritarianism, nationalism, statism, appeals to history and traditional values to counter West’s threat of legitimacy and universalism. “If its democracy did not die, the United States still has a good chance to continue to play leadership role and claim supremacy as the world’s pivotal power—still with a better hand to play than any of its rivals”—Russia and China (Friedberg, 2023).

Before the signature of their no-limits partnership in February 2022, Russia and China were already using sharp power to control not only the heart but also the mind of the politicians and the public opinion in different regions of the world (Pinto, 2022; 2023a).

In his 2022 book, *The Revenge of Power*, scholar, economist and social justice activist Moses Naim proposes that an authoritarianism has grown in a complex world, autocrats now come into power primarily through democratic elections, then use strategies of Populism, Polarization, and Post-Truth to consolidate their control and continue in power. Naim makes the clarifying point that Populism is a strategy to gain power, and NOT an ideology. In the same sense, in his 2017 book *Populism and Democracy* Populist dynamics in the European Union, Pinto has proved that populism is not an ideology, despite using ideological elements but not in coherent way. The changing nature of economic and political competitiveness worldwide has made the world more complex, packed, competitive and complicated to navigate geopolitically. Consequently, the post-cold war global order has shifted dramatically,

creating unprecedented rivalry to challenge American singular dominance as a global leader (Friedberg, 2023; Swanson, 2023). The great power competition is back as China can no longer allow the United States to totally dominate and claim unrivaled position of strength. Xi Jinping, the Chinese leader, does not believe in the old Xiaoping's philosophy of "hide your strengths and bide your time." China aspires to be a global economic peer of the United States while supplanting it at the very least as the leading power in Asia and if not in the entire world (Burns, 2019; Friedberg, 2023; Swanson, 2023; Zakaria, 2016). Indeed, China's proposal of a harmonious post-hegemonic world is a fallacy (Pinto, 2023a). China's growing belligerence and increasing military strength have made it a big threat to its wealthy and very able neighbors—Japan, South Korea, Australia, Taiwan, and India. All these neighboring nations now have massively increased their defense spending. This recent acceleration resulted from ongoing Russian aggression on Ukraine. Not surprisingly, what is going on in Ukraine and fear of Putin's Russian fire power have propelled both Finland and Sweden to align themselves with other European democracies by officially joining NATO (Burns, 2019; Friedberg, 2023; Swanson, 2023).

## **The Normative and Evaluative “Myth” of a Diffuse Concept: Populism**

In contemporary politics, populism has become a ‘floaty’ ideology, that is, a “floating signifier” (Hall, 2021) which changes meanings depending on its intended purpose (Farkas & Schou, 2018). Populism is defined most simply as a political strategy restoring “power to the people” rather than rule by an elite, though as the ancient saying goes and this book's chapters illustrate: “There's many a slip ‘twixt the cup and the lip”. While populism as a political strategy can be mobilized by many forms of ideology and governance, most recently it has multiplied in Europe's right and populists have gained ground around the world. Arguably, populism is one of the most relevant concepts to the study of global politics and party politics (Piccolino & Soare, 2021). The four most populous democracies have had populist rulers, starting from Joko Widodo (Indonesia), Jair Bolsonaro (Brazil), and Lula da Silva (Brazil), Narendra Modi (India) to Donald Trump in the United States. At present it has increased from 4 to 20 populist regimes worldwide.

To understand the contemporary status of populism, it is useful to consider a global perspective, within which populism offered both “promise and peril”, as in the work of Carlos de la Torre whose global perspective centers on Latin America (de la Torre, 2014) and considers an evolving global political landscape (de la Torre, 2022). Current writings reflecting political processes at the moment are more focused on “The Perils of Populism” (Tobias & Stein, 2022), particularly from the standpoint of populist leaders like Trump as promising to restore a lost paradise of White male supremacy in which everyone “knew their place”. Tobias and Stein, in their edited collection of essays note that growing global economic precarity fuels

the growth of populism as a “brand” offering a return to dominance, at least for some.

Given these complexities, how do we further define populism? From only observing regimes such as Cardenas of Mexico, Vargas of Brazil, Peron of Argentina, Hugo Chavez of Venezuela to Donald Trump in the United States, it is hard to grasp exactly what populism means. It is a phenomenon gaining strength from region to region around the world but still without a credible conceptual underpinning. But it is a web of beliefs and actions ‘embedded in deep feelings of discontent’ not only with prevailing governmental policies and practices but social life in general (Ranciere, 2016; Salaj & Grbesa, 2022; Spruyt et al, 2016). According to Fareed Zakaria, historically, populism has come in left-and right-wing variants of the political spectrum, spearheaded by a charismatic ‘strongman’ who acts as the ‘voice of the people’. But the right-wing populism is gaining ground globally at the moment. We have had the center-left moving closer to the center in the Western countries due to the far-left critique of the mainstream left. For example, Bill Clinton and Tony Blair center-left parties in the United States and the United Kingdom moved closer toward the center after the coldwar years. In a way, this helped creat a gap that could be filled by populists (Zakaria, 2016). As Pollack wrote in 1961 “populism had a peculiar notion of freedom”. Man was free only when society encouraged the fullest possible development of human potentiality. Addressing the mammoth Tattersall rally, which climaxed the 1894 People’s party campaign in Chicago, H.D. Loyd declared: “The people’s party is more than the organized discontent of the people. It is the organized aspiration of the people for fuller fuller, nobler, richer, kindlier life for every man, woman, and child in the ranks of humanity.” Seeking to enhance human self-fulfillment, it could not be a temporary phenomenon: “The people’s party is not a passing cloud on the political sky”. It is not a transient gust of popular discount caused by bad crops or hard times. Rather, “It is an uprising of principle, and the millions who espoused this principle will not stop until they have become incorporated into the constitution of the government and the framework of society.” Thus, the goal of Populism was “the hope of realizing and incarnating in the lives of the common people the fullness of the divinity of humanity” (Pollack, 1961).

In their concern with populism as a ‘spurious’ process, Akande and Johansen’s interest ia in the contextual and evaluative nature of populism. With massive apologies to George Orwell and his “Animal Farm,” some animals really, trully are more equal than others, or cultivae the beliefs that they are “more” (Akande & Johansen, 2023; Johansen, 2020a).

More destructively, these animals believe they are entitled to more of society’s resources and privileges, including the right to dehumanize and exploit “inferior” others. Our animal, in our times, Donald J. Trump, who has been playing the “more equal than others” game most of his privileged life, to American woe. This problem got really serious for the electorate of the United States (not to mention the rest of the world) in 2016 when he was elected President of what once declared itself the most Animal Farmish “Democracy” in the “Free World.”

What is Populism? Populism is a political genre or an ever-contested concept with an ever-increasing attention that believes it is the champion for the common (pure) people against the corrupt elite or establishment (Hunger & Paxton, 2021). Operating at multiple levels, it can be described as a communicative parlance, a political strategy or stratagem, or a mentality (Piccolino & Soare, 2021; Tarchi, 2016) or an ideology (Laclau, 1977; Mudde, 2004), style of politics (Knight, 1998), specific discourse (Hawkins, 2009) or the political strategy (Weyland, 2001" (Pappas, 2013, pp 2–3), as we; as a way of articulating the discourse aiming at the fight for hegemony, mainly in the political dimension (Pinto, 2017). As an amorphous and often deceptively applied term (as a “floating signifier” with lack of precise meaning—notational diffusion) that makes it mean different things to different sets of people. All of the quotations above covered by Pollack (1961) all untrue about populism. We have travelled a long way since the 1890s and the global labor movements supporting the dignity of a living wage for everyone, even/ working-class women, the formerly enslaved and European and other immigrants escaping of colonizers and empires. At this time, all we can say about populism is bundle of negatives. Before populism reaches power, taking into account the performance of some representatives, one should question if populism could represent an opportunity to improve the democratic system. However, after its initial phase, populism proved that, once in power, it becomes a threat to representative democracy because it creates an illiberal model obeying the leader’s voice. It is a top-bottom model, and all the intermediary bodies are rebuilt according to the leader’s will, as Orban is doing in Hungary. We appreciate that some communities hunger for this form of authoritarian leadership, we see this today as in the 2023 campaigns leading to the 2024 U.S. Presidential election, Trump’s popularity only grows with each of his many indictments, most recently for election fraud in the state of Georgia. As with the federal indictment for interfering with voting rights, Fanni Willis, Fulton County, Georgia District Attorney strategically selected RICO laws, historically used for Mafia criminal networks. So, for this one, we also have 18 indicted allies who conspired to commit a variety of criminal acts to get a “win” for Trump. Many believe Trump wants to become President again to pardon himself (thought this legally questionable) at the Federal level. At the state level, Presidents have some power to pardon. These political processes and legal cases will be ongoing, and we have planned this book to support the “continuing education” all of us need to understand and learn to respond to these threats, regardless of our geographical locations. Trump. Currently, populism’s worldwide offer is packed with a deleterious or pernicious mix of authoritarianism, xenophobia, and racism- be it anti-establishment or established institutions, anti-intellectualism, anti-democracy—mainstream politics or anti-elites and anti-globalism and immigration. With scholar interest now particularly moving from discursive political movement to populism as an alternate governing party or ‘reigning ideology,’ the term has gained more momentum (cf. Friedberg, 2023; Urbinati, 2019a; Zakaria, 2016; Zomerski, 2023). According to experts, with all the twists and turns, the term populism has been disputed, quarreled over, twisted around, blurred, and used to describe a differing variety of phenomenal beliefs, discourses and movements in the past, as far back as

the late 19th century and until the recent victory or surge in the Western World at the ballot boxes for charismatic populist leaders like Donald Trump, and Victor Orban (see Laclau, 2005; Urbinati, 2019a; Zomerski, 2023).

Pinto (2022, p. 3) states that “since the middle of the nineteenth century, when Herzen created the word in Tsarist Russia, populism remains as a sort of Cinderella’s hoe or Teumessian fox never destined to be caught”, before proposing a new sevenfold typology anti-system or anti-establishment, bottom-top, top-bottom or pluto populism, socioeconomic cultural or identitarian, digital of 2.0., and transnational or civilizational.

The “liberal” or neoliberal global economic order (aka liberal order), as Hedrick-Wong put it, is in terminal decline. This is mainly because of its gradual shrinking the West’s economic dominance (the United States in particular). And because of the rise of populism within Western countries themselves, an unprecedented challenge to the legitimacy of the liberal order since its inception, in the 1950s. Although the rise of China is a game changer, the gradual decline of West’s economic dominance has been in the making for a long period of time (Hedrick-Wong, 2019; Zakaria, 2016). As Hedrick-Wong further explained, this displacement will also affect the loyalty of the multilateral institutions that are the backbone of the liberal order as they are created by the West in its own image (Hedrick-Wong, 2019). The repercussion of this new set of realities is that as ‘China’s economic clout continues to grow’, it has started to see itself as an autonomous ‘civilizational state endowed with its own unique values and traditions’ hence kicking against ‘Western values’ claim of universality’ (Hedrick-Wong, 2019; Zomerski, 2023). The repercussion of this new set of realities is that as ‘China’s economic clout continues to grow’, it has started to see itself as an autonomous ‘civilizational state endowed with its own unique values and traditions’ hence kicking against ‘Western values’ claim of universality’ (Hedrick-Wong, 2019; Zomerski, 2023). This may end up in a bipolar world whereby China will continue to rise unabated without much effective hindrance from the West, “despite the West trying to ring fence China’s technological capacity and contain its investment abroad” (Hedrick-Wong, 2019, p. 18). To a degree not yet crystalized by public debate, some experts (including Hedrick-Wong, 2019), posited that the world will see a new cold war between a beleaguered West fighting against a rising China.

This may result in the world breaking up into two disconnected blocs confronting each other on many issues with geopolitical tensions rising. The rise of populism in turn will deplete the political capital of governments in the West that are trying to uphold and defend the liberal order—amid flourishing Russia–China partnership, which should not be underestimated.

However, the coming world order is far from consensual. For example, Flockhart (2018) proposes a multi-order world and Pinto (2023a) develops that idea saying that three orders are already well-defined: Liberal, Eurasian, and Silk Belt and Road Orders, while a fourth—Islamic Order—may become a reality and a threat—mainly for the Liberal Order.

This introduction will situate the book within an extensive investigative framework into a critically-engaged literature of populism through a critical reading of the



life and persona of former President Donald Trump. It provides discussions and critical insights into the personalization of political conflicts and violence in U.-S. politics. With an overview of the book, it uncovers the interplay of populism with anti-democratic tendencies, offering solutions for the impact of populism-in-power over modern democracy.

## Epitome of Populism

We offer this introductory chapter in the spirit of John A. Powell's work with "Others" (University of California, Berkeley's Othering and Belonging Institute) and the work of Akande and his associates (Akande & Johansen 2023; Johansen & Akande 2022; Pinto, 2018, 2022, 2023a, 2023b).

Concurrent with the above major lines of analysis, however, was a critical torrent of a somewhat similar nature on the criticism of populism and one of its towering figures, Donald Trump. As Akande and Johansen (2023) explain, Trump was making a case that one did not even need a majority of votes in the Electoral College nor, even the popular vote to win the presidency of the United States. All one had to have was the name Donald J. Trump, and his performance sensibility, developed through years of "apprenticeship" in which he studied Page 6 of the Society column of the New York Post alongside lawyer Roy Cohn's tutelage about how to get away with everything (Haberman, 2022; M. L. Trump, 2022).

During the 2016 electoral campaign, Trump presented himself "as the voice of the forgotten people and accused Hillary Rodham Clinton of being the voice of the establish interests". Moreover, "he did not care about his hard words and opted intentionally for an incendiary discourse." Later, after becoming president, Trump maintained his populist style, but he did not succeed on his intention of capturing power because "after all, in the USA, the presidential term is short and, despite several amendments, the Constitution is still the one elaborated by the Founding Fathers and a country is not a business." Trump managed his fraudulent business practices by outlasting his challengers in court, for example, the many workers who went unpaid when his Atlantic City Casino construction project failed. Does anyone remember Trump University? Or Trump Steaks? His niece Mary Trump (M. L. Trump, 2022) offers a useful analysis of this predatory "family business" strategy.

From the above perspective, Akande and Johansen reasoned that:

In 2024, Trump was running for president once again, and the Word down on the rancid sewer that we have come to call the Internet, the Animal Farm of our time, the Word had become that anyone who deviated from animals that are more equal than others was practicing "wokeness," or "wokefulness."

Please tell me what "Wokeness" really means. Lately, it seems to have become an all-purpose Republican slur for anyone who disagrees with them on matters of public policy. Once upon a time, in the days just after George Floyd was murdered in Minneapolis, it came to mean anyone, often Black, who had "awoken" from the standard-issue lies told by Trump & Co., et al., down on Animal Farm. That was

then. These days, “woke,” with a dash of Black dialect, has become the whitest animal on the Animal Farm? Wokers, what *this* really mean? Or are we in a post-meaning age in which nuthin’ means less than that?

As this book is being prepared for the press, the civil and criminal indictments are flowing with accelerating force. All hands on deck seem to be preparing for multiple indictments of our ‘man’ who is more equal than others. Many of Trump’s violations of law, and evidence supporting these, have been flaunted in public view, suggesting his deep belief in his impunity. The party is apparently over, as Trump has more than met his match in legal acumen and persistence. Given the current moments—with Trump’s indictment on multiple Federal charges carefully crafted by Attorney Jack Smith (an astute lawyer most recently working for the International Court) to be clearly prosecutable and NOT in any way about “free speech” but rather “speech” in the service of crimes. And Trump’s indictment in Georgia was also carefully crafted under the RICO Act. Inciting insurrection was left off the list of federal charges as potentially ambiguous, but criminally violating the rights of voters to have their votes counted is on it.

Trump’s federal crimes have been documented by six “unindicted co-conspirators” all apparently his lawyers offering evidence to avoid their own prosecution. The Georgia case involved a wider range of allies whom he hoped would deliver the votes he needed for a “win”. Historically, Trump often fails to pay his lawyers, but in 2023, he is spending lavishly on legal fees, using donated money from his campaign donations. Which crimes will finally bring a reckoning? Will it be the hush-money payment Trump’s lawyer Michael Cohen arranged in 2016 to silence pornographic film star Stormy Daniels, disguised as legal fees, designed to protect Candidate Trump from offending his Christian fundamentalist base? In 2018, Michael Cohen was convicted and jailed for illegal campaign contributions, and since that experience has chosen to speak openly of his work as Trump’s legal “fixer” (Cohen, 2020) and to share insider insights on Trump’s use of the Justice Department against his perceived enemies (Cohen, 2022).

Columnist Jean Carroll only sued Trump in civil court, winning a civil defamation lawsuit and a sexual assault charge but no “rape” because New York State law requires penetration by a penis, not a finger or object. Famously, during his 2016 campaign for the Presidency, shortly before the Iowa caucus, Trump bragged: I could stand in the middle of Fifth Avenue and shoot someone and not lose any voters”. Or will the winning criminal case come from one of Trump’s many former managers and “fixers”? All of the above or none? No matter what, or which, will we be treated once again to more Trump slithering act - into trouble and out again? Bear in mind that no president or ex-president in United States history has vacated the White House with more than two impeachments? Do I hear three?

The Manhattan district attorney’s office has signaled that charges, related to Trump’s reported hush-money payments to the porn star Stormy Daniels, *are likely*. At the U.S. Weather Service “likely” will get you a 60–70% chance of rain, or snow, or bewildering stares from officers of the court. And true on March 30, 2023, Donald Trump was indicted on criminal charges in New York for his role in organizing hush money payments to the porn star Stormy Daniels during the 2016 campaign.

According to Guardian Newspaper, the history making indictment marks the first time a president has been criminally charged. Further many court investigations are going on about Trump's conduct in numerous probes. With Jack Smith's brilliantly written indictments, we no longer need to lament that the first cases were not necessarily the most meaningful displays of Trump's misadventures. Many people find the repeated attempts to suppress Black urban votes among Trump's most offensive missteps, for the reasons of principle. The artful/draft dodger (with allegedly crippling bone spurs) has finally met, in Jack Smith, someone with superb dance moves and impeccable strategy.

In 2022, on a conservative talk radio show, Trump [said](#) that if he were indicted "I think you'd have problems in this country the likes of which perhaps we've never seen before. I don't think the people of the United States would stand for it." That, the same afternoon that he called the rioters "[We love you. You're very special.](#)" (Blow, 2023). This blessing was delivered to fine patriots who had been urinating on the floor of the Capitol Rotunda. Mr. Dylan: Is this "Desolation Row?" Dear old, deceased Dad: Is it "Bullshit?"

"Wokness," wrote Jamelle Bouie in the *New York Times*, is speaking of the failed Silicon Valley Bank, that it failed because it took on too many "diversity" programs. Not bad banking, mind you. Wokineering. Getting jobs for non-white people. Really? Is the banking world really that simple? Hire some people of color and women and go broke? How's that again? What about the other 99.5% of banks out there with "woke" hiring policies that have not gone broke?

Real work involves some mental ability to think about how to support or refute a speculation. Donald Trump can evade supporting his suppositions thousands of times a year merely by ignoring simple facts. "Woke" college professors have to support their conclusions with actual references. What a bore!

The governor of Florida, Ron DeSantis, [also spoke to Fox News](#) about the collapse of SVB, and he also blamed the bank's diversity programs. "I mean, this bank, they're so concerned with D.E.I. and politics and all kinds of stuff. I think that really diverted from them focusing on their core mission," he said.

[A headline](#) in the *New York Post* declared, "While Silicon Valley Bank Collapsed, Top Executive Pushed 'Woke' Programs." And over at The Wall Street Journal, Andy Kessler [wondered](#) whether "the company may have been distracted by diversity demands." This point of view was spreading like a virus.

## **Falsehood-Fakery-Mockery or Insanity? Or Both?**

Akande and Johansen drew attention to the danger of truncated truth ("alt-facts" aka "Fake News"). Donald J. Trump's style of political leadership can do to a democracy (Akande & Johansen, 2023). Because deep division or political polarization is prevalent at everywhere in the United States. Political polarization is a big threat and cankerworm that has eaten at the heart of the American psyche and the American way of life. Consequently, affecting individual selfhood, families' silhouette, the

public and corporation world, schools, neighborhoods, civic and religious organizations, stressing the fabric of a society founded on an unequal basic right (Akande, 2023).

One working definition of insanity describes a person who constructs his or her own world, and then behaves as if he or she is living in it. If that person is powerful, exceptionally delusional, and able to attract a large following, a great number of other people (even the entire Earth) may suffer (Johansen, 2020a; Johansen & Akande, 2022).

By a fluke of Electoral College luck, or rather, by outdated Electoral College design privileging White rural voters, in 2016 Donald J. Trump won the presidency of the United States, although he fell almost 3 million popular votes short. He carried about a third of the electorate along as strong supporters on a journey where truncated truth (“alt facts”) came to be accepted—a weird mixture of George Orwell’s Big Brother, the Roman emperor Caligula, and Captain Kangaroo, as Trump constructed a house of fanciful conspiracy theories and outright lies in which he repeatedly accused responsible news media of peddling “fake news” and operating as “enemies of the people.” By October 2019, Trump and his corps of supporters were calling the subsequent impeachment a “kangaroo court” Did that make the U.S. Constitution “fake news?” I’d like to bring a few of the U.S. founders to our present time to witness this spectacle. I’m sure Benjamin Franklin would have something pithy to say. It’s time to call on Poor Richard.

As Akande and Johansen, further observe, the British historian Arnold Toynbee asserted in 1931 (14 years after President Woodrow Wilson had proclaimed, even as he white-washed the federal government of black employees) that the sufferings of World War I would make the world safe for democracy: “Men and women all over the world were seriously contemplating and frankly discussing the possibility that the Western system of Society might break down and cease to work” (Lepore, 2020, p. 20). “The liberal state is destined to perish,” predicted Benito Mussolini in 1932, 11 years after his forces had marched into Rome. “The present century is the century of authority; a century of the Right; a Fascist century,” he pronounced (Lepore, 2020, p. 20). Lenin and Stalin, the founders of practicing Marxism rode the high saddle in their new Soviet Union. Franco took power in Spain. And, of course, Hitler, in 1933, took Germany. The Japanese seized Manchuria as the feeble League of Nations stood by wringing its bureaucratic hands. Felix Frankfurter, soon to become a U.S. Supreme Court Justice, wrote, in 1930, “Epitaphs for democracy are the fashion of the day” (Lepore, 2020, 20). Lindberg, best known for the first flight over the Atlantic Ocean in 1927, took another flight to Europe, to collect an Iron Cross from Nazi stand-ins for Hitler, for aiding the Nazi cause in the United States. Liberal democracy in the United States was taking its lumps from proto-fascist voices such as Father Charles E. Coughlin (whose main channel of alt-fakery, as the Rush Limbaugh of his day, was radio).

In the United States, there was one very important difference with the Trump regime: the country elected the center-left Franklin Delano Roosevelt four terms in a row, as the United States fought Germany to its east, and Japan to its west, allying with Stalin’s communists. By contrast, Trump has sought alliances with every

authoritarian he could find, in Russia, Turkey, the Philippines, Poland, Brazil, China, and more.

Trump's opinions have attracted considerable opposition. Conservative attorney [George Conway](#) (husband of White House Counselor to the president Kelly Anne Conway) called Trump a "sociopath" and a "con man" on October 16, 2019. "He lies because he's a sociopath, a con man—to deceive others," Conway said. "But he also lies because he's a pathological narcissist—to deceive himself, to protect his fragile ego from narcissistic injury," he added (Johansen, [2020a](#); [2020b](#)). To that, one may add: He lies because it works for him. Look at his job title and his net worth.

Johansen and Akande ([2022](#), x) concede that "using the politics of insecurity and insult, Trump mobilized his base to undermine the political and socioeconomic voices of African Americans and women, especially women of color." Moreover, during the presidential term, "trivial lies; exaggerations and self-aggrandizing lies, lies to deceive the public; and egregious lies were a constant, being the fourth type "the most serious lies of Donald Trump" because he made "false statements that were demonstrably to well-known facts." There may be hope, however, in the fact that Trump's zone of control has not (yet) extended to overwhelming repression of freedom of expression guaranteed to us by the U.S. Constitution's First Amendment.

Though not for lack of trying. According to Pinto ([2023](#)), "in the USA there is an effective separation of powers, despite the presidential being the system of Governments, because the checks and balances system works." Thus, "the misfortune of Trump is the fortune of American democracy; this fortune resides in the Constitution of the United States, which is not only hard to revise but moreover based on a federal system that adds to the institutional containment of the executive power" (Urbinati, [2019a](#), p. 222).

By 2018, it had become rather obvious that Trump's proposed impeachment would include an indictment by the House of Representatives and an acquittal by the Senate, nearly totally along party lines. *New York Times* columnist Paul Krugman had the long-term situation expertly nailed by late 2019:

The [impeachment] inquiry hasn't found a smoking gun. It has found what amounts to a smoking battery of artillery. Yet almost no partisan Republicans have turned on Trump and his high crimes-and-misdemeanors collaborators. Why not? The answer gets to the heart of what's wrong with modern American politics: the G.O.P. is now a thoroughly corrupt party. Trump is "a symptom, not the disease, and our democracy will remain under dire threat even if and when he's gone" (Krugman, [2019](#), A-23).

As Akande and Johansen, further note, the operative words here are *if* and *when*. He may win the 2020 election; he may lose it and refuse to relinquish the office. In that case, the United States' two-centuries-plus experiment in flawed democracy may be over. Conversion from a Republic to a dictatorship is not unprecedented. The Romans did it (Glueck & Stevens, [2019](#)).

Reflecting upon his sense of impunity, by late October 2019, Trump was learning that no matter how he manipulated the levers of political power, he was viscerally hated by some audiences. On the evening of October 27, he decided to take in a game of the 2019 baseball World Series with Melania, in Washington, D.C. because the Nationals had become the first District of Columbia team to reach the Series since 1933 (as the Senators). Trump, still congratulating himself as commander in chief the day after U.S. military forces had forced Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, founder of ISIS, to kill himself, he faced a wall of boos as soon as his presence in the stadium was announced. Soon, a coordinated chant of “LOCK HIM UP!” rolled around the 42,000 people at the ballpark, getting louder with each pass. Later, some fans behind home plate held a sign reading “VETERANS FOR IMPEACHMENT”.

## Trump’s Unlimited Fantasies

According to Akande and Johansen, (2023), often it is very difficult to keep Donald Trump’s fantasies straight. One day, he accuses Google of fabricating 3 million votes for Hilary Clinton in the 2016 presidential election, which explains (to him, at any rate) why he didn’t win the popular vote in 2016. On another occasion, several times, Trump said that Clinton had transported convicts from state to state, having them vote several times to increase her total of popular votes. *How* the convicts managed to invent voting credentials in all of these states was left to the imaginations of his “base.” (Glueck & Stevens, 2019, A- 15).

On August 20, 2019, Trump said that anyone of Jewish faith who voted for a Democrat for president was betraying his or her religion. Bernie Sanders, who was running for president as a Democrat (who is Jewish), 2 days after the El Paso shootings (March 3, 2019), wrote on Twitter: “Most of my father’s family was brutally murdered at the hands of Hitler’s white supremacist regime—a regime that came to power on a wave of violence and hatred against racial and religious minorities. We cannot allow that cancer to grow here” (Glueck & Stevens, 2019, A-15).

As Trump, supposedly reacting to the El Paso shooting, reading from a Teleprompter, was telling the nation that “There is no place for hatred here,” his re-election apparatus was flooding Facebook with advertising meant to instill fear about an “invasion,” part of a barrage of advertising (2000 ads on Facebook alone) focused on immigration, a dominant theme of his 2020 re-election campaign (Glueck & Stevens, 2019, A-15). White-supremacist hatred isn’t just a poisonous belief held by isolated individuals. It is a group phenomenon, that is, according to the FBI, is the greatest terrorist threat to America. Racially motivated violent extremism, mostly from white supremacists who also have carried out the most lethal attacks on American soil in recent years, made up a majority of domestic terrorism threats, Christopher A. Wray, director of the FBI, told the House of Representatives Homeland Security Committee September 17, 2020. Wray also said that also said that

Russia had mounted an intense disinformation campaign aimed at the campaign of Joe Biden, and favoring Donald Trump, write Akande and Johansen, (2023).

## Orwellian Slippery Slope

Trump makes and ‘Orwellian slippery slope, even more slippery’. As Donald Trump lives in an Orwellian world where the racists are nearly always black and brown, and where “clean” coal and oil are our environmental salvation, giving the United States the cleanest air and water in the world (Akande & Johansen, 2023; Johansen & Akande, 2022; Johansen, 2020a). The United States ranks about 17th in both categories, but Trump makes up his own alternative facts and calls anyone who disagrees with him a spreader of “fake news” at best, or an “enemy of the people,” a phrase originated by Joseph Stalin to designate anyone who was being delivered to the Gulag after a show trial using what Trump might call “alt-facts.” The phrase “Drain the swamp” originated with Mussolini in reference to Italy’s famously corrupt and inept public infrastructure (Akande & Johansen, 2023).

As with racism, so it was with matters of environmental protection. Trump, whose policies seek to deliver public lands (including the Alaska National Wildlife Refuge and many others) to private developers, just as Washington State Governor Jay Inslee wrote “at the exact moment when we need to stop burning fossil fuels and urgently transition to clean energy”.

In Trump’s world, the rich are continually under attack and require a stream of new tax cuts to nourish their entrepreneurial spirit. The facts are the opposite, as Trump fulfills the textbook definition of fascism, as an advocate of corporate control of the political system (Johansen, 2023). The onset of corporate control that is emblematic of fascism may be notable in concentration of wealth. The 160,000 households in the United States that comprise the top 0.1% in 1963 possessed 10% of the country’s wealth. In 2012, they possessed 22%. The bottom 90% possessed about 35% of the country’s wealth in the middle 1980s and 23% in 2015.

Also indicative of fascism’s development (e.g., corporate control) is satisfaction of corporate desires by the political process. In 2014, several Princeton University political scientists studied policy outcomes on 1779 issues in 1980 and 2002. They found that the rich (the “economic elite” in their study) “had, by far, the best chance of turning their policy choices into reality.” The second most influential group were special interest groups represented by lobbying organizations, which were active in proscribing legislation. The middle class, those without wealth or (usually) direct representation via lobbyists, had a “near zero” chance of influencing the course of legislation, even when polls indicated that their views were shared by a majority of voters. The study concluded: “When a majority of citizens disagrees with economic elites or with organized interests, they generally lose”. This is *not* the textbook definition of democracy, write Akande & Johansen, (2023).

In a democracy, public debate must share definitions of truth. When we read that President Trump believes that that the United States under his regime has the best



environmental record of any country in the world, we had to laugh to the point of nearly gagging. I must dissect his statements as pure lies, doing things we were taught *not* to do as a journalist long ago, but which have become necessary now: calling a lie a lie, and doing it over and over. We emerged from this story feeling as if it really is “1984,” but we are in the unique position of still being able to express ourselves because we still have a constitution that is taken seriously, for now. Even so, we can’t get out of my head the letter we received from a colleague in Texas saying she couldn’t take part in this book without endangering her job because of Trump-friendly interests (see Akande & Johansen, 2023; Johansen & Akande, 2022).

## **U.S. Constitution? Trump Calls for the Termination of the Constitution**

Numerous news networks including CNN reported, Donald Trump on Friday on Friday, December 3, 2022, took to his alternative social media platform, Truth Social, that the Twitter revelations were sufficient enough to either invalidate the results of the 2020 election and declare him the “right winner” or to hold a new election. Furthermore, he claimed that “Massive Fraud” of that sort should be enough “for the termination of all our rules, regulations, and articles, even those found in the Constitution.”

In a state governed by the rule of law, Constitution is the supreme Law, and the president is obliged to pledge loyalty to it.

Trump was so ignorant of the Constitution and customary presidential protocol that fumbles and stumbles by him and his staff became the subject of cutting commentary nearly every day. A president who ridicules the Constitution is something like a carpenter who can’t use a hammer. He is going to hit his thumb without realizing what he has done, or how he did it. The idea of summoning the G7 to a world conference at Trump’s own resort in Miami, Florida was dripping with violations of the emoluments clause. Someone probably reminded Trump that he was granting a massive federal contract to himself, a blatantly illegal act, because he canceled it 3 days later (Akande & Johansen, 2023).

In shaping the sensemaking of all these issues, Akande and Johansen (2023) continue by saying On October 17, 2019, Trump’s acting chief of staff, Mick Mulvaney outlined a quid-pro-quo with respect to Ukraine (\$391 million in military aid in trade for an investigation of Joe and Hunter Biden) which violated constitutional law meant to quell foreign interference in U.S. elections. Mulvaney said this sort of practice not only occurred in this instance, but that it was common presidential procedures in Trumpian statecraft, all of which contradicted what Trump had said. A few hours later, Mulvaney reversed his entire position despite the fact that his prior statement had been recorded (it was part of a press conference), and followed by an emphatic affirmation (“Get used to it!”). Mulvaney’s flip-flop was one of the



quickest and grandest backpedaling jobs in American presidential history. I heard one news analyst (on CNN) say that, on the first time out, Mulvaney did something very unusual in the Trump regime—he told the truth.

Trump’s ignorance of the U.S. Constitution reached epic proportions in days to come. On October 20, 2019, he ridiculed the emoluments clause as something the Democrats had dreamed up—fake news. Two days later, Trump called the impeachment probe a lynching (Johansen, 2023).

On October 16, 2019, Trump called Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi a very sick person and an animal part of his tendency to accuse people he opposes of what he is doing or thinking himself (Akande, 2022; Akande & Akande, 2023; Akande & Lulat, 2022).

At the same time, a pro-Trump group played a violent video at the Trump-owned Doral resort in Miami. It showed a hyper-violent scene from “Kingsman: The Secret Service,” with various political figures’ foes’ faces crudely edited in, as Trump machine-guns them to death (or, in one case, sets fire to Bernie Sanders’ hair). In this performance, composed in the genre of a hypo-violent video game, Trump murders nearly 40 people in less than 2 min, many of them his major opponents: Sanders, Nancy Pelosi, Chuck Schumer, members of the press at CNN, and so forth. After the clip had gone viral, the sponsor of the event, pro-Trump American Priority and the Trump campaign denied any knowledge of it. (This may have been true, or an exercise in the well-known tactic of credible denial often used by intelligence agencies worldwide.)

Nick Akerman, a prosecutor who investigated President Richard Nixon, said that unlike Watergate, when prosecutors struggled to figure out Nixon’s role in the events they were investigating, a growing body of evidence in 2018 and 2019 pointed directly to Trump. “Here, you’ll have that in spades,” Akerman said. “All these individuals, all testifying that this is what happened. . . . It’s just cascading at this point” (Akerman, 2019).

So what does the first impeachment of Donald Trump by the House of Representatives and his subsequent acquittal by the U.S. Senate tell us? First, that the United States’ political system is split nearly in half to the point of major dysfunction. As Charles Blow of the *New York Times* wrote:

The precedent will be set, and the die will be cast. A president may do almost anything to win re-election. And he can do anything at all to avoid accountability. This is the new America, one in which all the old rules can be wiped away, one in which corruption is tolerated, one in which truth is denigrated, one in which tyrants are venerated. It is tempting to think of this. . . presidency, as a blip. . . [but] the American people have had their own sense of what is acceptable stretched and reset. The unthinkable seems to be happening daily. . . a toxic new normal. . . What has happened to America under Trump is a tectonic shift that is generating a [formerly] unthinkable realignment. . . (Blow, 2019, A-31).

## Choosing Democracy Over Monarchy: the Day that Democracy Would Die

In exploring these issues of power, Akande and Johansen further opine that, Trump seemed to have the day that democracy would die already marked on his calendar, like any person with immense power who uses the U.S. Constitution as a dishrag. At a political rally, November 5, 2019, Trump said he would leave office when he felt like it. Five years? Seven? Nine? twenty-one? (*his* words). If any other president had made a statement like that as he was purportedly seeking a second term, serious questions would have been raised about his fitness for office and his mental state. In this case, Trump has so degraded the terms of political debate that we were left to hope that he was “just kidding,” or planning a coup to cast aside United States political history since 1789. But it’s illegal, some “Dems” or “Never-Trumpers” may sputter. So what? Trump evades the U.S (Akande & Johansen, 2023; Johansen, 2020b; Rosenberg, 2020).

Trump violated the Constitution nearly every day, and then told us it didn’t matter. Trump gets a free pass (“It’s just Trump being Trump. . .”) as his audience rumbles “Lock Her Up!” or “Send Her Back!” Some animals are more equal than others. . . or is the law really only for the little people? Is respect, decency, and humility for the little people? Since 2016, Americans had been learning just how much of our customary presidential powers are little but tissue-paper precedent, as Trump blew holes in them. And then his audience roars its approval. The Brown-shirts click their heels. Big Brother knits his eyebrows, write Akande & Johansen, (2023).

Observers of Trump’s disengagement with the truth were a weary bunch by August, 2019, when he denied that the release of \$391 million in military funds had nothing to do with his request to Ukraine’s president to secure “dirt” on Joe Biden, a possible Democratic rival in the 2020 election. This one led to an impeachment inquiry in the U.S. House of Representatives (Johansen, 2020b).

Trump wanted the Ukraine leadership to make a public statement against corruption to get the \$391 million released and to remove from him any stigma about asking for a “quid pro quo.” He even had a TV show picked out: Fareed Zakaria’s Sunday morning talk show on CNN. Ukraine’s leaders were taken aback. Wasn’t CNN, according to Trump, a font of “fake news”?

Despite doubts, the Ukraine leaders agreed to do as told, but then word leaked out, and a public uproar ensued, leading to the impeachment inquiry, followed by public hearings. All along, Trump insisted that all of this was a plot hatched by the “Deep State.” He held several campaign rallies during this time, and Trump’s mesmerized minions cheered his every invented word conclude Akande and Johansen, (2023).

## Presidential Debate Biden vs. Trump

October 23, 2020, brought everyone the second and final presidential debate. Trump was not as explosive as during the first one. His body language (jerking his head back and forth, gritting his teeth) gave a hint that Trump would have loved to jump the lectern and wring Joe Biden's throat, but perhaps he remembered how many points in the polls that similar behavior had cost him after the first debate. It also was very likely that his staff had put a leash on his mouth. Trump's pseudo-cordiality lasted until the last 15 min. Until then, the two men had a semi-civilized debate.

Trump again did his best to get people to believe that the COVID-19 virus would just vanish. He had pounded this trope since the previous March, when the death toll was about 15 in the United States. The evening of this debate, it was pushing 23,000. The number of cases hit a new daily high of 77,640 the next day (this rate *doubled* by November 14 to 159,000). Still, Trump was running around various swing states telling his devotees to forget masks and social distancing. Who was he to ruin their freedom to suffer agonizing deaths? The virus, of course, was not interested in personal freedom. It sought only habitat in which to breed. All of those mask-less faces standing close to each other and cheering lustily provided habitat, turning them into what scientists called super-spreaders. Who needed science, or scientists, most notably Anthony Fauci, the United States' best-known infectious disease specialist? (cf. Akande & Johansen, [2023](#); Johansen, [2020a](#)).

## Inseparable Discussion-Conclusion and Overview

Perhaps the first volume in the market to explore and obtain a systematic deep understanding and analysis of the perils of the elusive phenomenon of the so-called populism, through a comprehensive and critical "reading" of the life, political discourse, populist philosophy, and social thoughts of Donald John Trump, who served as the 45th president of the United States from 2017 to 2021. This volume puts a gloss on Donald Trump's self-portrayal as a successful business man ("up-by-your-bootstrap entrepreneur"), real estate developer and a "self-made" billionaire and "stable genius" who made lots of billions, hosted the reality TV show *The Apprentice* and promised to apply that business acumen to the presidency. Yet the volume takes the issue further, to offer a vivid, in-depth look at the and the continued support for Trump on the part of alt-right American Christian Evangelicals, (Christian Nationalism), centrality of whiteness in American geopolitical history, and the perils of White Supremacy. As a result of declining demographically and American neo-nationalism, Whites have resorted to district gerrymandering and voter suppression. It investigates the dangers of this phenomenon on a U.S. and global scale and enables a broader analysis of its effects. Furthermore, vigorously documented the decline of the U.S. treaty process (America's dysfunctional diplomacy and the doctrine of unpredictability). Trump was instrumental to the breaking of

U.S. diplomacy by withdrawing or not fully participating in many international agreements or treaties, hence rendering the treaty (not recognized and empowered), weak and ineffectual in a number of cases [e.g., climate change, Iranian nuclear weapons deal, security in Libya, Iraq and Afghanistan, human rights, and the constitution of the ocean or the law of the sea convection (UNCLOS)]. Undermining the democratic legitimacy of the International Law adversely affected U.S. foreign policy. All these made the volume as relevant as today’s headlines.

As a matter of fact, this has not been an easy volume to put together. Not that any venture that bases on the assessment of illiberal governments, illiberal actors and former incumbents like Donald Trump can and could ever be easy. Generally, if one thinks back, Trump is an imaginary island and Donald ? Is an inhabitant of that island, riding on the wings of right-wing populism and established conviction in certain quarters that “religion and politics made for an especially nasty brew.” A man who routinely lied and engaged in bad faith arguments in public to manipulate the American people. His political and psychocultural terminals of denial, falsehood-fakery, distraction, and falsehoods encapsulated into divide and rule, turning one political party against another and transforming American society into a “cauldron of bitterness and loathing with a vengeance, extreme racism, and misogyny.” With his Breitbart’s Stephen Bannon inspired America First, Conservative populist antiestablishment message, he won the GOP ticket. To win the heart and get support from Republican Christian evangelicals, he promised and appointed three conservative-leaning judges to the United States Supreme Court from lists provided by people like David Duke and members of the Federalist Society. Trump whipped up hatred against Nancy Pelosi, Hillary Clinton, Barack Obama, Joe Biden, immigrants, feminism, and Muslims, and the Deep State causing the virus to ruin the economy and threaten his reelection chances, with news media his main area of combat, television, and cable networks in particular, with attention-grabbing sensational and provocative rhetoric. How Trump’s rhetorical style, populist discourse, and parody threaten democratic norms, principles, and institutions. He made mockery of almost everything in America, including the Election Process and Constitutional norms. In Brazil, for a similar reason, Bolsonaro was convicted and cannot run for the next presidential election. This divisive figure offered a gloomy assessment of his predecessors, Barack Obama in particular. He portrayed as a criminal, his main rival at the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election, Hillary Rodham Clinton (Secretary of State, Senator and former First Lady), a woman with much relevant administrative experience and a better resume. Trump put on a blistering show with a barrage of vitriolic comments at his political rallies, which plays music resembling QAnon song. He often galvanized his loyal base and followers, with the chant “Lock her up! Crooked Hillary, Lock her up” to debase the first woman United States presidential candidate. He recommended bleach and other household disinfectants as ingestible protection against the COVID virus. Otherwise, he believed that the pandemic virus would just vanish (Boggs, 2018). Trump is the center figure in the QAnon cultic phenomenon, although he said he does not know anything about this. QAnon often “projects” Trump as a divine presence with what they call “God-tier genetics,” a reminder to the white supremacist doctrines of eugenics. Trump promoted

dismisinformation about unproven COVID treatments and the need for testing. Instead of a check on power, illiberal ruling (populist) actors (cf. Donald Trump, Viktor Mihály Orbán, Andrej Duda and Recep T. Erdogan) find a way to circumvent constitutional text in the context of weakened political constraints and concentrate power' in their hands. With a resultant effect in a loss of normative force of the constitution, thus undermining the very foundations of the rule of law in their nations" (Castillo Ortiz, 2019).

Many of Trump's comments, insinuations and actions have been characterized as xenophobic, xenoracist, racially charged or bias and discriminatory and many as misogynistic. He broke with the free-trade axioms of the GOP with China. Each of these misadventures imperils the American institutions of democracy, important tools of statecraft, and long-standing traditions of American political thought and strikes at the heart of the nation's political culture. Up till today, Donald Trump refused to concede defeat to Joe Biden in the 2020 U.S. Presidential Election. An election, Biden has won fair and square. By so doing, he threatens the foundations of American democracy, which is a regular, orderly, peaceful transfer of power after every quadrennial election," yet majority of the Republican party still support him. Trump's presidency is the critical point in which the United States began its precipitous from the sole remaining superpower to a dying power. It appears no matter any comments and repeated attacks on people, Donald Trump made, it will cause zero erosion in his support among his hardcore backers. According to Los Angeles Times, why Donald Trump's still hold iron grip on the GOP and why Republicans stick with him so far is in part because he has delivered tax cuts, deregulation, and other traditional GOP priorities (including appointment of right-wing judges at the lower courts and the U.S. Supreme Court), and they are loathe to cede power to an "increasingly left-leaning" Democratic Party. Those who dare criticize Trump have suffered consequences. There has been high political mortality rate among past Trump critics: Rep. Liz Cheney of Wyoming, Rep. Adam Kinzinger of Illinois, Rep. Mark Sanford of South Carolina and Senators. Jeff Flake of Arizona, Kelly Ayotte of New Hampshire, and Bob Corker of Tennessee were all defeated or driven into retirement. Donald Trump has absolute supremacy in the Republican Party, the view that Trump will disappear—or even see a real shrinking or erosion of his power—post-presidency is like an illusory and unattainable fantasy. Trumpism like populism is not likely to disappear any time soon.

Trump exploited the softnesses or weaknesses of democracy and set on fire, the fundamentals and its mode of governance—as a result of its tolerance of lies and contemptible machinations—to rule as an autocrat, claiming to be a 'messiah' of the losers of globalization and those that have been left behind. Donald Trump initiated conflict-driven policies like 'Making America Great Again' slogan which marks a fundamental divide over how America should relate to and with slavery, historical racism, sexism and exploitation, and encourages new forms of cultural or identitarian populism discourse and practice to germinate, take root and spread within the United States and in other regions of the world. Trump does not believe in what former Senator Flake said when he was appointed an ambassador to Turkey

in 2021 by Biden to reaffirm the best tradition of American foreign policy and diplomacy: the credo that partisan politics should stop at the water’s edge.”

He is accomplished at “emotional propaganda,” an esthetics of white rage, cloaked in authoritarianism, megalomaniac, malignant narcissism, and demagoguery, public stances devaluing people of color whether at Mexico border or elsewhere, appropriating, or exaggerating, the trope of the struggling, working-class heroes and others, the nexus of corruption, nepotism, cronyism, capitalism, and illiberal politics, rampant toleration of human rights violations, and denial of climate change “anchored” by his get-tough rhetoric. As Giroux (2021) put it, under Trump’s rule, the lies, and ignorance, culminated in the right-wing attack on the US Capitol on January 6, 2021, dramatically showed, they have moved from violence waged against immigrants, Muslims, and Black and Asian people to the violence of a right-wing mob attacking the police, rampaging through the U.S. Capitol [a government building in Washington, DC, that hosts Congress (US House and the US Senate), the legislative branch of the US federal government]. Indeed, the psycho-cultural consequences and serious sociopolitical aftermath of Trumpism as a weasel word for White Supremacist violence and negative political discourse in the United States are not yet fully understood. The attack on the US Capitol was the strongest challenge to American representative democracy and we can be facing the final step of the fifth wave of global terrorism (Rapoport, 2021).

A growing body of research conducted by Akande and his colleagues (Akande, 2022, 2023; Akande & Akande, 2023; Akande & Goodman, 2023; Akande & Lulat, 2022; Akerman, 2019; Baker & Shear, 2019; Blow, 2019, 2023; Boggs, 2018; Cole & Schofer, 2023; Eberhardt & Fiske, 1998; Friedman, 2019; Glueck & Steven, 2019; Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2020; Hunger & Paxton, 2021; Johansen, 2020a; Kaltwasser, 2015; Karni & Friedman, 2020; Kanno-Younga, 2020; Kazin, 1998; Krugman, 2019; Laclau, 2005; Laumond, 2023; Lawrence et al., 2010; Lepore, 2020; Liddiard, 2019; March & Mudde, 2005; Maurer & Reinemann, 2006; Moffitt & Tormey, 2014; Mounk, 2021; Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2014, 2017; Müller, 2016; Nicolaisen, 2023; Norris & Inglehart, 2019; Piccolino & Soare, 2021; Pinto, 2012, 2022, 2023a, 2023b; Rains et al., 2017; Ratkiewicz et al., 2011; Rodrik, 2018; Rooduijn & Akkerman, 2017; Rosenberg, 2020; Ryan & Gamson, 2006; Schroeder, 2018; Stanley, 2008; Taggart, 2000; Tarchi, 2016; Urbinati, 2019a, 2019b; Vaccari et al., 2015; Van der Brug & Mughan, 2007; Wells et al., 2020; Wettstein et al., 2018; Zakaria, 2016; Zelizer, 2022) has suggested that many people dislike populism, perhaps for good reason. Because populists like Donald Trump, Narendra Modi, Jair Bolsonaro, Marine Le Pen, Geert Wilders, Recep Erdogan, and Viktor Orbán, erode and destroy liberal democracy in the name of the people and masses, with bitter disdain for core democratic institutions and norms. This political system called populism believes that their incumbents, groupthink and followers have a “superior claim to truth, authenticity and cultural currency” but alas only evokes reckless, unpleasant and untenable policies that often end in disaster and hurt most the ordinary people they ostensibly aim to help. Against that background, the ideology with no conclusive blueprint of the world offered, is rather static because of

its persistent belittling and distrust of the establishment (authority) and its more ambiguous tunnel vision approach to all that concerns their movement.

However, populism in the world appears more globalized today than at any time in history. In recent years, the world has witnessed a growing wave of this political system across a broad ideological spectrum at both sides of the political aisle and has made significant electoral gains across the globe. The re)emergence of populist forces and the ubiquitous use of wireless communication (social media) across countries has also sparked exponentially increased scholarly attention over the past decades. Populism and populists' parties and their elected officials are now familiar components of the contemporary politics. In a society, truth is the bedrock of democracies (Nicolaisen, 2023). However, when "the principle of truth" loses its relevance and meaning as benchmarks for appraisals and decisions, and became a harmful tool for willful propaganda, then democracy is at peril.

The cleavage between the liberal and conservative members developing into a rift between globalism and nativism emanating along the politics of the left–right axis. This leads to a virtual tug of war, online and offline, between two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, "the pure people" versus "the corrupt elite," between "them, the elite" and "us, the people" driven by nativist populism's revolt to activate anger against 'the world elite' among followers and the electorates by engaging a sense of opposition to liberal economics and globalization, and a penchant for authoritarian governance, personal attacks, hatred, division, injustice, and cultural backlash (Geissel & Newton, 2017). Obviously, each modality of populism creates its own concepts of people for example Trump's people is quite different from Beppe Grillo's net people and elite, but the former is always pure, and the latter is always corrupt. As a rule, nationalism draws a dividing at the border and populism draws the line "inside the country and it separates the citizens in two opposite fields: people and elite," showing that "the place of birth does not automatically mean the right of belonging in the people. That is the reason why some populist parties consider themselves as the true people" (Pinto, 2018, p. 3).

Trump's way of articulating the discourse proves that he is both populist and nationalist.

Using the transgressive political discourse and communication style of defiance visual cues and gestures and open display of frustration and anger exploited by the populist style of emotionalization, personalization, simplification (simplified rhetoric), negativity, and exemplification estimated within auditory/tonal cues and non-verbal communication coupled with proxemics and visual cues, which experts believe operate in tune with the dopamine driven feedback mechanisms upon which populist incumbents rely to help them perform populism very efficiently (Akande & Goodman, 2023; Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2020).

From multidimensional conceptual standpoints, and from expert contributors' own decades of experience and research, this most updated, forward-thinking volume delves and captures and gains real insight on the leadership acumen by analyzing the key structures of leadership effectiveness, vision, execution, management, and decision-making, which a president needed to address. This volume assesses the performance and the most current thinking about the life, work and



the unconventional presidential image (within American national mythology) of Donald J. Trump (arguably, the most noted or notorious person in the universe today. A former president who embraces Trumpism, a version of populism with an interest followed by exaggerated zeal. Several chapters in the volume offer a stimulating proposition on the story of his rise to power, primarily based on political lying, falsehoods, falsity, faker, and white ethno-nationalist agenda. Against that background, it further discusses about Presidential powers and management of executive branch, handling of the press media, use of social media, relationship with Congress, and democratic party, and other national and international organizations, domestic and foreign policy, Lower Courts and Supreme Court appointments and intersectionality and the presidency. It illustrates tangible deep transformations and assessment of a diffuse ideology—post-modern right-wing populism in the United States and globally by an array of theoretical, conceptual, and empirical chapters that sum up many of the central issues (cause and expected effects) orbiting the elusive phenomenon of “populism” today and how to combat them. The volume may be the philosopher’s stone found yet, in shedding light toward counterstrategies against populism that can help us explore and revise our societal taxation, macro-economic, industrial and commercial policies and look to develop stratagems that don’t cause unnecessary erosion to democracy.

In addition, this volume opens up analytical space to understand the unprecedented threat to liberal democracy in America and further discusses the unprecedented impact that Donald Trump and his Presidency and style has had on attitudes and perceptions of political discourse, ethical leadership and total quality management in America and the rest of the world. It delves unto the key topics and features issues pertaining to the elusive far-right ideology and positioning, and considers how illiberal actors of the populist milieus have fared within the given context. It explores the role of social media platforms and campaign strategies, specifically ad hoc campaign messages, Facebook and Twitter, in shaping populist communication strategies and the possible echo chamber effects. When vying for power or going on an election for a post, populists over-politicize issues of the day, and topicalize problems that are pressing, viz. inequalities, the loss of national sovereignty to globalization, or the rule of unresponsive political elites. Whereas populists’ solutions appear to be reckless, of little consequence, simplistic, and in most cases of little value, instead their outcomes are antidemocratic, authoritarian, and lukewarm. Populists while eager to deal with detractors or their supposed enemies of the people, the fake news media, television in particular, utilize a playbook of concentrating power in the hands of the president. Despite promising to empower the people, populists’ regimes lead to processes designed to threaten democracy. By restricting the rights of citizens and bad treatments of other minorities and undocumented immigrants or simply evolving laws to suppress or erode freedom of thought, voting rights, information, and expression, or the ability of citizens and members of the media to criticize the incumbent or the elected populist president or governor (Boggs, 2018; Castillo Ortiz, 2019; Cole & Schofer, 2023; March & Mudde,



2005; Maurer & Reinemann, 2006; Moffitt & Tormey, 2014; Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2014, 2017; Müller, 2016).

There is a more general sense, as we take readers to a comprehensive and systematic overview of the concept, history, and development of the elusive phenomenon called populism, prioritize, and analyze the main debates at the heart of the alt-right in the US and its links with Donald Trump and his presidency, as they explore and read the chapters in this volume. We present a critical exploration of Donald J. Trump, the way he shredded conventional norms and endeavored to expand his power and the struggle to “unmask” an increasingly emboldened presumed leader of the free world who seemingly was not acting in the interest of the United States, but his personal ego, his wallet, his family, his entire Trump’s empire, and perhaps even the adversary, Russia.

The way to confront “fake news” is to keep learning, always being one step ahead of the rhetoric propaganda machine. Mainstream political parties must be authentic and convincingly differentiate themselves, by being more responsive to their constituency of voters and to promptly address voters’ concerns and people’s hardships. Go for genuine realization of meaningful social principles that can really benefit the people such as good governance, equity and rule of law with adequate checks and balances and not focusing on personalistic leadership in contrast to party institutionalization. Not reactions coming out of anger and resentments to practice politics as usual. But be keen on genuine democratic renewal. Genuine leaders in government should not seen as elites that are ‘disconnected and uncoupled’ from the people (voters). They should ‘mind the gap’ or eliminate the distance or gap between them and the people, they are governing (transitive ‘liquid’ democracy, wikidemocracy, openness and transparency). Explores the implications of advanced technology, bureaucratization, and centralization of control in America. The volume concludes with contrasting views of the future demands on military professionalism. *The Perils of Populism* is a must-read for anyone interested in understanding the foundations of the U.S. politics, American Presidency and Elections.

This volume links public discourse on how to uphold political constitutionalism, in defending democracy against judicialization or legal constitutionalism (Castillo Ortiz, 2019) in full understanding of the contemporary political and racial dynamics in the United States and around the world in a way that few other books have.

Nobody ever dreamt or predicted that Donald Trump (and even himself) will ever live in the White House or become the 45th President of the United States. This volume helps curious people who are still trying to figure out all these to understand to a certain extent the reasons. And to further contribute one piece of the puzzle as to why he manages to do the magic despite all his baggage of woes. Trump draws his power from over-large wallet and his poor presidential vita based on telling “more lies than truth” and gross misinformation did not dent his record as a presidential candidate, despite everybody knows all his wrongdoings and weaknesses, people still voted for him. The accelerating pace or lightning-speed ascent and political invincibility of Donald Trump has left many pundits and experts baffled and wondering, “How did we get here?”

This is unbelievable in a country like the United States. Can we then correctly say that voters in America do expect their politicians to talk rubbish, tell lies, and make false statements or we can say nobody cares about truth anymore?

Therefore, we need to educate ourselves and combat the negative rhetoric and ignorance. In order to free ourselves from mental slavery and concomitant ignorance from the rhetoric and misinformation of people like Donald Trump and his ilk. To this end, we just need to get our feet wet first in doing more reading to gain accurate knowledge and facts as well as being aware about the danger of misinformation and fake news.

Clear and succinct, peer-reviewed, and powerfully argued, this is a staggering dissection of the Trump presidency and a naked record of the scandalous reality of an unconventional presidency like no other. A call to arms against complacency and political daftness. This volume is an all-inclusive reference and contains overviews of the issues and events on American Presidential and midterm elections from Trump to Biden, the deadly January 6 insurrection on the US Capitol by a mob of Trump’s supporters intent on preventing the certification of Biden’s presidential election victory, his rhetoric, the alt-right Christian Evangelicals, the election deniers, Trump diehard support or loyal base and the power of dis or misinformation, “fake news” and social media. It helps us to educate our minds from abuse, all sorts of racism/xenophobia, negative ignorance and mental ignorance. The correct antidote against hatred, hate crime, and racism of all forms is empathy. To move with the time and know and learn about the world we live and we are in, one needs to read a book or other forms of correct information from authentic sources. With much vitality, the volume feels like venturing out into the world. . . . A volume ready, vivacious, thriving and engaged with the world at any given time.

It’s a splendidly spectacular volume—a book that is meant to be read by all, every global person, every American, student, individual, or otherwise, who wants to understand their country, their world, its true history, and our hope for democracy, peace, stability, and progress in the world. A new theoretical thinking is the most prominent feature of the volume. Providing much needed context on the dangers of populism, packed with details and telling quotations, this piece that should be a required reading for all will revolutionize the way we perceive Trump phenomenon and populism and how American politics, Government, American Presidential Studies, Civil Right Studies, and History are taught and remembered. The volume has the potential to bridge the deep division (race-class warfare) with enduring insights for a way forward in the development and destiny of the nation.

This accessible and timely volume contains many elements and more. It grabs readers on the first look or chapter and doesn’t let go until they’ve perused the end of the book. The cover is attractive and more than absorbing, reading this volume is another step in understanding how Americans (and indeed all citizens of the world) can treat each other with more due respect, so that we can accomplish more together as one people, even if we are of a different background and religion (from moderation to recognition). This act of politeness and comradeship can lead people to return the favor while ultimately all treats everyone with respect and can generate trust and societal wholeness, which will signal where humanity is headed—for the

time being, if not forever (Akande & Goodman, 2023; Moffitt & Tormey, 2014; Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2014; Müller, 2016).

This is an all-encompassing, timely, and compelling volume, one may not be able to read without deep thinking seriously about what is going on in the world of bitter politics we live in, and one will close with tremendous feeling of empowerment and peace of mind. In the very best of research tradition, a scholarly, transferenceal communion momentarily transpires between reader and book. In a smart manner, the volume skillfully excavates and oils the cerebrum fragilities, transporting the reader deeper into the narrative and the interior lives of Donald Trump's acts and misadventures, an indispensable resource for anyone interested in the Trump presidency.

Taken together, *“The Perils of Populism”* maps new and innovative ideas and discusses from theoretical analysis and empirical research perspectives on a hypothetical perception of looking at white-minority majority America or black (brown)-majority America while changes in demography bring people of color into the majority. It helps readers understand Trump phenomenon and his negative (authoritarian) populism, especially those of them seeking a broader understanding about presidential power and leadership. The volume elicits both great knowledge and empowerment as a fundamental foundation on which to build a better understanding of not just the ever-mounting challenges of today's America but of the solutions and prospects for a more hopeful better future together.

This volume, *The Perils of Populism: The End of the American Century?* is divided into NINE sections that reflect the breadth and depth of the populist literature. The chapters differ in the way the different authors have different views and conception about how to realize the contents and goal set for each chapter, and partly because each topic shapes and determines what can be covered about it. The strength of the original writing is in the freshness, passion, and focus with which the contributing authors have approached their tasks, and the fact that they were enthusiastically engaged with the topics they discuss. The thematic treatise brings freshness to the crisis of truth and the slew of misadventures of Donald Trump and populism and the commentary displays freshness of insight. I hope this had led to a stimulating overview to a diverse and complex phenomenon.

The expert contributing authors of 22 chapters in this volume provide measured, scholarly, and a cogent analysis of the Trump presidency, before and after taking office. It further covers theory, and research—historical perspective, contemporary analysis, and their respective academic disciplines in attempting to explain the current state of the populism in the context of Trump's unconventional presidency. The volume can be read in many different ways. The volume begins with an introductory piece titled “I the People, The Rhetoric of Goliath (Trump): On Populist Watch.”

Part I—*The Introduction: The Rhetoric and Myth of Populism*. It offers a better understanding on Donald Trump and the Art of Falsehood-Fakery-Mockery called Authoritarian populism aka Trumpism. His relentless campaign to weaponize populist government power against his enemies and the news media. His reckless exchange in a long-running public feud between him and the Allies. It discusses

further *The Struggle Between Democracy and the Trump’s Negative Populism and the Culture of Narcissism and Post Truth*. It further explores the broad introduction to the volume (book) and the context surrounding right-wing populism and Trump phenomenon. This introductory chapter has been written to put the reader in a proverbially inquisitive, but interested, frame of mind.

Part II—*Ambivalence of Populism* features chapters including *Democracy in Perplexity: Donald Trump Entangled in a Colonial Legacy of Race-Based Enfranchisement*; *Cultural Backlash: The Long-Term Damage of Trump’s Legacy to American Democracy and Global Politics*; *Trump, Authoritarian Populism, COVID-19, and Technopolitics From a U.S. Perspective*; and *Trump’s Big Lie and the January 6th Attack on the U.S. Capitol: Going Beyond the Select Committee Report*. Part II is analyzed in four chapters.

Part III—*The Nexus of Populism and Foreign Policy*. The topics in these two chapters include *In Search of the Elusive Trump Doctrine*; and *Ever Enough: The Policy “Deals” of Trump White House*, etc.

Part IV—*Trump and World Order: Trends in Polarization and Resilience* is a dynamic addition to the usual topics covered in *Donald Trump and Populism*. Chapters include *Polarization, Trump and Transatlantic Relations*; *Latinos for Trump: Three Explanations of a Surprising Shift in the 2020 Election*. And *The US-Iran Showdown: Was It Smart for President Trump to Authorize the Assassination of Iranian General Qassem Soleimani?* It comprises three chapters.

Part V—*Power Without Persuasion and The Social Construction of Trump’s Reality*. One chapter deals with *A Critical Inquiry into U.S. Media’s Fact-Checking and Compendiums of Donald Trump’s Falsehoods and “Lies.”* Another chapter looks at *The Trump Effect: A Journalistic Discourse Analysis of Islamophobic Rhetoric in Facebook Comments*. A third one is *The Linguistic Construction of Trump’s Social Reality*. Three chapters in all.

Part VI—*De-democratization: Populism, Partisanship, and Pandemic*. The four chapters discuss *TRUMP REDUX: The Former President and Political Turmoil Go Hand-in-Hand*; *Nietzsche, Trump and the American Far Right*; *Donald Trump, Populist: Threat to American Democracy*; *Trump Administration’s Approach to Global Health Governance*

Part VII—*L’Etranger, Ressentment, and the Truth* includes three chapters on *Trumpism and Putinism: Just Old Wine in New Bottles*; *Who Are You, Donald J. Trump?*; *Odds and Ends: The Importance of Political and Social Variables in Explaining the Politics of Mortality in the Wake of Trump’s Presidency*.

Part VIII—*Climate Change Denial and Populist Anti-establishment Attitude*. The chapter deals with *Populism and Private Property Rights in President Trump’s Decision to Withdraw From the Paris Agreement on Climate Change*.

This volume concludes with Part IX—*This Time Is Different*. This chapter focuses on *How America’s Discontent Fueled the Rise of Trump’s Populism: Causes and Remedies from the Perspective of Michael Sandel*.

The authors of chapters in this book, examine a broad range of critical, topical and controversial issues, about the importance of recognizing the influence and legacy of populism or Trumpism, which is going to outlast Trump and his tumultuous 4 years

of presidency, by a long shot. Thus, making it a matter of urgency to critically explore the latest theories of far-right populism, Trumpism, community violence, hate, extremism, polarization and resilience, voter suppression, and all forms of electoral malpractices by developing community-driven responses and harnessing the power of democratic politics for social equity and reform, and more largely as a ‘defense of freedom of expression and difference of opinion’. To that end, in order for American democracy to survive Donald Trump’s gigantic departure from political tradition, level of democracy on the international scene should be brought to a qualitatively higher level. Consequently, resulting to a world where social classes, under the banner of a more balanced and socially motivated government, can collaborate to forge social change, international alliances, diplomatic China policy and peaceful era of engagements, within this increasingly fractured global context. Hopefully, these will solve the problem of the failure of mainstream political parties to address a fast-spreading ideology intent on sowing government mistrust and excluding marginalized people. The trenchant volume will help offer a foundation for thinking about the logics of what happened within the 4-years of Trump’s unconventional presidency and contextualize Trump’s “megalomaniac and malignant narcissism” personality toward reawakening the call for an American government that will be ‘for’, ‘by’ and ‘of’ the People, proving that populism is really a problem and that running away from it is not the solution (Akande & Goodman, 2023; Akande & Lulat 2022; Fromm, 1964; Isikoff, 2019; Laumond, 2023; Nicolaisen, 2023; March & Mudde, 2005; Maurer & Reinemann, 2006; Moffitt & Tormey, 2014; Zelizer, 2022).

This eye-opening volume will enable us to provide a global wisdom psycho-strategic full answer (‘not too American’) in agreement with the people to persuade them not to look for wrong and irrational recipes when searching how to solve today’s global crisis. Modern populism, a highly contagious political peculiar mess of stances, shapes and policies, has leaders skilled in blending economic and cultural resentments so as to trigger a ‘state of deep crisis’ and a ‘perception of dire threat’, (viz immigration(a naked hatred and ambivalent fear for immigrants and building a big wall to stamp them out) and integration anxiety; democratic backsliding), at the expense of ‘competence, engagement and control’. Populist leaders use and weaponize the media for free coverage during their campaigns, and to bypass the mainstream media so as to mobilize their support among their base or target audience. Such a political movement like populism claims to focus on the average Joe or Jane and that they give gratification to blue-collar workers or working class strata or the so called ‘losers of globalization, innovation, automation and digitalization’ brigade cannot be ignored. At the same time, populist leaders like Donald Trump cannot be ‘outpolarized’ or ‘amplified’ through ‘retaliatory rhetorical slugfests’, but we need to proactively engage populist with heuristical power of reason in cross-party open debates and be the first to set the all-inclusive agenda and for the people, involving political parties, the social media, NGOs and civil societies. We must explore a way to curb future Trump-like presidential hubris and power that will and might be put to anti-democratic ends. This mindset helps us to utilize global wisdom to interpret and explore the development of automatic techniques to detect the rhetoric of

sensationalist and biased right wing news media in the age of ‘lies’. To that end, it may enable people who find themselves in an endemic “cesspit of polarization, hatred or even out-and-out criminal rhetoric,” to have a voice, to become more and more independent in their cultural context, tackle fakery, falsehood, mockery, trickery, bias, racism, and discrimination, (not on the basis of fundamentalist bias) combat the negative rhetoric and ignorance (group-peer-self advocacy) through this phenomenal collection of thoroughly researched chapters, a must read for everyone.

Our choice of chapters/literature also represents a subtle academic effort to stimulate fresh and authentic thinking and ideas about many problems and challenges facing liberal or modern democracies in this new 21st Century and in this age of lies and fake news. It is to assist our readers especially present and future policymakers, civil leaders, politicians, professors, and advanced student reading lists, and researchers to keep it close at hand. This volume helps readers alike to a fascinating insight into the underbelly of immigration policy and politics in the United States, and shift the United States and the world foreign policy and global politics away from the abrasive and unconventional populist approach, toward reckoning with Trumpian Republican Party. But at the same time focus on ways to ensure that global disciplines do not disproportionately benefit capital at the expense of labor. This volume further broadens the parameters of these timely subjects and includes the latest studies in the related fields. They draw together freshly minted essays and articles written by experienced academics from North America and abroad who have taken up the challenge with enthusiasm or high gusto; to write cogent and lucid assessment and analysis for scholars, while also being in a style that is accessible to everyone interested including graduate students and advanced undergraduates, because of their balanced and inclusive approach to the subject matter. The contributing authors engage diverse perspectives from many and sundry discourses about trending issues across the political, economic, racial and social disciplinary spectra, while placing them in their meaningful socio-historical and political contexts, so that a major overhaul of market economy and democracy are done to phase out established economic practices that no longer served the interests and purpose for the people and their nations, using economic populism to combat political populism.

Drawing on contemporary and historical literature, with a unique diverse collection of perspectives and providing a fresh examination of the contrasts and the continuities of Trump’s Twitter rhetoric and other nonsensical, by also featuring qualitative-case studies–quantitative analyses, assessing and evaluating tweet patterns, broader language shifts, and the social psychology of President Trump’s Twitter voice making a persuasive case for the rise of antiestablishment attitudes and fascistic tendencies among people in the United States. The sudden election victory of Trump in 2016 was “a sign of the lurch to the antidemocratic far right populism,” that was replicated or reverberated in some nations across the world. This is a big sign of the threat of negative populism at our peril. This present volume comprises of 22 chapters and is organized around 9 thematic sections, a well-blended international stew of epistemic knowledge that can be used worldwide, written by top scholars from over 11 countries, with cross-cultural acumen. Their contributions

include chapters on some of the “hottest topics” in the areas of partisan polarization, democracy, far-right politics, international law, American and global politics, contemporary political theory of what is populism, overcoming populist propaganda, the ongoing crisis of mis or disinformation, and discussion of tribal politics and democracy in danger. Trump phenomenon and democracy in American public discourse, a decline of free speech, the new nationalism, racial stereotyping and global politics, the global regime of human rights and examples of new initiatives in combating Trumpism and political lies, while setting out agendas for future research.

Quite useful as a valuable resource as it helps us understand the shifting Trump agenda in diverse areas from human rights, international relations, far-right politics, international bodies, human rights, sociology, law, intelligence, psychology, to trade and security. Essential reference across a range of subjects, bringing together contributions from scholars, policy makers, lawyers and political scientists, political advisers, military school teachers, practitioners, managers, decision-makers, and media communication alike and being adopted for use in classes in introductory of American government. Especially ideal for advanced placement courses, community colleges, and international programs in American Studies. Also used for seminars in university and institutes of security and strategic studies settings, as well as in diplomatic training classes aimed at a non-academic audience, each of the book chapters has keywords and abstracts of key issues. This extraordinarily well-researched and practically crafted, the culture-inclusive text could not be more relevant and timelier. This nine-part volume helps readers to apprehend, get the picture, and grapple with, the issues confronting international organizations like the UN, NATO, EU, and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, and so on, practitioners and researchers toward evolving a new perspective that can attain effective accomplishment of international human rights and be able to guarantee minimum social equity, peace, cooperation, global stability, and respect for the environment. As such, we believe this volume can be quite useful to scholars, practitioners, *Trump watchers*, and students alike, being adopted for use in the field, classes and seminars in university and diplomatic studies’ settings, as well as in executive education classes or in-house training on human rights, peacekeeping, and migration/refugee issues.

With this worldwide coverage volume, prescient contributions were assembled from a diverse array of scholars and international experts. The authors lay bare the roots of the current globalization and human rights challenges in a populist era and offer progressive and meaningful paths forward. For anyone seeking a comprehensive and multidisciplinary global overview of populism and democracy in the light of globalization, an astute analysis of the forces that drive the dominance of the (neo)liberal paradigm of the last decades resulting in major economic and social inequalities, which resulted in the surge of national populism in the twenty-first century, should look no further than this volume. Expertly drawing on global and regional examples and current literature, closes a gap in the multidisciplinary field. While discussing the dangers of white supremacy and the continued support for Trump on the part of American evangelicals and devout Catholics (Christian

nationalism) despite his unspeakable moral flaws, the volume suggests, it is better for a community raises authentic transformational leaders (Laumond, 2023).

This is a must-read. For interested scholars, shocked by how America is bitterly and deeply divided and the extent of the QAnon cult movement, and for others who genuinely desire a volume that broadens the parameters of these important and timely subjects, and includes the latest works in the fields. A volume that draws together freshly minted essays and articles written by experienced academics from North America and abroad, that are cogent and lucid for scholars, while also being in a style that is accessible to graduate students and advanced undergraduates, because of their balanced and inclusive approach to the subject matter. A scholarly volume that engages diverse perspectives from many and sundry discourses about trending issues across the political, racial and social disciplinary spectra, while placing them in their meaningful socio-historical, psychosocial, and political contexts—this is where you start.

All in all, the chapters in this smart volume will provide every reader with many hours of heuristic pleasure and knowledge in its structured content, relevancy, and provision of the solid groundwork for further learning of good research anchored on synergistic theorizing about populism and contemporary American society and politics. And a high-level analysis, which portrays both sides of a political hot potato issue and critical topics with total acuity and depth in a way that compels us to reexamine and reset our own political notions with an engaging style of today’s parlance in a manner that will drive a great many of us to rethink.

The volume is an essential and comprehensive reference bundled with compelling examples that connect concepts to real-life occurrences to reinforce learning and cover key issues on Donald Trump’s authoritarian and negative populism. It probes the key procedural, technical and policy issues America used in dealing with populism, taking a wide interdisciplinary approach including media studies, political anthropology, American studies, and myth studies, American politics, comparative politics, law, political geography, political sociology, political psychology in that realm, and assesses external impact in practical and systematic manner in the age of Trump.

Bringing together contributions from qualified and experienced leading international academics, scientist-practitioners, political scientists, lawyers, psychologists, sociologists, policy makers, philosophers, and research scholars who have done extensive global research to explore new developments and provide accurate, systematic, and up-to-date content and material, focused, motivated, and driven toward readers to fully understand Trumpism and its groupthink, illiberal actors and followers in the contemporary world of politics to illuminate a clear path to a better society and a democratic world. It focuses on critical analysis and reflection regarding the changing times and crisis management patterns in the public sector and civil right movements in the current COVID and post-COVID era, across diverse political, institutional, and social settings globally. A good, concise summary was given at the beginning of each of the 22 chapters that offer high-level insights and provide important assessments, insightful analysis frameworks, and recommendations concerning a wide variety of institutions, practices, and policies with a view to



addressing the many emerging societal, governmental, and professional issues concerning the danger of populism. The qualities and research excellence that span theoretical, empirical, and policy discussion contributions distinguish the volume in all its interconnected contents—a variety of novel big ideas, lucidity of themes and well-developed concepts, sharpness of well-placed questions, the naturalness of dialogue and illustrations, visually appealing, well organized and easy to navigate with a superbly attractive book exterior and appearance. There are several possible explanations for all of this, none of which are mutually exclusive—these and many other desirable external and internal qualities will be found abundantly here.

And it is that analytical and critical qualities guided by logic, research ethics, and transparency that assure *The Perils of Populism: The End of the American Century?* of an enduring place in the annals of modern world literature in American Presidential Studies, American Politics, Law, and World Politics and in the hearts of all who love good academic (scholarly) and professional (applied) research in a scholarly show-stealing performance global volume.

This volume is a well-blended stew of global epistemic knowledge (with less Englishization and Anglo-American shoehorning “journalistic” scholarship) in triadic discourse. It is designed as a substitute for avalanche of gleeful accounts and journalistic books of the dangerous time of Donald Trump’s presidency. It is a required reading for Trump-watchers in every nation across the world. It is meant for use alone or as a supplementary text for upper-level undergraduate/graduate courses, or in-house or internal training programs in government, diplomacy, civil society, business and corporations, managers, and who will become managers, executives, decision-makers, and practitioners especially in today’s organizations with new virtual/physical hybrid way of remote working. In order to conceptually move the field ahead, we have organized the book into nine broad sections.

With cutting-edge updates on offering insightful analysis on how populism could realistically become a source of democratic revitalization, encouraging sweeping changes in accordance with the majority will (Cole & Schofer, 2023). This volume may help to finally begin to make inroads on appraising carefully the situations and factors producing and contributing to the theories and practice on how populism destroy democracy for the people, how populist anti-elitist appeals may help unseat governing cliques, authoritarianism, psychological and sociological political and social theory of populism, on how populists politicize inequalities and differences, on the media and populism, on its threat to democratization with illustrative real-world examples and on the manifestations of populism around the world. With the field expanding by an order of magnitude, this is an inexhaustible volume full of many things, among them essentially a mighty resource, an indispensable text for every thoughtful student of populism, and related areas. It comprises a rich coverage of a wide array of interesting and scholarly topics written, aligned, and assembled in a good chronology to make it outstandingly interesting for a comfortable learning environment, easy to read, and challenging to provoke excitement to read more about Donald Trump, American politics, GOP, and populism.

*The Perils of Populism: The End of the American Century?* equips us with increasing toleration for the intolerant, simplistic, and elusive ideology—populism. Confessing the bad and the ugly done in the past and embracing the good and political correct might rejuvenate, the sharing of common memory that can bridge intense American polarization and lead to secure justice, fairness and equality and build an egalitarian society. As this volume connects theory and practice in the diverse political and social domain as populism, Trumpism and authoritarianism are problems in the world today. It is an ideal reading for all those whose business is in creating political and social policy for organizations and civil society. Also, for those committed to advancing democracy, particularly students of democratic theory, government, local government administration, Protestantism, Religious Studies, Church, Criminology, Sociology, Law, and Gender Studies, International Relations, Labor Law, Diplomacy, and International Politics.

For great many people who are anxious about the state of democracy in America and beyond, this volume is a liniment or salve....behind our current tempo (as the political polarization in the United States deepens seemingly by the day), one which requires re-committing ourselves to certain Enlightenment ideals at improving and revitalizing our democracy. Against this background we need counterstrategies that encourage more citizen participation and involvement in the innovation toward increasing the quality of democracy and participative governance and building inclusive institutions that are close to the grass roots as we confront moment of polarization, political crisis and threats to democracy in the age of “the big lie.” Be it in the world’s developing or richest democracies we need more vibrant and proactive press, honest moral leaders, and dynamic civil societies that can spearhead ways to prevent reversions to autocracy by calling out abuses of power by leaders in government before they can significantly erode democratic norms and institutions (Akande, 2022; Akande & Akande, 2023; Akande & Goodman, 2023; Laumond, 2023).

With a scholarly focus of putting analysis of events into long-term perspective rather than the “fire and fury” or behind the scenes, everyday journalistic coverage of activities and calendar year event that consumed any presidential administration in the white House to provide readers a bigger platform and a clear perspective to understand the moment that are often contained in books written by journalists, pundits, politicians, and celebrities or press executive. This book is different. Our authors moved beyond Trump’s narratives as a recalcitrant and long-ranger (a candidate and President) who upended the long tradition of ethics and political context operated in the political world, to utilize extant literature, systematically gathered knowledge, utilized the auspices of an avalanche collection of pertinent scholarly literature to interpret and reflect the trouble state of democracy during Trump’s administration to identify the continuity, sharp breaks, map out the new directions the nation has been shepherded or pushed.

At the center of each chapter is populism and Donald Trump, Who then is Donald Trump? According to many writers as well as Wikipedia.

Donald John Trump, the scion of a rich and influential immigrant family, (born June 14, 1946) is a business mongol turned American politician, media personality,

who served as the 45th American president for a single term of 4 years in office from 2017 to 2021. Trump spent 2 years at Fordham University before transferring and graduating from the Wharton School with a business degree in 1968. He dodged or avoided being drafted like his age groups in Vietnam (student draft deferment and other medical exemptions). Soon he was catapulted to head his father's real estate business in 1971, which he swiftly renamed the Trump Organization. He was involved or revolved around elaborate scheme by which his family could dodge paying taxes. He developed the business into many dimensions including building and renovating skyscrapers, hotels, casinos, and golf courses and later started side ventures, mostly by licensing his name. He thereafter dabbled into branding by licensing his name in food, clothing and building that he or his company was not involved. He later transformed himself to a well-known celeb in the New York media (gossipy Page 6 of New York Post). From 2004 to 2015, he co-produced and hosted the reality television series *The Apprentice*. Trump and his businesses have been involved in more than 4000 state and federal legal actions, including six bankruptcies. He refused to release his tax returns, years upon years.

According to a Quora commentator, Trump might not be a truly "self-made" billionaire as he is surrounded by wraithlike or shadowy accountants or fraudulent schemers who daily "micro manage" the wealth added to his skewed, inherited family fortune by "minimizing and manipulating his tax records" to meet scrutiny and at the same time 'inflating his net worth to gain loans and later down playing it to IRS audits' and continually in that manner. Another CNN commentator chronicled his most consequential abuse of power. Trump's subversion of the U.S. 2020 presidential elections, his calling the free press the enemies of the people, abusing the bully pulpit by using his platform to openly spew "big lies" and conspiracies, attack political adversaries of all stripes, and praise bad political actors like white nationalists and authoritarian leaders, calls it treason when congressmen don't applaud him, ignores lawful subpoenas from Congress, illegally suppressing evidence in his impeachment trial, and firing inspectors general who were probing him and his cronies, politicizing the Justice department, obstructing the Mueller investigation, urging his aides not to cooperate and dangling pardons in exchange for loyalty (loyalty oaths and making presidency his personal venture), to entrench himself in power and to subvert the legal system; and also abusing the presidential pardon power. He tried to enforce the Postal Service to charge Amazon higher shipping rates because Jeff Bezos' owns a newspaper that refused to bow down or hide his misdeeds like Fox News. Or the Ukraine cover-up. Firing whistleblowers and truth-tellers and hugely profiting off the presidency. He refused refugees asylum despite guaranteed by the U.S. Constitution, but instead separated their children and pack asylum-seekers like sardines in concentration camps or sent them back to where they will be raped, murdered or eliminated in any way.

A deluge of over two dozen women (including Access Hollywood tape) have accused Trump of sexual misconduct, non-consensual touching and forcibly kissing women without their consent. This decades-long history of allegations against Trump are said to have taken place during random encounters, on airplanes, eateries/restaurants, bars/ drinking areas, and at his private homes in Florida and

New York. Although, Trump has fully denied all these allegations really took place, labeling them as a “hoax” and that these women accusers were not his “type.” Yet Donald Trump is still running and on course to be the likely sole GOP (Republican) nominee in 2024 Presidential election to face President Joe Biden in a Biden-Trump rematch of the 2020 race.

The latest is E. Jean Carroll’s accusation that Donald Trump raped her was not a “he said, she said” dispute, a lawyer representing the writer said as a civil trial over the former U.S. president’s conduct nearly three decades ago got under way. Carroll, age 79, sought unspecified damages for sustaining significant pain and suffering, lasting psychological harm, and invasion of privacy. Trump was found liable for sexual abuse and defamation. The jury awarded Jean Carroll \$5 million in a judgment that could haunt Trump as he campaigns for a second term. According to some ex-Trump staffers, Trump had a pattern of behaving dangerously and inappropriately with women while in the White House.

Trump has been chameleonic in his political party affiliation. He was registered to the following parties at one time or another between 1983 and 2012, Republican Party, Independence party, Democrat Party, No party, and finally back in 2012 to Republican party (GOP).

Trump organization filed for bankruptcy six times and most banks (except Deutsche Bank) refused to do business with him because he had defaulted multimillion dollars in loan. His business-track record was chaotic, disjointed, and problematic.

He was in the front front in the birther movement who accused and challenged the legitimacy of President Barack Obama (the African American First President of the United States) that Obama was foreign born (“a Kenyan”) and hence not qualified to be in the White House as a sitting president. He used the social media platform with notoriety while he was trying to register his name in the minds of people. However, the Apprentice and Celebrity Apprentice Reality Television gave him the launch to political power and stardom.

Coming down the escalator of the flamboyant Trump Tower, on June 16, 2015, he announced to the world that he would run for American presidency. That was the beginning of his political landscape. He began his style of mocking and belittling his opponents calling nick names like “lying Ted” Cruz. And he dubbed Senator Marco Rubio “Liddle Marco,” and Senator Hillary Clinton as “Crooked Hillary.”

At the Republican Convention in 2016, former presidential nominee, and a very long time Trump’s most high-profile critic in elected office, Mitt Romney called Trump a “phony and fraud,” mocked his failed business ventures, “Trump University, Trump Steak.” In 2022, Mitt Romney said, ‘a return of Donald Trump would feed the nation’s ‘sickness, probably rendering it incurable’. He further cited Trump’s false claims that he won the 2020 election as a “classic example” of denial. He remarked that Joe Biden is “a genuinely good man” who hasn’t broken through “our national malady.”

Trump attacked and ridiculed on July 18, 2015, then-candidate Donald Trump said this about late Senator John McCain (former GOP presidential nominee and a popular Vietnam War veteran), “He’s not a war hero. He was a war hero because he

was captured. I like people who weren't captured." In 2019, Trump said that McCain was "last in his class," and accused the late senator of sharing the Steele dossier with people.

On April 27, 2023, Donald Trump tweeted and said he will be retiring the nickname he gave to Hillary Clinton. "I will be retiring the name 'Crooked' from Hillary Clinton & her moniker & I'm gonna give her a new name—I don't know—maybe 'Lovely' Hillary or 'Beautiful' Hillary [...] so that we can use the name for Joe Biden because he'll be known from now on as 'Crooked' Joe Biden."

With no prior military or government service Trump as a populist won the 2016 presidential election as the Republican nominee against Democratic nominee Hillary Clinton despite losing the popular vote. His sudden election victory and unusual populist policies invoked numerous protests. The Mueller special counsel investigation established Russian interference in the 2016 United States elections, links between associates of Donald Trump and Russian officials, and possible obstruction of justice by Trump and his associates to favor the election of Trump. Trump encouraged conspiracy theories and made many unforgettable racist statements during his campaigns and presidency, to a degree unprecedented in American political norms and election politics.

Trump ordered a travel ban on citizens from several Muslim-majority countries, diverted military funding toward building a wall on the U.S.–Mexico border, and implemented a policy of family separations for apprehended migrants. Trump pursued a trade war with China and withdrew the nation from the proposed Trans-Pacific Partnership trade agreement, the Paris Agreement on climate change, and the Iran nuclear deal. Trump met with North Korean dictator Kim Jong Un on three occasions (Zelizer, 2022; Wikipedia, 2022).

Unprecedented, twice impeached and now four times indicted, Trump lost the 2020 United States presidential election to Joe Biden, but did not accept and refused to concede defeat, went to U.S. courts, mounted many unsuccessful legal challenges, and obstructing the presidential transition. On January 6, 2021, Trump supporters, under his guidance marched to the U.S. Capitol, and caused mayhem whereby many people including police officers lost their lives (Akande, 2023; Laumond, 2023). Thus, he set in motion deep fascist tendencies at work in America, a major transgression of ideological parameters against what makes the United States widely known as a model of constitutional democracy, pluralism, and political liberties; to follow in the tracks of earlier fascist regimes in Europe and Japan. Or following the footsteps of path of Hitler or Goebbels?

We sincerely hope that all readers including students of political constitutionalism and other readers at all levels will rely for many years to come on the latest insights, completely current theories, and time-honored ideas afforded in this fascinating volume. How wonderful to have this essential work prescribed for the present and preserved as supplements for diversity modules, short-term courses and instructional, webinars, seminars, conferences, and workshops, for those committed to combat xenoracism at workplace, liberal democratic study group, and civic education organizations in the foundational learning in the functional areas of local government administration and development management, politicians, professionals

and social policy makers who are actively working to promote human flourishing, world peace and global democracy. In any case, this challenging populist worldview must be of immense interest to a wide range of professional, academic and scientific disciplines from Anthropology to Law, War Studies and to Zoology. This book’s chapters will be readily accessible to all their audiences alike.

An invaluable source for readers who are willing to understand the perils of populism and are interested in the phenomenon of Trumpism in a populist era. Since we know Donald John Trump with a seamless clarity, we must know Trump’s America—and presidency before and after—with a seamless clarity. Essential for our times in a changing world because “nowadays, all over the world, populist leaders are presenting themselves as the new prince. The only who can embody the pure people and guide it in the fight against the corrupt elite” (Pinto, 2023b, p. 43).

This is a global volume, from Athens to Abu Dhabi, Berlin to Bangkok, Dublin to Delhi, Lagos to Las Paz, London to Los Angeles, Tokyo to Tel Aviv, Shanghai to Sao Paulo, and Wellington to Washington DC that can be used worldwide, and which undercuts a vein of a ‘normalized view’ of the world of populism (Trumpism), a constant undercurrent of racial tensions during Trump’s presidency, and an essential “piece” of contemporary history (in an increasingly bipolar world); I hope the whole world will read.

A scholarly gold mine for researchers, scholars, and practitioners alike, this volume unlocks the full complexity of Trump’s presidency through the mix of theoretical, qualitative and empirical data presented as an invaluable framework for working through those contradictions at the heart of American populism that form part of the bigger picture that are still around us. Vividly shows a rivetingly long-lasting account revealing the weakness, fragility, and vulnerability of the institutions of the nation and the perils of Trump’s autocratic leadership, policy silos, it goes beyond the diplomatic tip of the populist iceberg to shed light on the submerged processes, actors and institutions that structure this complex, and conflictual relationship between this ‘twice-impeached, criminally indicted former President’ and his loyal base (Team Trump). To further explore how his die-hard or uniquely loyal supporters were left to endlessly parry with Trump’s lies, and the rest of America to become even further immersed into the same consent-manufacturing operation that helped lead to Trump’s rise. Assembled an extraordinary selection of respected voices on populism and Trumpism from both sides of the pond, this seminal work delivered rigorous, novel, and provocative contributions providing a consistent narrative on a divided state of the nation that has been and will remain difficult before, during, and after Trump’s presidency.

We hope this volume will be an inspiration and an invitation to researchers to undertake the pressing challenge of conducting further studies on Donald Trump, one of the epitomes of populism. Wherever, whoever one is, any one needs to read. We need to obtain never before known insights into the workings and life of Donald Trump’s ‘toxic positivity’, whose presidency is unlike anything that came before. For instance, following the unfavorable defamation lawsuit verdict Trump received in the E. Jean Carroll case, some American opinion leaders weighed in with their take on the outcome. One of them is American politician, Senator Mitt Romney

(a rare moderate in the Republican party of Donald Trump), who condemned the ‘demagogue’ and insisted that he hopes that “the jury of the American people reach the same conclusion about Donald Trump,” as he further put it, “He (*Trump*) just is not suited to be president of the United States, and to be the person who we hold up to our children and the world as the leader of the free world.” According to Raw Story on MSN, joyful Trump celebrated and delighted when the Never-Trump Utah GOP lawmaker, Romney on Wednesday September 20, 2023, said that he was stepping down and that he is not seeking re-election for a second term in the U. S. Senate, and Romney’s remarks follow a previous appeal made to his fellow Republicans back in 2021, that it was time for a new generation to “step up” and “shape the world they’re going to live in.”

An unconventional presidency built on open public contempt, conspiratorial and propagandistic politics and disgust for Constitutional principles. It will take time for the effects of Donald Trump’s singular tenure to be fully understood historically, It is yet to be seen, for instance, whether other future presidential candidates for office in the United States will adopt his disruptive style of politics, whether they will be able to mobilize the same coalition of voters he did, and whether his views on many issues will be reflected in the U. S. government policy in the years to come. Modern populism, unlike its progressive cousin, economic populism, undercuts democratic norms and is at all times most often endlessly dangerous to underestimate. This volume will help to shape the political landscape of the twenty-first century and will remain a vital source of inspiration for modern-day scholars and political activists.

We do, You do, We all do.

Flashback, to our titular question, this is not the end of the American Century! Populism, though dangerous, but some people see it, as democracy’s pharmakon in a way. Education is our most valuable “treatment” in fighting the poisonous distortions and false equivalences offered by Trump-branded populism. “*The Perils of Populism*” is, as its title is, beautifully sculpted attempt, a succinct overview of the psychopolitical discourse of the question, is this *The End of The American Century*? The answer to this question will depend on several factors because the end of American hegemony in a multi-order world does not mean the collapse of the liberal order and the role played by the United States (USA) in the international arena. However, as this book makes clear, the answer also depends on the American citizens, namely in what concerns their active participation in political life, refusing the siren songs of populism.

After all, whenever Democracy is in peril, all those who agree with Winston Churchill’s words (below) are called to defend.

Many forms of Government have been tried, and will be tried in this world....

No one pretends that Democracy is perfect or all-wise.

Indeed, it has been said that Democracy is the worst form of Government except for all those other forms that have been tried from time to time.

(Speech in the House of Commons, 11 November 1947).

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**Part II**  
**Ambivalence of Populism**

# Democracy in Perplexity: Donald Trump Entangled in a Colonial Legacy of Race-Based Enfranchisement



Richard D. Anderson Jr

**Abstract** Whether Donald Trump is a threat to democracy is a political issue, but it is also an intellectual one. An answer to the intellectual question requires both an appreciation of Trump and an understanding of what originates and preserves democracy. Is Trump an exception to or an example of practice common to Republicans whose conduct has been adjudged compatible with democracy? And if democracy is near-universal adult suffrage, do the conditions that have promoted widespread enfranchisement find a refutation or an evocation in Trump's appeals to voters?

**Keywords** Democracy · Enfranchisement · Trump · Colonialism · Racism · Discourse · White · Reconstruction · Voting Rights Act · Causation · Equifinality · Multifinality

## Introduction

Donald Trump is sometimes labeled a threat to democracy. Agreement with that proposition says less about either Trump or democracy than about loyalty to Democrats who are Trump's main adversaries. Still the question deserves more than a partisan response. Partly, of course, it is a question about Trump, but partly also about the conditions for democracy to persist. An answer to the first half of the question requires thoughtful evaluation of the facts concerning Trump's political message, and particularly whether, how much and in what respects he differs from other Republicans whose self-presentation is ordinarily accepted as compatible with democracy. The second part demands understanding what causes democracy and makes it last. An answer to that question might reveal why Trump and other

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Many thanks to the anonymous reviewers for their comments and to Dr. Adebowale Akande for his professorial editorial assistance.

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Republicans choose the messages that they emit. But political scientists are uncertain about the answer. Uncertainty about the cause of democracy prevents anyone from knowing whether Trump threatens democracy or conceivably even propitiates it. Comparison of Trump with a past Republican normally thought to be fully compatible with democracy, and even its stalwart, combines with consideration of democracy's causes to resolve the issue of Trump's potential to endanger democracy.

## Donald Trump and Other Republicans

Trump is often depicted as a rupture with the Republican Party's past. It is worth comparing what Trump says with what a past Republican commonly regarded as a mainstay of democracy has said.

Senator from Kansas and combat casualty during the Second World War, when he lost use of one arm fighting in Italy and recovered only limited use of the other, Robert Dole became known as "Mr. Republican." In 1996, he won the Republican nomination to run against the Democratic incumbent President Bill Clinton. Here is a thematic sentence from his nomination acceptance speech to the Republican convention: "And to those who say it was never so, that America's not been better, I say you're wrong" (Dole, 1996). How does Dole's sentence differ from Trump's slogan "Make America great again"? Both assert that a past America was preferable to contemporary America. Any differences are grammatical and performative. Dole's grammar is declarative, Trump's is imperative. Dole contrasts himself with those who disagree, Trump connects himself to those who agree. Dole invites agreement, Trump calls for action. But the main difference is simple. Trump is pithier.

They also make comparable assertions about race. Both submerge any discussion of it under a larger, transparently spurious assertion of racial harmony. Dole (1996) says, "And our nation, though wounded and scathed, has outlasted revolutions, civil war, world war, racial oppression and economic catastrophe." Racial oppression has occurred, but it is all in the past, having been "outlasted." Dole continues:

We are and should be one people. . . The 10th Mountain Division, in which I served in Italy, and the Black troops of the 92nd Division who fought nearby were the proof for me once again of the truth. . . when the blood of the sons of immigrants and the grandsons of slaves fell on foreign fields, it was American blood. In it you could not read the ethnic particulars of the soldier who died next to you. He was an American.

Dole omits the segregation of the 92nd Division. The division was the Army's sole ground unit assigning Black troops to combat. Other Black conscripts were assigned to construction or supply missions. All the enlisted men in the 92nd Division were Black, later joined by some Black junior officers. From the start, though, the division's officers were mainly whites, mostly Southerners chosen by the Army for their experience "handling" what were then known as colored men. Since combat effectiveness depends mainly on enlisted men's trust in their commanders, a

division consisting of Black enlisted men, commanded by whites selected for bigotry, performed in combat with notorious ineffectiveness (Wilson, 1992). The poor record was not due to any lack of Black valor. A Black officer, Lieutenant John R. Fox, earned the Medal of Honor for calling in an artillery strike on himself after ordering his soldiers to retreat from a German counterattack. His citation reads, “This action, by Lieutenant Fox, at the cost of his own life, inflicted heavy casualties, causing the deaths of approximately 100 German soldiers, thereby delaying the advance of the enemy until infantry and artillery units could be reorganized to meet the attack” (Citation, 1997).

To Dole and his audience that applauds “He was an American,” racial justice is entirely compatible with indifference to racial segregation. But racism delays celebration of Lieutenant Fox’s courageous death for more than five decades until 1997, after Black voters have supplied the margin of Dole’s defeat the previous November. Meanwhile the white Dole’s wounds, severe but not fatal, are cited regularly throughout his political career as evidence of self-sacrifice and devotion to the Republic. Repeated mention of Dole’s wounds has surely been justifiable, but if it is, what can justify the delay in even recording Lieutenant Fox’s greater, more consequential self-sacrifice?

What of Trump? Like Dole, he redirects the discussion from the condition of any racial group to the well-being of Americans as a whole. Here is Trump in the White House meeting “African-American leaders” on February 27, 2020 (Trump Archives, Feb. 28, 2020a). He begins by telling a story that associates Black Americans with the pejorative “begging.”

You know, something that happened recently that the press doesn’t write about — but, every year a group of wonderful people from the black colleges and universities would come up to my office. A lot of people — 40, 35, 50 one year. And after the second year, I said, “How come you keep coming back?” And they came back for money, Deneen. Money.

And I said, “Why do you have to come back? Other colleges have money. You don’t do — you don’t come back every year.” And one of the gentlemen, who is a great guy, from one of the schools — good school, very good school — he said, “We come back because we have to, because we need money. And we come back and other schools don’t have to because we — they want us to come back every single year. They want us to beg.” He used that word. “They want us to beg.”

Trump does not say who “they” are. But his silence is a teaser for his audience to fill in his empty signifier with Republicans’ usual bugbears: Democrats, officials making up the “deep state,” and journalists. After diverting to the rival candidate Joe Biden’s drawing more press coverage for allegedly smaller crowds, Trump reverts to his topic of his own press coverage. He uses this topic to bury the issue of race under what is “good for our country”:

And I don’t get it because it’s so good for our country, what’s happening. And whether it’s black or white or any other group — Asian, because you see what’s happening with Asian; you see what’s happening with Hispanic — the best unemployment rates for every group. For very importantly, for black — the best unemployment we’ve ever had by far and getting better. And getting better. (Applause.)

So we've set every record. Poverty numbers — the best you've ever had. The best we've ever had for a number of groups. But black people, right now, are having the best — statistically, the best numbers that you've ever had, and it's really an honor.

Three months less 2 days later, four police officers murder George Floyd. According to the White House archive of his public statements, it takes Trump 3 days to say anything about the murder. On May 28, during questioning by journalists after Trump announces an initiative to correct what Trump calls “fake news,” one journalist asks whether Trump has spoken to Floyd’s family. Trump replies:

No, I haven't. But I feel very, very badly. And it's a very shocking sight.

Bill [Barr, the Attorney General] and I were talking about it before. It's one of the reasons Bill is here right now because, as you know, we're very much involved. And I've asked the Attorney General — FBI and the Attorney General to take a very strong look and to see what went on, because that was a very — a very bad thing that I saw. I saw it last night, and I didn't like it.

When the journalist tries to follow up, Trump repeats, “I'm not going to make any comment right now. I can tell you I think what I saw was not good—was not good. Very bad.” Then Trump interrupts the journalist, calls for a question from someone else on another topic, answers it, and ends the questioning (Trump Archives, May 29, 2020b).

The next day, May 29, Trump has evidently decided that his spontaneous answer to the journalist is the line he wants to take. In contrast to his refusal to comment the day before, Trump now even says, “We think that we also have to make the statement.” His statement opens his remarks to a meeting of industrial executives who have gathered to hear about re-opening the economy after closures to control the pandemic. Trump starts with multiple repetitions that something bad has happened, again avoids calling attention to race, repeats that the issue should be federalized, and ends with a general affirmation of national harmony (Trump Archives, May 30, 2020c). Mention of George Floyd and his family segues to federal action followed by attribution of Trump’s own response to “the Americans”:

I want to express our nation's deepest condolences and most heartfelt sympathies to the family of George Floyd. A terrible event. Terrible, terrible thing that happened.

I've asked that the Department of Justice expedite the federal investigation into his death and do it immediately, do it as quickly as absolutely possible. It's a local situation, but we're also making it into a federal situation. And it's—it's a terrible thing. We all saw what we saw, and it's very hard to even conceive of anything other than what we did see. It should never happen. It should never be allowed to happen, a thing like that.

But we're determined that justice be served. And I spoke to members of the family. Terrific people. And we'll be reporting as time goes by. We think that we also have to make the statement, and it's very important that we have peaceful protesters and support the rights for peaceful protesters. We can't allow a situation like happened in Minneapolis to descend further into lawless anarchy and chaos. And we understand that very well.

It's very important, I believe, to the family, to everybody that the memory of George Floyd be a perfect memory. Let it be a perfect memory. The looters should not be allowed to drown out the voices of so many peaceful protesters they hurt so badly. What is happening—and it's so bad for the state and for that great city.



So we are working very closely with the Justice Department. We're working with local law enforcement. We're working with everybody. And we're speaking with the family, and hopefully everything can be fairly taken care of. I understand the hurt. I understand the pain. People have really been through a lot. The family of George is entitled to justice, and the people of Minnesota are entitled to live in safety. Law and order will prevail.

The Americans will honor the memory of George and the Floyd family. It's very important to us. It's very important to me to see that everything is taken care of properly. It's a horrible, horrible situation.

On these formal occasions neither Dole nor Trump voices overt racism. Instead both Republicans submerge racial oppression that is real—real in both the segregation of the 92nd Infantry and the police murder of a Black man—under a national unity that is a mirage. That the late George Floyd is Black never even enters Trump's remarks. Some Americans have killed George Floyd, but Trump says Americans honor his memory.

Even Trump's initial recognition that Floyd's murder is a terrible event soon recedes relative to Trump's multiply repeated affirmation of harmony among Americans. Multiple press sources report remarks by Trump on June 5, recorded and televised by CNN. The archive contains no mention of these remarks. *The New York Times* for June 6 quotes Trump reacting to the latest figures showing declines in unemployment: "Hopefully, George is looking down right now and saying this is a great thing that's happening for our country. This is a great day for him, it's a great day for everybody. This is a great day for everybody. This is a great, great day in terms of equality" (Rogers, 2020). Trump neglects to mention that Black unemployment does not join in the decline for all Americans.

The reality about the Republican Party in relation to Trump has found eloquent expression in a letter to *The New York Times* from Ross K. Baker (2023), an Americanist in the department of political science at Rutgers. Republican Never-Trumpers "adroitly overlook the ugliness at the core of the party over the past century. . . The Republican party may be a ruin, but it is not a noble ruin. It is a whited sepulcher infested with antisemitism, racism, Christian nationalism and conspiratorial delusions about a 'deep state.'"

## What Causes Democracy

Trump's and Dole's mutual submersion of racial tensions under a veneer of racial harmony matters because of the role that assignment of racial identity has played in causing democracy to emerge and endure. Democracy's original cause or causes certainly might be different from whatever makes it last, but the original cause or causes also might not. To decide, one would need to know. Political scientists have failed to recognize the role of race. Because of their avoidance of race as the issue, they have failed to develop any cogent causal theory of democracy at all. Their uncertainties have repeatedly been reviewed by Barbara Geddes. Her syntheses of theoretical work repeat the skepticism she expressed as early as 1994 about the very

possibility of identifying general causes of democracy (Geddes, 1994). Formerly many political scientists have agreed that wealth causes democracy. Nearly all societies with high per capita incomes are governed as democracies, which are very rare in the many societies with low per capita incomes. But some painstaking investigators have noticed that democracy has been no more likely to start in high-income than in low-income societies. These investigators suggest that democracies observably concentrate in societies with high per capita income because democracy is more likely to survive where higher incomes leave populations more satisfied with democracy and endow elected officials with more resources to defend it. As oil prices have surged, several oil-rich countries with tiny populations have joined the upper reaches of the distribution of income per capita. But those have often been Arab states, few if any of which are democracies. Also, there is always Singapore, enriched by its location athwart trade routes but hardly democratic, as well as Mongolia after communism's collapse in neighboring Russia, impoverished by its isolation but democratic anyway. Surveying the scholarship about democracy, Geddes (2013) justifiably concludes that no condition revealed by her survey both consistently prevails wherever democracy exists and is consistently absent where democracy either has never appeared, or if it has started, has soon failed. From evidence that local conditions vary widely in places where democracy starts, she also concludes that the cause of democracy varies from one state to the next. In particular, early democracies result from different causes than more recent ones.

Many political scientists have applauded. From, it seems, evolutionary biology, political scientists borrow a concept called "equifinality." This concept refers to the possibility that different starting conditions can cause the same outcome—say, democracy may result amid poverty in one place or riches in another. Political scientists have also allied behind an additional, influential proposal about democracy that it is subject to "multifinality." Not objecting to but rather affirming equifinality, this proposal, called V-Dem, alleges that the causes of democracy are imponderable because it is not all one phenomenon. Instead, causes differ from one democracy to the next, as Geddes says, because democracy comprises many different varieties: "electoral, liberal, participatory, deliberative, and egalitarian" (Lindberg et al., 2014, 160).

Despite the convergence on equifinality and multifinality, political scientists' borrowing of those concepts raises a question about the discipline's scientific legitimacy. Political scientists' source for the concept of equifinality, evolutionary biology, is unquestionably legitimate science. But it is legitimate because its concept of cause is clear: differential reproduction. In contrast to what Geddes writes about democracy, to many political scientists' applause, the evolutionary biologists' cause does not vary from one species to the next. Some organisms of all species reproduce, and the individuals that do reproduce do so more rapidly than their local competitors when they evolve adaptations improving their ability to exploit local resources. Since later organisms inherit their progenitors' adaptations, favorable or unfavorable, eventually whole populations of any species feature the adaptations that have enabled the most frequent reproduction. Since resources certainly do vary across time and space, the same outcome—faster reproduction—is observably associated

with different preceding conditions (Mayr, 1982, 116–7). The association of a single outcome with different preceding conditions may legitimately be called equifinality (Patterson & Hoalst-Pullen, 2011). But the possibility of identifying the varying resources exploited by organisms succeeding in reproductive competition depends on a prior finding that differential reproduction, or “natural selection,” causes biological phenomena. That finding was initially not greeted with applause. Charles Darwin hesitated to publish it at all, he published a preliminary version only in a joint publication with Alfred Wallace when Wallace sent Darwin a draft of a similar argument that Wallace was about to publish separately, he ignited a lasting public controversy that continues even today, and he had been dead for a half century before his finding achieved acceptance among scientists (Mayr, 1982, 420–423, 565–7). For political scientists to talk coherently about equifinality in the context of democracy, they need first to develop a cogent theory of democracy’s cause or causes.

Multifinality is equally vague. Despite recommending “theoretically useful disaggregations of the process of democratization” (Geddes, 2013, 3), Geddes then describes a single process. Democracies emerging before 1945 differ from those developing since then. The early ones often develop through intermediate franchises beginning with “very limited suffrage” and ending with “nearly universal” suffrage. Since 1945 “nearly all have involved. . . immediate universal suffrage” (Geddes, 2013, 13). Apparently enfranchisement of all adults defines democracy. It certainly needs to be authentic enfranchisement, in which adults gain the right to vote about everyone who exercises unsupervised political authority. All German males, at least, acquired the right to vote for deputies to the Reichstag, the empire-wide legislature of the newly unified *Kaiserreich*, but since the ministry remained responsible to the unelected Kaiser, not the elected legislature, and since most law was regional rather than empire-wide, German enfranchisement was spurious or incomplete, as well as restricted to men and therefore scarcely universal. An inauthentic, restricted franchise may certainly be a way station along the path to an authentic, universal franchise like that introduced by the Weimar Republic’s 1919 constitution, but it may also be a hindrance that undermines and reverses authentic voting by 1930, when the German republic reverts to minority governments that culminate in Adolf Hitler’s emergence as not only Chancellor but also *Führer*.

The vagueness of multifinality derives from confusing the question of democracy’s origins and persistence with democracy’s consequences. Universal suffrage is a source of variation in its own right. Even near-universality of the suffrage may not emancipate voters from restrictions retained from some previous undemocratic regime, such as the division of voting units by boundaries either established by monarchic land grants or later modeled on those land grants. Voters’ exercise of the franchise may also be distorted by provisions of a constitution originally written to confine extension of the suffrage and to constrict the consequences of its exercise. (The preceding two sentences are assuredly meant to, and do, describe accurately democracy in the United States.) The effects of varying historical legacies combine with the presentation of alternatives to voters in varying sequences and variation in those voters’ choice among alternatives. Some electorates contain

many liberals, others more illiberals. A Dutch political scientist has expressed astonishment in conversation that the episode of Monica Lewinsky ever threatened Bill Clinton's hold on the American presidency. Perhaps his astonishment owes to the confinement of the Dutch vote for the *Staatkundig Gereformeerde Partij* and its allies to about one sixteenth of the Dutch electorate. In the United States, the comparable Christian right has composed as much as a fifth of the American electorate. As circumstances change, compositions of the electorate can shift. Amid post-war devastation in Europe, electorates may become more egalitarian, or like Americans dismantling the Internal Revenue Service amid postwar prosperity, an electorate may also become less egalitarian. These and other sources of variation ensure that the consequences of enfranchisement differ across space and time. Voters may use their sovereignty to install or abolish the participatory institutions of initiatives, referenda, and plebiscites. While the authors of V-Dem evidently suppose that these institutions foster something called participatory democracy, in California initiatives decided by referenda were introduced with the purpose of frustrating exercise of the franchise to choose representatives. That device continues to work by switching voters' choices from persons or partisanship to questions. Institutional arrangements are not different kinds of democracy, they are different choices by voters about democratic outcomes. V-Dem measures variations in the outcome of elections, but democracy, plainly, is the opposite of a guarantee that every election will produce the same outcome. Despite variations in the consequences of voting, democracy itself remains all one thing: the exercise of a universal adult suffrage to elect everyone exercising unsupervised political authority. It is another question how often that one thing existed before Geddes's alleged inflection point, 1945, and even after, as the next section reveals.

Recognizing that local conditions vary before states adopt democracy, Geddes (2013, 13–14) offers the perceptive suggestion that the cause of democracy may be an interaction between varying local conditions and a changing international environment. Other political scientists also make promising suggestions. One of them, Eleanor Ostrom, has been quoted by three scholars advocating equifinality as using her Nobel Prize lecture to say, “When the world we are trying to explain. . . is not well described by a simple model, we must continue to improve our frameworks and theories so as to be able to understand complexity and not simply reject it” (Fioretos et al., 2016, 3). It is surely not unreasonable, in the face of failure to identify simple causes, to explore whether contingent combinations of causes might do better to explain seemingly inexplicable observations. Nor is it unreasonable to consider some additional cause or set of causes other than those previously examined and rejected. Such a novel candidate cause might itself be simple.

## The Natural History of Enfranchisement

A glance at the process, by which Geddes's "very limited franchises" very gradually widened into "nearly universal" adult suffrage, reveals a surprise rarely, if ever, mentioned by empirical comparativists, although occasionally noticed by historians of political thought ordinarily placed in a separate class of "political theorists." Expansion of the franchise began in European states possessing overseas colonies and in those states' settler colonies of North America, the Southwest Pacific, and South Africa. In particular, Britain, by far the main colonial power, had possessed a narrow and carefully constrained franchise ever since 1429. Surviving records of Parliament contain a complaint from local knights that the pair of knights sent from each county was elected "in many counties. . .by people who have little or no means, each of whom pretend to have, as regards the making of such elections, a voice which is equivalent to that of the more wealthy knights or esquires living in their same counties." As a remedy, the knights proposed that anyone claiming the right to vote at the electoral meetings choosing the two knights should prove possession of property yielding an income of 40 shillings yearly, then a substantial amount. The petition duly received the royal assent (Curry, 2005, item 39). It seems plausible to read this limited franchise as intended to block the few hereditary lords who dominated each county from swamping the election meetings with poorer dependents who would elect knights obedient to the lords' will. Since the lords were rivals of the king, the king would have been shrewd to protect the knights' elections from interference by the lords. In any case, the restricted franchise would persist into the nineteenth century, in various modified forms until 1884, and it was an incomplete franchise, since those enfranchised could vote only for delegates to a Parliament that in any case only advised the unelected king and that unelected lords dominated. Fifteenth-century Britain was no democracy.

The nineteenth-century expansion of the franchise in Britain culminated in 1928 with the final stage of empowering women to vote for the House of Commons on equal terms with men resident in the British Isles. In the process, the unelected House of Lords lost its veto power in 1911, and two centuries earlier Queen Anne had made the last, vain attempt to withhold the royal assent from Acts of Parliament. With the Lords' surrender of the veto power, whatever influence that a monarch like Victoria had continued to assert also diminished, becoming at most an occasionally popular monarch's capacity to sway public opinion if ignored by elected officials. But not even universal adult suffrage in the British Isles achieved anything resembling democracy, for the enfranchised population within Britain composed maybe about an eighth of the people outside Britain enduring Parliament's rule (Etemad, 2000, 185). Since none of those outsiders could vote for the House of Commons without establishing residency in Britain, in 1928 the state as a whole was hardly closer to universal adult suffrage than England in 1429. Over four centuries, British democracy had stood still or even retreated, not advanced.

The nineteenth-century enfranchisement and the associated withdrawal of power from unelected lords and monarch was a response to a transformation of British

colonialism. Until after 1800, the overseas colonialism practiced by other European states, to which Britain was a relative latecomer, consisted mainly of seizing ports and narrow hinterlands to profit from taxing and then conducting seaborne commerce, from extracting minerals, especially precious metals, and from, in some localities, establishing plantations. Where the seized ports were situated on islands, of course, even a narrow hinterland might encompass the whole island, but especially in Asia and Africa as well as parts of the Americas, inland expanses remained under indigenous power (Reinhard, 2011, 148–150). But in 1772, Britain's East India Company dispatched Warren Hastings to one of its port cities then known as Calcutta. He was sent to assume responsibility for collecting taxes in Bengal so that the territory's nominal sovereign, the Mughal emperor, could pay his commercial debts to the company.

That event was transformative, not only for British colonialism. Commerce demanded only limited contact with colonial subjects. Commercial deals could be negotiated through descendants of the Arab traders who were already conducting the Indian Ocean trade long before the advent of the Europeans at the end of the fifteenth century. The Arabs could translate because their interlocutors in South Asia were speakers of Persian who controlled the subcontinent's commerce on behalf of speakers of Turkic exercising political power, whose written administrative language was also Persian. As the vocabulary of Persian was by this time heavily arabized, commercial negotiations were unproblematic. Once the Europeans arrived, a long history of contact with Europeans ensured that some Arabs also knew how to translate the newcomers' languages. But in contrast to commerce that could be done through translators, tax collection was impossible without maintaining order. That task required hiring a local army and appointing judges (Sen, 1997; Lees, 2010). The company's representatives could not command their soldiers, the famous sepoy, nor could European judges render verdicts, especially according to indigenous law, without learning some form of Bengali. Hastings assigned a junior staffer, Nathaniel Halhed, to compile a dictionary and grammar of Bengali that could be used to teach the new British district officers how to communicate with Bengalis now under their authority. A speaker of standard English rather than the dialects prevalent among England's population, Halhed understood his assignment as the compilation of a standard Bengali, which needed to be taught not only to the arriving English but even to sepoy recruited among speakers of local Bengali dialects. A common speech based on Halhed's dictionary and grammar unified the English commanders and their sepoy in opposition to the dialect speakers surrounding them in Bengal (Franklin, 2002).

What happened in Bengal could not stay in Bengal. English officials sent to Bengal returned home. They sent their sons for schooling. Even more often, they exchanged letters with correspondents in the home country. They published poems and books about their experiences that were widely read among Britain's literate minority. Hastings was recalled to London to face impeachment before Parliament in a case that drew extensive publicity in a press read by many of the few who could. Although Hastings was impeached, he was not convicted. The enhanced profitability of administering Indian territories, compared to merely trading in them, became

evident to his peers in Britain's other two South Asian entrepôts, then known as Bombay and Madras. His practices spread. Contacts back to Britain intensified as the the South Asian territory under administration expanded. As contact became more frequent and mattered more, vocabulary from South Asian languages—such as “sepoy”—penetrated the educated English of the colonials' correspondence and their conversations once they returned home, spreading to the English of people who never went near Asia. The profound contrast between English and South Asian languages, as well as between English and the wide variety of other languages spoken in Britain's other steadily expanding colonial possessions, became evident to English speakers everywhere.

Very slowly the contrast with South Asian and other colonial languages sharpened by the shift from commercial to administrative colonialism tore down barriers to the franchise at home. The restricted franchise of 1429 for rural areas accompanied an elaborate set of other franchises limiting the right to vote in those towns entitled to representation in Commons. A principal barrier protecting those franchises was language. For centuries Englishmen with political rights had been deliberately cultivating an educated register of English noticeably distinct from the wide variety of rural dialects spoken by the villagers who supplied the agricultural work force. As these villagers migrated into cities to become an urban labor force, encounters among speakers of different village dialects produced an urban contact English different from any rural dialect. Since each city drew migrants mainly from nearby villages, each city's contact English was peculiar to that city, differing to the point of mutual unintelligibility from the contact English of any other city. And all these urban contact Englishes differed from an educated register kept as uniform as possible (not very!) wherever English was spoken. To reduce variation in the spoken version of this educated register, instructors in pronunciation and spelling, soon called “orthoepists,” were recruited, trained and hired to maintain the distinctiveness of educated English even for words shared among the contact Englishes, the dialects and the educated register. The orthoepists magnified even trivial differences into crucial indicators of social distinction. Very many people said “papa,” but to this day the Duke of Sussex, once Prince Harry, can be heard complying with the orthoepists' insistence on shifting the stress to the second syllable and fully vocalizing both instances of the vowel rather than reducing the unstressed vowel to /ə/. The orthoepists also advised educated Britons that they must pronounce the /gh/ in words like “daughter” (Lass, 2000, 134; Görlach, 2000, 471). At least four centuries of differentiating the educated register from popular speech both accompanied and encouraged expressions of contempt for the dialects and contact Englishes as incapable of expressing thought. On the specious grounds that governance required thoughtfulness, speakers of dialects or contact English were declared incapable of taking part even in choosing those to participate in governance as MPs (Smith, 1984).

Once the shift in colonialism from commerce to administration exposed speakers of the educated register to the overwhelming contrast between any form of English and any language of a colonized population, the contrast between the educated register and urban contact English or village dialect began, quite slowly and incompletely, to recede in salience. As it receded, with equal slowness and incompleteness,



barriers to expansion of the franchise began to fall. In the 1850s, both conservatives and liberals successfully resisted the few radicals' bills for franchise expansion. Indeed, "conservative" meant rejection of any enfranchisement, "liberal" meant advocacy of election reform that might include enfranchisement of some additional men, and "radical" meant declaratory endorsement of manhood suffrage inside England and Wales, although in practice it might mean proposals for intermediate steps. The conservative Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli recognized the opportunity to divide the coalition of liberals and radicals composing his opposition. His tactic consisted of proposing the Second Reform Act of 1867 with its smallish enfranchisement that would attract radical support.

Disraeli's sponsorship of the Second Reform Act connected franchise expansion with colonialism. A year earlier he had redefined England: "no longer a mere European Power [but] the metropolis of a great maritime empire. . . really more an Asiatic Power than a European" (Harcourt, 1980, 96). The link in his person between colonialism and enfranchisement soon connected in turn to overcoming the linguistic divide among speakers of English. During debate over the Second Reform Act, a stubborn opponent of legislation to fund even elementary schooling suddenly warned that "it will be absolutely necessary that you should prevail on our future masters to learn their letters" (Sylvester, 1974, 16). Although it would take 50 years to achieve enforcement of an Education Act adopted in 1870 requiring universal schooling funded by the state, as schools gradually opened, teachers taught children the educated register instead of their native dialect or the urban contact English that they spoke. As political candidates realized that mass education was enabling them to communicate with potential voters, they increasingly dropped their opposition to universal manhood suffrage, which they approved in 1919, and they also eliminated remaining restrictions on women's voting within less than a decade. But since elected legislators remained unable to communicate to people ignorant of educated English, they retained barriers to voting by colonized territories' indigenous inhabitants.

The consequence, vehicle, and engine of enfranchisement was redefinition of English identities. Before the nineteenth century, English discourse distinguished among men or among families by the metaphors "great" or "high" applying to the few and "small" or "low" applying to the many. In contrast to contemporary usage, when "great" has almost if not quite entirely lost any spatial denotation, before the nineteenth century it retained the spatial sense shared with its cognates Dutch *groot* and High German *groß*, both of which have continued to translate what English speakers now communicate instead with "big." Early in the nineteenth century, the formerly common usage of "great" to distinguish politically dominant aristocrats and their kin began to disappear. As colonialism replaced the contrast between educated and dialectal or contact English with the contrast between any kind of English and the languages of colonized populations, Britons increasingly changed color. They became white. This change was by no means immediate. Even late in the nineteenth century, urban laborers and village agricultural workers continued to be described as "dark" (Bonnett, 1998). But while Britons remaining deprived of their natural right to vote qualified as dark, colonized populations received the derogatory "black." It



was a short step over the next two decades to reduce the trichotomy of white-dark-black to a binary opposition between white at home and black overseas.

This change spread the franchise by encouraging people to vote. A now very substantial literature in experimental psychology reveals that people with reason to describe themselves as occupying more space or as more able to cross space expect the accomplishment of any task to require less effort, while people with reason to describe themselves as small or low expect any task to require more effort (Anderson, 2018). Voting, of course, takes more effort than it is worth, since in any largish electorate anyone is almost equally likely to receive the same gain or loss without voting as can be expected from exerting even a slight effort to vote. Hence, the natural course of effort-allocation decisions inherent to any reasonably complex zoological organism, such as a human, discourages voting. But those describing themselves as large or high, like enfranchised Englishmen before the nineteenth century, who understand any task as requiring less effort, are more likely to consider even the small increase in the probability of receiving a gain or avoiding a loss as meriting a reduced effort to vote. Meanwhile people describing themselves as small or low understand that same task of voting to require additional effort. Correspondingly, those describing themselves as small or low do not alter their natural tendency to refrain from voting, let alone to refrain from the greater effort of protesting for the right to vote. Shared identity with others, meanwhile, reveals the same effect of reducing effort as describing the self with positive spatial cues such as “great” used to be and “high” remains (Xiao & Van Bavel, 2012). None of these effects are conscious, of course. They are what happens in the mind’s pre-attentive processing before it reports to conscious awareness. Hence as Englishmen acquired the identity “white,” all of them gained motivation both to vote and to protest in favor of enfranchisement in order to vote, many intensely enough to overcome the discouragement inherent in the persistent improbability that exerting the effort to vote or to protest for the vote would actually incur gain or avoid loss not incurred without exerting effort. Voting rights became an expression of white supremacy toward populations identified with the colonies and with blackness.

Processes in Britain shaped enfranchisement elsewhere in Europe. The main Dutch colony, now Indonesia, had reverted to Dutch authority in 1815 when the British Parliament returned it to Dutch control in order to fund Parliament’s newly created Kingdom of the Netherlands, to which it added the Belgian provinces in the vain hope of creating a state large enough to serve as a continental counterweight in case of a revival of French power after the defeat of Napoleon. As in Britain, in the Netherlands colonial officials expert in the languages of the southeast Asian archipelago led the revision of expression of contempt for Dutch dialects in favor of recognizing them as efforts to speak refined Dutch that could be fostered by schooling. Belgium only acquired its colony in the basin of the Congo River because Britain negotiated a compromise between rival German and French claimants. As soon as it did, proposals to expand Belgium’s miniscule franchise that had been rejected for two decades promptly succeeded, and although the new franchise was unequal, universal manhood suffrage was agreed before the Great War and delayed until 1919 only because German occupation of nearly all Belgian territory precluded

conduct of the election required under the constitution to amend its provisions regulating the electorate. France began expanding inland from its colonial ports in 1830 with ambitions to compete with England, but as the British possessions swelled in the late nineteenth century, defeat by Prussia in 1871 had replaced Britain with Germany as France's principal enemy. French fears of Prussia had already inaugurated cooperation with Britain in dividing up colonial territory, particularly in east Asia. Defeat to Prussia had already disabled French opponents of manhood suffrage, and the escape valve of colonial conquests diverted the opponents' energies from efforts to reverse enfranchisement at home while education reforms sponsored by Jules Ferry, not coincidentally France's principal advocate of colonial expansion, gradually replaced dialect with educated Parisian French. Authentic manhood suffrage also took root in Switzerland and universal adult suffrage in Norway, Denmark, and, once civil war assured independence, Finland. Three of these states never possessed overseas colonies while Denmark had recently made a forced sale of its Virgin Islands to the United States, retaining control only of almost uninhabited Greenland and thinly populated Iceland. In each of these states, despite their lack of colonies, a close watch on British and French discourse, as it was reshaped by the encounter with the languages of colonized populations, armed the advocates of enfranchisement with the discursive tools to trigger a reconciliation of an artificial standard language for politics with the ordinary speech of those excluded from voting. Elsewhere in Europe and Japan, franchises also expanded to imitate the practice of the world's most influential and by far largest state, the British empire, but these franchises were inauthentic, incomplete, or if not, short-lived, succumbing either to domestic violence or foreign conquest (Anderson, 2014).

## Warfare and True Universal Suffrage

Colonialism's discursive division between some human beings assigned whiteness and others assigned other colors caused enfranchisement of Europeans in colonizer powers and a very few marginal states without colonies, as well as of European settlers in some colonized territories. But enfranchisement before 1945 achieved democracy only in those few marginal states. In Britain and other colonizer powers, now including Japan, voters elected officials who ruled populations denied the vote that in many, though not all such states, vastly outnumbered the enfranchised home population. When Geddes writes of "many transitions" before 1945 from "very limited suffrage to nearly universal," she joins practically all theorists of the causes of democracy in casually ignoring the disfranchisement of the colonized. In a seminal paper concerning enfranchisement in Europe and its settler colonies—the "West"—the most prominent theorists of enfranchisement make no mention whatsoever of the word "colony" or any of its variants, despite expressing gratitude for comments to a pair of anonymous referees, 15 named scholars, and numerous unnamed participants in seminars at a variety of major universities and other elite institutions (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2000, 1167).

And that combination of enfranchising the few with disfranchising the many has never been any mystery. It was perfectly apparent to nineteenth-century colonial officials, who welcomed and perpetrated it. Expressions of their contentment were on record. The Cabinet appointee heading the India Office in London managed Parliament's communications with his kinsman by marriage, the royal viceroy administering its south Asian territories. In 1878, the appointee published a pamphlet explaining: "We are carrying on side by side an Imperial and a Democratic policy; in one part of our dominion proclaiming self-government and free institutions with the widest popular suffrage; in another maintaining our hold on vast populations only by a powerful administrative despotism supported by military force" (Mowat, 1973, 111). At the time the appointee's "widest popular suffrage" mentioned Disraeli's enfranchisement of 1867, which had recognized the voting rights of about a third of men in England and Wales but many fewer in Scotland and Ireland. Published less than a decade after passage of the law funding elementary education, realization of which remained merely incipient, the appointee could expect his pamphlet to be widely read among that minority of the English who as yet could read. The appointee was himself a prominent radical espousing manhood suffrage confined to the British Isles. Selection of a known Radical to manage Britain's "administrative despotism" in South Asia expressed Cabinet approval for the combination of enfranchisement at home with disfranchisement abroad. In the House of Commons, the Liberal Sir Charles Dilke was an ardent advocate for enfranchisement. The year after the 1884 enfranchisement finally extended voting rights to a majority of males in England and Wales, Dilke celebrated the slaughter of indigenes in Australia and North America as "a blessing to mankind": "The Anglo-Saxon is the only extirpating race on earth" (Porter, 1968, 50).

It would take two global wars to turn European colonizer states and their settler states into democracies, as well as some other states. Contrary to much literature, neither war's causes are separable from colonialism. Instead, both wars were about possession of colonized territories. Together the two wars promoted democracy, but they did so by inadvertence, exhausting the colonial powers to the extent that they were compelled to release their control over vast swathes of Asia and Africa. Loss of territory outside Europe deprived them of all but a very few of their disfranchised subjects, turning them into democracies by default.

The conflict over colonies resulted from German jealousy about British and French possession of territory in Africa and Asia. The success of Britain and other European states in gathering colonies had convinced the conquerors and others, including Germans, that racial superiority was the reason for European dominance, rather than military or naval technique and organization that were the real reasons. But not unified until after Prussia's victories in short order between 1866 and 1871 over its rivals the continental empire of Austria and the overseas empire of France, Germany came very late to the competition for colonies. Until 1884 its dominant official Bismarck avoided pursuing colonial enterprises, even conceding the Congo basin to Belgium the next year to avoid conflict with the British and French. When Germany did join the contest, few territories remained available. Germany acquired only two particularly desolate, thinly populated expanses of Africa in the southwest

and southeast, plus scattered more populous holdings elsewhere, a port in East Asia and parts or the whole of a few Pacific islands.

After their victory over France, feelings of racial superiority to people outside Europe convinced at least many Germans to think they deserved better. It was not a "place in the sun" they wanted. German *Platz* may respell French *place* that is also the original of English "place," but *Platz* is not "place." Like French *place*, German *Platz* is a reference to the public square, particularly the paved space surrounded by official buildings. The *Platz an der Sonne* was an official presence in the colonial world, the sunny south. The only way to enlarge it was to make war on the European states who already occupied it.

Because many Germans thought their whiteness entitled them to more colonial subjects, in 1914 German officials validly expected to win public support if secret encouragement of their erstwhile Austrian rivals to invade Serbia, which had harbored intriguers against Austria's oppression of the Serbs' fellow Slavs, developed as the German officials anticipated. They expected the Austrian attack to trigger a war against the main colonizer Britain and its secondary accomplice France. In the process of fighting that war, German armies overran nearly the whole European territory of a third colonizer, Belgium, although the Germans left untouched the fourth main colonizer state, the Dutch monarchy, whose main colony in the southeast Asia archipelago the Germans evidently either did not covet or expected to fall into their hands once the main facilitator of Dutch suzerainty, Britain, was defeated.

German defeat in 1918 forced surrender of the colonies won after 1884, but in the war's final year German generals had changed their tactics. The revised tactics penetrated the trench lines that had previously stabilized the western front since 1914 at the cost of immense casualties to both sides. Younger commanders among those German generals' successors in the 1920s imagined that the revised tactics could win another war if applied from the beginning. The tactics looked especially promising if the victors in 1918 chose to persist in the trench warfare that had won for them in the first war, as it appeared from their writings that they would. Moreover, the younger commanders expected that the new equipment of tanks, truck-borne infantry and dive bombers could turn initial penetrations of the trench line into advances in depth at speeds more rapid than the enemy infantry could retreat on foot. It would become possible to encircle large enemy formations while disorganizing their resistance by capturing or destroying their communications, supplies, and ammunition stockpiles. When the breakdown of the universal franchise enacted for Germans in 1919 raised to power a demagogue who could keep control of the state only if he allied with the younger commanders by endorsing their plans for renewed aggression, the younger commanders got their chance. Blitzkrieg was initially an enormous success.

But any Germans who thought they could win had overestimated their chances again. One error was Russia, now temporarily renamed the Soviet Union. The victories won by the blitzkrieg made the increasingly unpopular demagogue fearful that the German public would rally behind his generals, some of whom he knew were plotting to assassinate him and who did try. His fears made him interfere in

their tactical decisions. He tried to discredit their reputation for victories by ordering them to waste soldiers and equipment in vain attempts to hold terrain on the Russian front when the doctrine of blitzkrieg would have suggested a rapid retreat to avoid, ambush and surround the enemy spearheads. Although Stalin's own program of executing or imprisoning his ablest generals had assured the naming of incompetents to senior commands before the Germans invaded in 1941, in defeat Stalin moved rapidly to promote able subordinates. It cannot be said that the Russians ever became especially competent soldiers, but the initial welcome that the Germans received from survivors of starvation during Stalin's program of forcibly converting villages into plantations, called "collective farms," turned into active hostility and resistance once the Germans made clear their intent to enslave and to exterminate. Somehow German conduct in the conquered territory communicated itself across the battlefield, and conscripts from further east fought resolutely while organizers of partisan warfare sent into the occupied territory found willing recruits. Numerical advantages, some surprisingly good equipment, and the demagogue's interference with German tactics steadily won back the lost ground in a counteroffensive that rolled through Poland into Berlin. At the same time, the Americans, whom the German commanders had noticed refusing to rearm before war broke out, rearmed very fast when the demagogue's loyalists declared war on them. The quality of some American equipment may have been doubtful, but its quantity was abundant.

The war reduced public support for the colonial enterprise. Postwar governments in European colonial states tried to retain their colonial possessions, but an electorate that had celebrated its recruitment as whites into the coalition that controlled the state now, at least frequently, wanted relief from the privations of 6 years of warfare. Soldiers sent abroad to fight Germans in Europe and Africa and Japanese in Burma and Malaya wanted to return home. Moneys for armaments and expeditions competed with funding of public health, restoring the damaged housing stock and transportation routes, and paying subsidies to people released from war industries but not yet rehired by enterprises selling civilian goods. People demanded an end to food rationing. Although France and Britain fought colonial wars, both ended up withdrawing even though France lost and Britain won. Britain surprised everyone by suddenly surrendering South Asia without even putting up a fight. The United States forced the Netherlands to surrender Indonesia, and the Belgians freed Congo in a ruse to retain control that blew up in their faces when their Congolese troops mutinied on being informed that independence was a ruse. It would take three decades for decolonization to complete, but when it did the colonizer states found themselves ruling few adults not enfranchised. Near universal suffrage was achieved, but its cause was colonization changing political discourse and identity in a manner that provoked European warfare over colonies.

The transformation of the international setting from colonialism to decolonization is, of course, an instance of changing international conditions that might interact with a variety of local domestic conditions, in this case all originally featuring a linguistic divide between a register developed for politics and dialectical variation in popular speech, to promote near-universal suffrage that establishes democracy, just as Geddes suggests.

## White Suffrage and Black Enfranchisement

If enfranchisement is a consequence of being declared white because of colonialism, how do persons declared black, or declared to be any other color also not white, ever obtain recognition of their right to vote? The short answer is many do not. Decolonization left African and Asian states ruled either by former colonial officials of African origin administering in the European languages of colonial rule or by Asian officials reviving the written languages of rule once developed by their precolonial predecessors. On both continents the officials organized plebiscites to approve independence from the European colonizer state and, often, an election to choose which official would guide the new state. For the plebiscite and any election, the officials enfranchised the local populace declared other than white. But once in office, the contrast of the European language of rule or the pre-colonial written language to the variety of languages spoken within the boundaries of the former colonial possessions, now become independent states, reproduced the linguistic divide characteristic of the European colonizer states before colonialism as well as of other pre-colonial states across Eurasia and Africa and frequent at some times in some places in the Americas. Since those states were all undemocratic, almost all the newly independent post-colonial states also lapsed into dictatorship. In a few, notably India, creative compromise preserved the suffrage, in India partly because the absence of any single pre-colonial written language of rule across the whole territory combined with the presence of many written competitor languages to offer negotiators championing each such language an opportunity for creativity. Over time other creative solutions have emerged in a variety of other states, enfranchising their populations. But even India has suffered one interruption of its democracy already, while another now appears perilously looming.

Although the general pattern is disfranchisement, sometimes white suffrage promotes enfranchisement of blacks and others. How is evident in the history of the United States. Suffrage not only unites whites but also divides them into adherents of rival candidates, who quickly coalesce into political parties. Soon one party becomes dominant. It is the majority party in elections where governing coalitions are announced before the election and the coalition-formant where multiple parties that run against each other in the election negotiate to announce the governing coalition afterward (political scientists call these elections “first-past-the-post” and “party-list-proportional representation,” respectively). Since the dominant party is the one that attracts more white votes where the suffrage is confined to whites, other parties expect normally to lose unless they can attract votes from people denied the suffrage. The losers therefore are motivated to recommend enfranchisement of blacks and of people assigned other colors, although even the desire to win is not invariably strong enough to overcome many of their white adherents’ racist bigotry.

Parties expecting to lose are the reason that the United States, the one colonizer state with a large population assigned colors other than white on its home territory during the colonial era, has enfranchised its populations of color. The first enfranchisement of blacks was the 1867 Reconstruction Act. In 1860, the new Republican

Party, successor to the defeated Whigs, won its first presidential election on its second try. But despite winning a majority of electoral delegates, its candidate Abraham Lincoln won only 40% of the popular vote. He triumphed among electoral delegates because three rival Democrats split the popular vote in states where he won while dividing among themselves the states where he lost. His election was not promising for future Republican candidates and particularly not for control of the House of Representatives, then much more important for governing than it is today. But a party that usually loses does not necessarily lose every election. Victory in war combined with exclusion of Democrats representing southern states recently in rebellion to return large Republican majorities to both Houses in 1866. Those majorities adopted legislation requiring southern states to enfranchise blacks, the vast majority of whom then resided in the South where most had until recently been slaves. Republicans confidently expected the new black voters to support Republicans against Democrats identified with former slave masters. Together with white Republicans not disfranchised, the new black voters would outnumber those few whites already, or soon to be, re-enfranchised after insurrection during the Civil War (Foner, 2002, 271–280). Three years later, the Fifteenth Amendment prevented any state from using race as an excuse for disfranchising anyone. But its wording allowed various work-arounds to accomplish disfranchisement of voters described as black as long as legislators justified their exclusion with other reasons. Republicans then found themselves winning every presidential election except two until splits in their now dominant party enabled Woodrow Wilson's election in 1912, followed by three more Republican wins starting in 1920. Having become the dominant party, Republicans lost interest in black enfranchisement. Violence by whites duly all but eliminated voting by blacks in the Deep South and restricted it further north.

Now the Democrats looked like the losing party. Mass unemployment exacerbated by Republican indifference followed by world war won four elections for Franklin Roosevelt, but even so Harry Truman survived 1948 so narrowly that a famous newspaper headline declared him to have lost. For the Democrats, it was crucial to maintain the coalition with southern Senators who used their seniority to protect white southerners against any national law enforcing the Fifteenth Amendment's prohibition. Migration north of persons described as black had swelled their population in the Republican states commanding a larger share of electoral votes. Though previously having led the racist southern Senators, when elected President in 1964, Lyndon Johnson saw a chance to shift the electoral votes of at least some midwestern and eastern states into the Democratic column. By legislation to enforce the enfranchisement of persons described as black in the South, he confidently expected to attract the votes of those persons' kin and of their fellows also described as black but resident and enfranchised in the North. He confidently expected that Democrats would lose the South to resentful whites, but electoral votes and Congressional Representatives there were then scarce, and he either did not anticipate the population shift that would later grow southern states' electorates or did not care about something that would happen long after his own departure from office. His plan failed to ensure his own re-election because of the war he launched in Vietnam.

That war was itself an integral part of his plan to enfranchise persons described as black. When many southern whites equated enfranchisement of persons described as black with devotion to communism, a war against communists in southeast Asia shielded Johnson against that calumny. Defeat in Vietnam was an eventuality that he was ill-prepared to anticipate. Though the failure of the war compelled him to forsake all hope of reelection, still his party gained. Ever since, the overwhelming majority of those persons described as black who vote has reliably voted Democratic, regardless of where they live. From being the racist party in the antebellum era when they dominated American politics, the Democrats became the antiracists when they became losers.

White enfranchisement, by dividing persons described as white between electoral winners and losers, motivates the losing minority of whites to enfranchise persons described with other colors when it occasionally does win. In this way, colonialism's original assignment of whiteness to persons causes enfranchisement to become nearly universal. The causation is simple.

## **Trump and the Threat to Democracy**

White enfranchisement results from colonialist racism and then generates the near-universal suffrage that defines democracy. White enfranchisement then preserves near-universal suffrage because without it, white voters for the losing party cannot hope to win. For this same reason, Trump expresses the very same longing, for an America before extension of voting rights beyond whites, that many other Republican candidates have also voiced. Those very Republicans have been deemed compatible with democracy all through the decades since the Voting Rights Act finally enfranchised Black Americans in 1965 and since its amendments in 1975 finally encouraged Americans of other minorities to exercise their already legally accepted right to vote. If "Mr. Republican" does not threaten democracy, a Trump who is at most only pithier and more prone to repeat himself does not threaten democracy either. Instead, Trump is democracy in action. His appeals for a return to an even more racist America accrued nearly 75 million votes in 2020, falling barely short of the number needed win. If democracy means motivating voters to choose who will exercise political authority, rather than threatening democracy Trump's appeals instead enable it.

Someone might reasonably object that the failed invasion of the Capitol on January 6, 2021, has never been tried by Dole or any other losing Republican candidate for the presidency. That objection is not entirely accurate. The invasion is part of Trump's connected, also failing plan to replace electors promising to vote for Biden with slates of fake electors from various states. This plan reprises the successful tactic used in 1877 by the losing Republican candidate Rutherford B. Hayes to overturn the victory of the Democrat Samuel J. Tilden. Hayes launches no assault on the Capitol, but he also does not need to because for him the tactic wins. Trump's carefully ambiguous solicitation of the assault on the Capitol is not,



by itself, a convincing attempt to reverse the election result. Only about 2000 invaders actually enter the Capitol, not all at once (Select Committee, 2022, 76). The invaders are too few to stage an armed coup taking over the government of a nation the size of the United States. Although some of them carry guns, none fires a gun. The only gunshot kills one invader trying to smash her way into the chamber of the House of Representatives.

Instead of an armed coup, the assault succeeds in achieving, and seems to have been designed to achieve, a quite different goal. Rather than failing in a governmental takeover that they are too few and too lightly armed to achieve, the assailants try successfully to delay the joint session of the House and Senate, which meets in the House chamber, with its more numerous seats. At the joint session, objections may be voiced to any state's list of electors, as long as any objection is made in writing and signed by at least one Representative and one Senator. In case of an objection, the Houses then separate to vote on whether to confirm or reject the objection, reconvening once their decision has been made (CRS, 2016, 6). Timing reveals the rioters' goal of delay. As rioters attack police barricades around the Capitol, "at approximately 1:46 p.m." (Select Committee, 2022, 464) one Representative from Arizona objects to the electors from his state on behalf of 60 other Representatives. One Senator confirms that he has signed the objection. Clearly orchestrated in advance, the objection coincides with the rioters' onslaught. The Houses duly separate, but their debates over the objection are interrupted less than a half hour later, when the rioters force their way into the Capitol at 2:13 p.m., preventing debate among Senators by occupying the Senate Chamber and trying to invade the House Chamber. Fearing the rioters, at 2:12 p.m. the Vice-President's Secret Service detail has removed him from the Senate Chamber to his Capitol office, and at 2:25 p.m. the detail moves him again "to a secure location" (Select Committee, 2022, 466). By their actions, the rioters succeed in delaying the joint session for more than 7 h, from its beginning shortly after 1:00 p.m., the legally appointed moment, until 8:06 p.m. (Select Committee, 2022, 609), when the joint session resumes. The restart of the joint session takes time after the Capitol clears at 4:23 p.m. (Select Committee, 2022, 667), 6 min after a public statement by Trump encourages the rioters to vacate the Capitol and lets officers of the Capitol Police and the D.C. Police finish restoring order, although they then need until after 5 p.m. to clear the tunnel from the West Plaza. The next 3 h are consumed in reassembling both Houses separately and in their rejecting the initial objection.

Not a failed coup, the riot is a successful effort to protract Trump's presidency. By law he remains President until an announcement by someone presiding over the joint session declares that another candidate has won a majority of electoral votes (CRS, 2016, 4). In the event, Vice-President Mike Pence cannot make that announcement until 3:32 a.m. on January 7 (Select Committee, 2022, 669). For almost 14 h, therefore, President Trump remains commander-in-chief. His loyalists in the armed forces are numerous enough to preclude any use of the military to suppress the riot, perhaps partly out of concern among officers faithful to their constitutional oaths that Trump's loyalists, who are numerous among both officers and the troops, might obey a command from Trump abusing his Constitutional powers to order them

to aid the rioters. Should the rioters succeed in preventing any resumption of the joint session by capturing the Capitol, which military help would enable them to do, their action would protract Trump's presidency indefinitely. They would touch off a crisis not envisaged in the Constitution. Its resolution is unpredictable. Although even a Supreme Court controlled by his nominees presumably would not intervene to resolve the crisis in Trump's favor, no presumption is a certainty. When the rioters fail to ignite the Constitutional crisis, their riot nevertheless emits a rallying cry that forces Americans to take sides on the question of whether Trump should be re-elected 4 years later. That rallying cry is Trump's interpretation of the riot's end. At 6:01 p.m., while the House and Senate are reassembling, Trump tweets: "Remember this day forever!" (Select Committee, 2022, 607). In that sense, the riot is just a spectacularly abhorrent echo of the contemptible dogwhistle heard from many Republican candidates all through the decades since Lyndon Johnson first endorses the Voting Rights Act.

From the beginning of the enfranchisement at its core, democracy has been understood by vast numbers of people as the institutional expression of political equality confined to whites. Because colonialism's attrition of resistance to enfranchisement has gradually extended political rights to all whites, white losers of the political contest have begun advocating extension of political equality to Blacks and other racial minorities. Still, despite those for whom upholding equality is not merely instrumental, all too often whites' support for the rights of racial minorities has lasted only as long as the votes are still being counted. Then persisting racism is tolerated, both by the political candidates who have won by virtue of support from racial minorities, Black and other, and by many of their white adherents whose favored candidates' support among minorities has won office for the candidates. Colonialism's identification of democracy with equality among whites endures. It is even reinforced among those for whom sharing equality with those assigned colors other than white seems to dilute their own hold on equality. In that persistent racism, inbred into the history of enfranchisement, lies the true threat to democracy, of which a Trump or a Dole is merely the voice. Persistence of the racism that launched enfranchisement threatens democracy by continuously motivating attempts to retract the enfranchisement of racial minorities that alone can achieve the near-universal suffrage definitive of any democracy. Not every Republican is a racist, but no Republican candidate can win the presidency without racists' votes. Dependency on votes by racists opens Dole's pet aphorism to a particularly grim reading: "I never met anyone whose vote I didn't want."

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# Cultural Backlash: The Long-Term Damage of Trump's Legacy to American Democracy and Global Politics



Barbara Wejnert

**Abstract** This chapter explores how former President Trump followed the pattern of populism to dismantle democracy in the United States and how other democratically elected leaders with autocratic tendencies have been imitating his antidemocratic calls. Considering the global impacts of Trump's Presidency, first, the chapter briefly analyzes populism's effect on democracies. Second, it demonstrates how Trump's populism attempted to derail the long-standing American democracy. Third, it analyzes the global diffusion of Trump's actions and rhetoric on leaders of other democratic regimes. The chapter concludes by deriving a conceptual framework of diffusion of Trump's effect on democracies worldwide and the resulting warning of a persisting threat to democracy retrenchment under rising Trump-like populism.

**Keywords** Trump's populism · Diffusion of Trump's effect · Framework of diffusion of Trumpism · Assault on democracy · Democracy's retrenchment conceptualization

## Introduction

The global rise of populism in democracies and nondemocracies alike (Roberts, 2006, 2010; Moffitt, 2016; Ron & Nadesan, 2020; Taggart, 2004; Wejnert, 2014a, 2020), assisted by Trump's effect on the American Presidency and its global spread to other countries calls for reflection on why populism appears to appeal to citizens across many democratic countries. In what ways does the worldwide increase in populism affect democracies? How do democratically elected leaders with autocratic tendencies use populism that endangers democracy's existence? How populism implored by Donald J. Trump attempts to derail the long-standing American

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democracy, and how do other democratically elected leaders imitate Trump's anti-democratic calls generating worldwide diffusion of Trump's effect?

The common root of the birth of populism in democracies is not only popular discontent caused by sociopolitical inequalities, people's dissatisfaction with the existing political and economic situation, and limited opportunities for progress. It is indisputable that the growing gap in income disparity and the resulting increase in the GINI index of inequality has led to massive dissatisfaction among wage earners worldwide. For example, in the United States, the gap between CEO and worker compensation increased from 21 times in 1965 to 351 times in 2020, resulting in ownership of nearly 90% of stocks by the top 10% of the wealthy individuals, leaving the remaining 10% of stocks to share among 90% of the rest of the U.S. citizens in 2021 (Galloway, 2022, p.28). Therefore, scholars demonstrated that populism arises when disenfranchised groups' economic or political needs are unmet (Haggard & Kaufman, 2021; Ron & Nadesan, 2020, pp.17–22; Wejnert, 2020, pp.191–193). In addition to economic inequality, however, the unavailability of typical blue-collar jobs with blue-collar workers' value and pride magnifies the effect of economic inequality. As Michele Lamont in *The Dignity of Working Men* explains, the dream of blue-collar working men is not to become upper-middle-class but to live within their comfortable class milieu, but with more money and with a job that preserves workers' independence, value, and pride (Lamont, 2002, pp.17–55). "Manly dignity is a big thing for most men. So is the breadwinner status: Many still measure masculinity by the size of a paycheck. . . .For many blue-collar men, they are asking for basic human dignity (male varietal) ... Working-class men are not interested in working at McDonald's for \$15 per hour instead of \$9.5; what they want. . . is steady, stable, full-time jobs that deliver a solid, middle-class life to 75% of Americans who don't have a college degree. Trump promises to deliver it," writes Williams (2016, p.2).

Such suitable conditions for the rise of populism are frequently exploited by populist leaders who delve into popular discontent, trying to destabilize the democratic rule of law and democratic governing. This includes the former President of the United States, Donald J. Trump, who used populism attempting to derail the long-standing American democracy. This chapter briefly defines populism to ask how democracy interacts with populism and how populism, implored by former President Trump, endangers democracy in the United States. The chapter concludes by demonstrating the global diffusion of Trump's effects and its danger to other democracies.

## Background

### *Populism's Effect on Democracy*

According to most researchers, populism depicts a fundamental antagonism between "the people" and "the elite," where populism represents the voice of "the people"

against “the elite,” and the people are united by a common goal of anti-establishment and anti-elite (Wejnert, 2020, pp.185–198). One of the core features of populism, therefore, is an appeal to anti-pluralism, anti-elitism, and juxtaposition of virtuous people against corrupted elites (Bonikowski et al., 2019).

“The elites” typically include the ruling government, business lobbyists, large dominant companies, and any entity or institution. The “elites” are perceived as attempting to disservice, control, or harm its constituencies, employees, or ordinary citizens. Since populists represent only the need of the people pitting the people, who are perceived to be virtuous and homogeneous, “against a set of elites and dangerous ‘others,’ (Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2008, p.3), they endanger the principle of inclusiveness in a democratic system” (Przeworski, 2019, pp.113–122).

Moreover, speaking against the principles of political representation, populism constitutes a “shadow of representative politics” (Müller, 2016, p.101), a façade of democracy, only speaking the language of democratic values to win the support of the electorate (Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2008). To appeal to ordinary people, populist leaders use direct forms of communication, including direct contact with followers, spectacles and performances, derogatory language, and inflammatory comments. They broadly use media and social media (the so-called *mediatisation* politics) and celebrity-like strategies to propagate their agenda and increase the ranks of their followers (Moffitt, 2016, pp.70, 83). Their claims are moralistic, empty in content, sensational, and symbolic, offering mainly rhetoric and groundless solutions (Mudde, 2007) and false promises (Freedom House, 2018). Williams discussing Trump’s appeal among blue-collar American workers explains that Trump promises to deliver a well-paid, male-dignifying job that he would not be able to fulfill the promises (no concrete plan on creating such jobs was ever offered by Trump). However, he understands the worker’s needs (Williams, 2016, p.2). The rising popularity and attraction of populist demagogue Donald J. Trump among a portion of American society encourages examination of the intricate interconnections between democracy and populism in the U.S. and globally.

Populism is destructive to democracy by creating conflict and polarizing society. Its destructive role obstructs cooperation and political dialog between diverse social or political groups. It impedes the opportunity to reach a consensus, make joint decisions, or create a political coalition (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2012, p.83). The result is hypo-partisanship that adds to distrust of carrier politicians and the portrayal of state apparatus as being captured by the opponents (Applebaum, 2020, p.114). Distrust influences unwritten rules and the written constitution, which should protect and soft-guard democracy, preventing political competition from transforming into unruly conflict and polarized polity (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018, p.101).

In contrast to democratic forms of governing, populism speaks against the principles of political representation. In a divided society, segments of constituencies frustrated with representative politics rely on a populist leader to represent their agenda in a political forum and to directly influence political decision-making (Gurov & Zankina, 2013, p.7). Populist leaders claim to speak directly in the name of “the people” and appeal for a need for restoration, especially regarding the context of institutions’ response to pressing emergencies (Arditi, 2007, p.83).



Populist demagogues *de facto* act on behalf of opportunists and the disaffected, prompting a yearning to suspend legal processes (Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2008, p.3). Populist restoration wars led by demagogues can threaten democracy, primarily because of the suspension of constitutional and legal procedures (Nadesan & Ron, 2020, p.18). Populism, thus, is destructive since it only speaks the language of democratic values to win the support of the followers. It offers empty promises and spreads false information (Mudde, 2007, p.262). Moreover, the populist leaders are the spokesperson of the “real people,” but such a mandate does not come from “people.” Instead, its instructions are based on interpretations of populist politicians (Muller, 2016, pp.30–31). Such strategies contrast the mandates of elected democratic leaders representing their constituencies and being accountable for presenting verifiable, accurate information (Abts & Rummens, 2007, pp.405–24).

The anti-establishment voice of populism offers unconventional solutions outside of the rule of law (Woods, 2014, pp.1–25). Populist leaders who become influential policymakers (like former President Trump) act like autocratic leaders, attempt to control the state (the judiciary and executive branches of the government), use corruption and “clientelism,” and suppress civil society and freedom of the press (Przeworski, 2018, p.1). They also work on limiting the voice of institutions that represent minorities and use the notion and praxis of majority rule to circumvent minority rights (Przeworski, 2018, p.1). Unsurprisingly, Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018, pp.33–53) argue that weak representative polity combined with inefficient and highly divisive political parties cannot guard and protect democratic institutions and could cause the death of democracies. Making an analogy to a soccer game, Levitsky & Ziblatt (2018, p.78) explain that to consolidate power, the would-be authoritarians must capture the referee, sideline at least some of the other side’s star players, and rewrite the rules of the game to lock to their advantage, in effect tilting the playing field against their opponents.”

Populism emerges when the safeguards of democracy erode, the free press, the rule of law, separation of power, and mutual toleration fail (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018, pp.125–144). Hence, it is perceived as the decay of democracy, a potential threat to civil society, and a force that is countering the global spread of democracy (Puddington & Roylance, 2017). The juxtaposition of populism and democracy is summarized in Table 1.

### ***The Global Effect of Populism***

Since starting with the new millennium, populism has awakened globally, becoming a new political style of appeal to voters (followers) (Moffitt, 2016, pp.28–50). Faced with destructive populism, the spread and maintenance of democracies have been retrenching, and autocratic regimes are on the rise. The share of the world’s population residing in stable (Dahl, 2000) countries’ democratization declined to 52% by 2010 and 32% by 2020 (V-dem, 2021), while the percentage of the world population living in autocracies increased from 48% by 2010 to 68% by 2020



**Table 1** Characteristics differentiating populism from democracy

Populism	Democracy
1. Juxtaposition of a virtuous people against corrupted elites	1. Unity, interconnectivity, and equality of all people
2. Exclusion, representation only of “the people.”	2. Inclusiveness of all constituencies
3. Affirms mandate to be a spokesperson of the “people”	3. Receives mandate to represent the voice of constituencies in the election process
3. Anti-pluralism, “the people” are homogenous	3. Pluralism
4. Anti-elitism	4. Acceptance of elites (including governing elites)
5. Claims are empty promises, false information	5. Claims based on facts
6. Restricted media or media control	6. Freedom of the press
7. “Mediatization” and Celebrity politics, media used only to support claims of populists as a communication strategy	7. Objective media information, media transparency as a communication strategy
8. Celebrity strategy as a political strategy	8. Serious debates as a political strategy
9. Spectacle and performance as a political strategy	9. Political debates, informed speeches as a political strategy
10. Suppression of civil society	10. Support of civil society
11. Control of judiciary and executive power	11. Separation of the judiciary and executive power

(V-Dem, 2021). My research on democracy diffusion and its retrenchment during the spread of populism confirms that across the globe, the current era is marked by a decrease in the number of sovereign democratic countries from 75% of democratic to all sovereign countries (or 119) in 1995 to 67% (or 101) by 2015. In such historical conditions, it is imperative to assess the impact of Trump on American and global democracy.

### ***How Populism Dismantles Democracies and How Trump Assaulted the American Presidency***

Research on the impact of destructive populism on democracies discusses how under the rise of populism, democracies undergo slow, progressive erosion of key democratic institutions, and gradual weakening of political norms of democratic governing. At such times, populist leaders, often democratically elected government members, initiate democratic retrenchment, and democracy erodes from within (Bauer & Becker, 2020; Przeworski, 2019, pp.172–192). Democracy’s retrenchment is, therefore, orchestrated and guided by democratically elected officials unwilling to concede power to the incoming leaders (Haggard & Kaufman, 2021; Przeworski, 2019, pp.164–171). Geddes, Wright, and Frantz called these strategies “authoritarianization,” i.e., a process when elected leaders “initiate dictatorship via legal changes like banning opposition” to solidify their position and prevent the

yielding of political power (Geddes et al., 2018, p.27). Most democracies do not end by revolution or military coup but erode from within, conclude Geddes, et al. (2018, pp.31–32, 41).

Consistent with the theoretical explanation of the destructive effects of populism on democracy, former U.S. President Donald J. Trump embraced several autocratic behaviors, establishing what could be called *Trumpism* as a political strategy. To hold political power beyond his appointed term, as an elected leader of the democratic country, he followed a blueprint of populism, simultaneously dismantling the long-standing American democracy.

*First*, when populist leaders do not win an election, they deny the results of a legitimate election disputing its legality and fairness. They do not concede political power to the newly elected members and refuse to accept a fair ballot (Przeworski, 2019, pp.183–188). That was evident when Trump disputed election results, called them rigged, and filed over 60 frivolous lawsuits denying the election’s honesty and fairness in 2020. He also started frivolous legal actions against his election rival, the former United States Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, in 2016. For the lawsuit against Hillary Clinton, he was prosecuted and punished with a 1 million dollar fine in early 2023.

Trump called for “Stop the Steal,” referring to an election that was supposedly stolen from him (Przeworski, 2019, pp.183–191). His denial of election results culminated when he asked his followers, including white supremacists, insurgents, and militia groups, to gather in front of the U.S. Capital on January 6, 2021, and March and storm the Capital to prevent certification of his defeat in the 2020 election. The riots led to nine police and insurgents’ deaths, multiple injuries, and over 860 defendants charged with forced entrance to the Capital, destruction of federal property, and other crimes.

The Congressional committee investigating the January 6 attack on the United States Capital explained that according to testimony from multiple former Trump administration officials, “there is plenty of evidence Trump — and his team — knew he lost the election, that the allegations of fraud were baseless and that he knew what he was doing” (NPR, 2022, p.1). The Committee concluded that the insurrection incited by the former president was an attempt to take over the government by force after his unsuccessful re-election and “referred former President Donald Trump for four criminal charges related to an insurrection that he inspired because he could not publicly accept that he’d lost an election” (NPR, 2022, p.1).

*Second*, populist leaders strengthen their agenda by sidelining or silencing political rivals (Applebaum, 2020, pp.22–54), attacking their “opponents in harsh, provocative terms” (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018, p.75). They portray the opposition as the enemies, baselessly describing partisan rivals as criminals, dishonest, and undeserving political office to disqualify them from political participation or influence on political decision-making (Mollan & Geesin, 2020; Jagers & Walgrave, 2007; Johnson, 2019). Following the populist’s strategy, Trump incited his followers against his political rival, the Former United States Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, calling to “lock her up” for her occasional use of a private email account when conducting official business. To devalue his decision-making power, he

insulted opposing his policies, a prominent African American Congressman, Chairman of the Congressional Oversight Committee. Trump tweeted that the Chairman's Baltimore district is a "disgusting, rat and rodent-infested mess" (Stracqualursi, 2019, p.1). Using racist language, Trump also called from his pulpit four progressive Democratic Congresswomen of color to "go back and help fix the broken and crime-infested places from which they came." Three were born in the U.S., and the fourth was a naturalized U.S. citizen (Stracqualursi, 2019, p.1). In the same derogatory language, he called sitting Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi "an animal" after her husband was brutally assaulted and almost killed by a follower of Trump's conspiracy claims who broke into Nancy Pelosi's private home looking for her (Politico, 2022, p.1). Furthermore, Trump publicly insulted Elaine Lan Chao, the wife of the Republican Majority Leader, Mitch McConnell, soon after she stopped working as Transportation Secretary in his administration (Business Insider, 2022, p.1).

Trump spread lies and conspiracy claims from the presidential pulpit blaming political opponents for the lost American jobs and migrants crossing American Southern borders. He propagated lies, claiming that these were "the alternative truth." These included lies about migrants taking jobs from American workers (Mollan & Geesin, 2020, p.1). Appealing to his followers, Trump incited fear of the export of American jobs to China, "they can't get jobs because there are no jobs because China has our jobs and Mexico has our jobs" (Phillips, 2017, p.1).

*Third*, to maintain the support of followers, populist leaders alarm about the imminent national crisis that is an existential threat to "the people" (Müller, 2016, pp.41–75). In the case of former U.S. President Donald J. Trump, he proclaimed that caravans of immigrants are crossing the United States' southern border, bringing rapists and criminals, taking American jobs, and causing destruction. At the same time, like other populist leaders, Trump was ineffective in governing. As noticed by conservative media host Michael Savage, who usually backs and propagates Trump, followers became "more dismayed each day as the budget deficit swells, thousands of new migrants are apprehended at the border, and the wall Mr. Trump promised to erect and make Mexico pay for remains unbuilt. 'Read my lips: no new immigrants,'" was one of the president's major unfulfilled promises, explained Savage (Peters, 2019, p.1).

*Fourth*, to stay in power or to gain political influence and power, populist leaders deny and constrain any potential criticism of their governing or policies (Cianetti et al., 2018), thus violating ethics and principles of democracy (Mouffe, 2020, pp.129–140). Accordingly, in July 2019, a federal appeals court ruled that President Trump violated the Constitution by blocking people from following his Twitter account because they criticized or mocked him. "The First Amendment prohibits an official who uses a social media account for government purposes from excluding people from an 'otherwise open online dialogue' because they say things that the official finds objectionable," wrote Judge Parker (Savage, 2019, p.1). Moreover, according to testimonies at Trump's impeachment trial in 2019, Trump purged from offices highly ranked officials who testified against him, including the U.-S. Ambassador to the European Union and a member of the National Security

Council. He also fired then-FBI Director James Comey for collaborating with impeachment investigations (Cohen, 2021, p.1).

*Fifth*, populist leaders restrict the freedom of the media, often publicly mocking or belittling journalists (Economy, 2022). Frequently take legal or other punitive action against the press critical of their activity, against civil society, or rival parties (Cianetti et al., 2019; Karolewski, 2020; Przeworski, 2019). As an example of such behavior, Trump demanded that the Washington Post [fire](#) a reporter over an inaccurate tweet about the crowd size at the Trump rally (Trump wanted the reporter to portray the crowd as larger than it was). Also, as a presidential candidate, he “blacklisted” reporters and entire news outlets and bloc them from attending his campaign events. He referred to journalists as “scum” and “slime,” claiming that the freedom of the press is disgusting. Unsurprisingly he mocked a disabled reporter (Tashman, 2017, p.1).

*Sixth*, populist leaders endorse and fail to condemn supporters’ violent and criminal behaviors (Mollan & Geesin, 2020). Contrary to expectations, they encourage violent behaviors of their followers, simultaneously spreading lies about political rivals to further ignite violent behaviors. According to Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018, pp.64–65), Trump announced to his supporters in the U.S. southern state of North Carolina, where half of the population are gun owners, that if his opponent Hillary Clinton won the election in 2016, she would abolish the Second Amendment of the constitution, to right to bear arms. Using social media platforms and celebrity-like performances (*mediatization politics*), former President Trump directly engaged with anti-government extremists, conspiracy theorists, and groups of militias. His rhetoric aided anti-government extremists’ plot to kidnap, with the purpose of killing, the duly elected Governor of Michigan, Gretchen Whitmer (Clifford & O’Brian, 2022). Whitmer blamed then-President Donald Trump for sympathy to extremists, saying he had given “comfort to those who spread fear and hatred and division.” At the same time, Trump said the kidnapping plan was a “fake deal” (NPR, 2022, p.1).

When serving as President, Trump failed to condemn white supremacies’ violent attack on the University of Virginia students, leading to one student’s death and several critical injuries. “There were fine people on both sides,” Trump said, referring to attacks on the University of Virginia students. The white supremacist march was organized following the removal of the monument of the confederacy’s general, who used to be a slaveholder (Jackson, 2019). Moreover, during his rallies and the debate with presidential candidate Joe Biden, he repeated “Stand Back and Stand By,” further enabling and supporting the actions of white supremacists, militia, and extremist groups (Cohen, 2020, p.1).

January 6, 2021, attack on the U.S. Capital, the kidnapping of Governor Whitmer, white supremacists march on the University of Virginia campus, and the Fall 2022 violent attack on the husband of the Speaker of the House, Nancy Pelosi, were outcomes of extremists’ response to Trump’s lie-infused rhetoric. Trump called insurrectionists and anti-government extremists *True Patriots*, asking for their loyalty and commitment to his leadership aimed to “drain the swamp” of his political rivals, the established politicians. Unsurprising, white supremacists and militia

groups, elevated to the critical role of supposedly restoring American democracy, were prepared to serve Trump's purpose of holing into power after his lost election.

*Seventh*, to hold or try to obtain political office, populist leaders support laws and policies restricting civil liberties (Karolewski, 2020) and use their influence to appoint loyalists as judges in local and national courts (Przeworski, 2019). Democracy's retrenchment begins with a decrease in the independence of the judiciary system. This included Trump's personalization of government and the Department of Justice (DOJ), demand for loyalty from everyone serving in his cabinet, and conflated private with national interests. Specially appointed by Congress prosecutor Muller investigating then-President Trump in an impeachment investigation, explained that his investigation found persuasive evidence that Trump's actions fit the legal criteria to warrant criminal charges. However, anointed by Trump DOJ ruled against indicting a sitting president citing constitutional questions that would make for a challenging prosecution (Cohen, 2021, p.1). "By engaging in such conduct that appears to be illegal, President Trump undermined the ability of the judiciary system to proceed in a clear way going forward," reported Cohen (2021, p.1).

*Eight*, populist leaders in retrenching democracies praise the repressions of citizens' rights in authoritarian countries (Mollan & Geesin, 2020). Subsequently, while attacking political opponents, Trump praised authoritarian leaders, often horrific human rights abusers. He invited the brutal dictator of the Philippines, Rodrigo Duterte, to the White House during a "very friendly" phone call in May 2017. The dictator did not visit the U.S., citing other appointments. Trump had only positive words about autocrat President Putin, "If he says great things about me, I'm going to say great things about him. I've already said he is really very much of a leader" (Time, 2016, p.1). "A guy calls me a genius, and I'm going to renounce?" Trump said, "I'm not going to renounce him" (Hamburger et al., 2016, p.1). This Trump's comments is quite striking considering recent warrant issued by the International Criminal Court for arrest of Putin for Ukrainian War Crimes on March 29, 2023. As his son, Donald Trump Junior, noted a few years before Trump's Presidency, "Russians make up a pretty disproportionate cross-section of a lot of our assets. We see a lot of money pouring in from Russia" (Hamburger et al., 2016, p.1).

Alike, autocrat Xi Jinping of China was not spare of Trump's praise either. "He certainly doesn't want to see turmoil and death. He doesn't want to see it. He is a good man. He is a very good man and I got to know him very well," explained Trump in an interview with Reuters on April 28, 2017 (Adler et al., 2017, p.1). Trump even praised North Korean dictator Kim Jong Un known for unparalleled human rights abuses in modern history. "At a very young age, he was able to assume power. A lot of people, I'm sure, tried to take that power away, whether it was his uncle or anybody else. And he was able to do it. So obviously, he's a pretty smart cookie." (Silva, 2017, p.1). Lastly, Trump maintained friendly contact with turned-authoritarian Brazilian President Bolsonaro, meeting with his son and appointed by Bolsonaro members of the Brazilian government in Washington D.C., and his Florida home.

**Table 2** Autocratic behaviors manifested by Donald Trump the weaken American democracy

1	Undermined the lost election result and refusal to accept legitimate ballots (Przeworski, 2019).
2	Baselessly portrayed partisan rivals as criminals to disqualify them from political participation (Mollan & Geesin, 2020; Johnson, 2019)
3	Endorsed or failed to condemn the violent behaviors of his supporters (including insurrectionists who stormed the U.S. Parliament building—the capital) (Mollan & Geesin, 2020)
4	Supported laws and policies that restrict civil liberties (Karolewski, 2020)
5	Restricted criticism of his government and political decisions (Cianetti et al., 2018).
6	Took legal or other punitive action against criticism of his government by media, civil society, or rival parties (Cianetti et al., 2018; Karolewski, 2020; Przeworski, 2019)
7	Praised repressions used by authoritarian governments against their citizens (Mollan & Geesin, 2020)
8	“Authoritarianization” after winning the competitive elections, personalization of power in the hands of elected leaders (Geddes et al., 2018, p.27).

Table 2 illustrates the autocratic behaviors that Trump adopted and are also manifested by populist leaders (see Table 2).

Summarizing Trump’s legacy, after winning the Presidential election in 2016, former President Trump embraced autocratic strategies to prolong and solidify his political power. He politicized the Department of Justice (DOJ) by twisting the DOJ’s role to serve his personal rather than the country’s needs. He tried to eliminate boundaries between DOJ and the White House, violating the separation of judiciary and executive powers in a democratic system. He conducted 245 judiciary appointments and replaced three judges in the Supreme Court, counting on appointed judges’ loyalty, shielding his abuse of power and undemocratic governing. He also corrupted the executive branch by appointing his unqualified children to be members of his cabinet.

However, the top case of presidential power abuse was subversion and relentless efforts to undermine the 2020 loss of the election and overturn its legitimate results. Before the election, to weaken the candidacy of his rival (President Biden) and win the election in 2020, Trump pressured the Ukrainian government to announce baseless investigations into Bidens, threatening to withhold Congress-approved military aid from Ukraine. He claimed election victory before the votes were counted, disseminated misinformation about the election’s results, and incited riots in the U.S. Capital to prevent results’ certification. Eventually, Trump pressed “election officials in battleground states to fraudulently throw out millions of votes for President Joe Biden” (Cohen, 2021, p.1). Among such efforts was his famous 1-h long phone call to Georgia’s Secretary of State Brad Raffensperger, elected during the Trump presidency, to find additional votes for him that would overturn the election results.

Trump profited from his Presidency. According to reports, political spending at Trump properties topped 22 million dollars (Schouten & Wright, 2020). This included foreign officials buying Trump’s influence by booking rooms in his Washington DC exclusive hotel (Cohen, 2021). In addition, the Defense Department

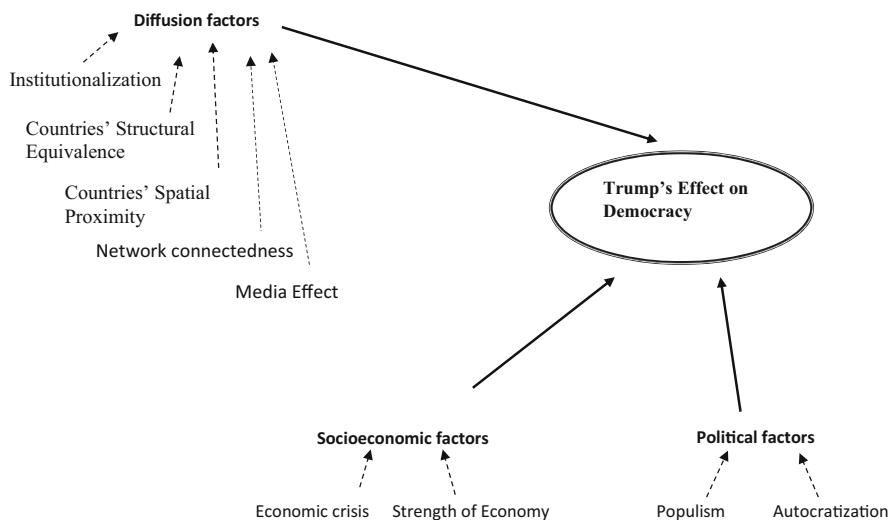
spent \$300,000 on security at Trump’s properties (Devine, 2019). According to Forbes reports in December 2020, soon after Trump announced the big protests to stop the certification of results of his loss election, rooms in his hotel surged from \$476 to \$1999 per night to pick at \$8000 per night in the least-expensive room. The rooms were also sold in record numbers (Everson, 2022, p.1).

Former President Trump left “behind a legacy of unmatched abuses of presidential power that range from violations of longstanding norms to potentially criminal behavior for personal and political gain,” noticed CNN reporter (Cohen, 2021, p.1).

### *Trump’s Effect on Global Politics*

Research shows that democracies do not act alone but form alliances to model on each other (Carter, 2012; Wejnert, 2014b). Democracies endorsed and supported each other directly or through established networks (e.g., Like-Minded Group), providing legitimacy and justification for democracy retrenchment (Cianetti et al., 2019). Consequently, although illiberalism and democracy’s erosion arose nationally, Trump’s effect spilled over to other countries, emboldening the autocratic tendencies of democratically elected leaders and weakening democracy worldwide (Bauer & Becker, 2020) (see Fig. 1a, b).

Exposed to Trump’s behaviors through modern media communication and information technology, several democratic governments imitated practices introduced by Trump in the United States or followed his populist actions and policies. Trump’s effect on democracies worldwide was multifactorial.



**Fig. 1** Conceptualization of Trump’s effect on the global and American democracy



*First*, one of the main effects of Trump on American and worldwide democracy was his spread of lies and false information about the American voting system, his “big lie” of a fraudulent election, and the U.S. presidency stolen from him in 2020. The incitement of his followers to “Stop the Steal” protests and false claims that elected President Biden was not fairly elected provided a blueprint for other leaders with autocratic tendencies on how to dismantle the democratic election process, the rule of law, and the peaceful transition of power in the aftermath of lost elections.

The Trump-provoked insurrection became a model for populist leaders who did not want to concede political power to the next president. The prime example was the January 2023 storming of a Brazilian Capital and the Presidential building, incited by former Brazilian President Bolsonaro, who lost Presidential re-election. Bolsonaro did not concede power to the duly elected new President, Lula da Silva, and mimicking the American events of January 6, 2021, incited his supporters to storm the Capital and start an insurrection to reverse election results. Before the insurrection, Bolsonaro’s son visited Trump and met with his election advisors in Florida. Bolsonaro likely acted under Trump’s instruction.

The elected in 2022 Italian Prime Minister Georgia Meloni, the far-right politician, also mirrored Trump’s populist calls. In her speeches, she expressed standing for the scorned by the elite, a forgotten underdog against the establishment, and calling for violence to gain power (Harlan, 2022). Similarly, following Trump’s speeches, presidential candidate Marine Le Pen escalated attacks on ethnic and religious minorities and the LGBTQ community in structurally equivalent to the U.S., well-developed, and long, established democracy in France (Applebaum, 2020; Ciobanu, 2021).

*Second*, Trump’s persistently violent and vulgar rhetoric and spreading of untruthful and misleading information established a precedent for promulgating lies, biased information, and “fake news” by countries’ leaders (Economy, 2022, pp.52–67; Xia, 2021, pp.78–96). The pervasive lies spread during rallies, and the aggressive, offensive language established a precedent institutionalizing a new form of political communication, *mediatization* politics (Moffitt, 2016). Disseminated untruth information confused voters and weakened democracy in several countries (Economy, 2022, pp.52–67; Xia, 2021, pp.78–96). Eroded during Trump, American and global democracy emboldened autocrats. Belorussian President Lukashenko falsified the election result to claim victory and brutally subdued protesters demanding to uphold the election results. To his rescue came autocrat Russian President, Putin. Following Trump’s refusal to concede power after losing the election, Brazilian President Bolsonaro, after losing re-election, did not formally concede presidential power or acknowledge the new President.

*Third*, Trump’s attacks against the press and media paved a pathway to restrained freedom of the press in other democracies. President of Turkey, Erdogan, followed Trump’s anti-free press and antipolitical opposition calls, jailing journalists, labeling opposition figures as ‘terrorists’ and jailing political rivals before the 2023 election, e.g., he jailed Istanbul’s mayor Ekrem Imamoglu in December 2022. Less established democracies passed laws censoring independent media, freedom of the press, and criminalizing media reports disapproved by ruling regimes. This included



Turkey's censoring freedom of the press, the "disinformation law" passed in 2020 (Brookings, 2020, p.1). A similar law was passed in another predominantly Muslim country, Indonesia, in 2020 (Gall, 2021, online).

The Polish Lower House approved a bill preventing non-European shareholders from owning a majority stake in Polish media in August 2021. Although the bill intended to restrict Chinese and Russian media companies, it also banned independent Polish TV channels (Gall, 2021).

Hungarian Prime Minister Victor Orbán has consolidated his grip on Hungarian democracy by nearly controlling the media (Scheppelle, 2022, pp.45–61). In 2010, he cut all state advertising funds to critical news outlets and threatened to cut contracts with private advertisers that continued to support targeted media. Viktor Orbán repression of independent media was supported and praised by former President, Trump. Following the diffusion principles, the suppression of the freedom of the press spread to the economically and politically equivalent prior-communist Poland and Serbia (Mollan & Geesin, 2020).

*Fourth*, during his presidency, former President Trump packed local and national courts with his loyalist judges setting the stage for dismantling the separation of the legislative from the executive branch of government. Such judiciary changes coincided with declining political neutrality and independence of the judiciary system and the limitation of checks and balances intended to ensure that political power is not concentrated in the hands of an individual government member. The appointment of loyalist lawyers who executed the rule of law in favor of the sitting president betrayed public trust in the independence of the democratic judiciary system and the rule of law. Although in the U.S., the appointed judges withstood Trump's pressure to falsify the results of his loss in the 2020 election and ruled against him regarding the alleged election fraud, appointed by Trump DOJ did not enforce the law to prosecute the former President following the impeachment investigation in 2018. The new DOJ started a criminal investigation of then-President Trump in 2022 based on the recommendation of the Congressional Committee investigation of the January 6 attack on the U.S. Capital. Moreover, the conservative Supreme Court judges appointed by Trump, currently constituting the majority of the judges on the U.S. Supreme Court, reversed the half-century-old *Roe vs. Wade* abortion law banning what was considered women's health right in the U.S. since the 1970s.

In less-established democracies, where the rule of law was weaker, personalization of power by a democratically elected president prevented investigations of sitting presidents and prime ministers, averting the execution of justice in cases of the president's obstruction of justice, tax evasion, or corruption. Modeling Trump's personalization of power, the democratically elected President of Turkey and Prime Minister of Hungary prevented the execution of justice regarding their involvement in obstructing justice and corruption. Two structurally similar and geographically proximate Eastern European countries—Poland and Hungary, followed Trump's footprints attempting to coalesce the judiciary with executive power. These countries' Presidents and Prime Ministers appointed judges in national and regional courts loyal to them and their agendas. Like in Hungary, the Polish government issued mandatory early retirement of judges lowering the retirement age of Supreme

Court Justices from 70 to 65 in 2018. This practice put 27 out of 72 sitting Supreme Court Justices at risk of being forced to retire, weakening the Polish rule of law and attacking judicial independence (Przeworski, 2019). Newly appointed, conservative judges loyal to the ruling Law and Justice (PiS) party limited women's reproductive rights and criminalized abortion in 2020, resembling the U.S. debates on the restriction of abortions during Trump's presidency. Judges in Poland embraced the language of Trump and Le Pen when the Polish legislature passed anti-LGBTQ laws limiting the rights of these groups and silencing LGBTQ activism. Similar anti-LGBTQ laws were passed in Hungarian courts after the appointment of loyalist judges (Human Rights Watch, 2022). Emboldened by the international anti-LGBTQ response, Trump signed an anti-LGBTQ child welfare policy executive order in the last months of his presidency, later replicated by Victor Orban in Hungary (Cook, 2020).

*Fifth*, Donald Trump and Trumpism affected global democracy by promoting illiberalism, frequently associated with the increased prominence of Far-right parties and nationalistic groups (Cooley & Nexon, 2022, pp.103–119). Former President Trump's endorsement of the far-right ideology was copied by Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, aiding Hungary's movement towards autocracy (Mollan & Geesin, 2020; New York Times, 2022). In the U.S., the far-right illiberal groups subverted democracy and the rule of law. They promoted democratic retrenchment to defend traditional values and "nationalism" (Wejnert, 2021, pp.3–6), although illiberalism also reflected economic problems, a typical response to economic hardship and challenging socioeconomic conditions. In the U.S., globalization's influence on outsourced and lost industrial jobs—a symbol of workers' dignity and pride, exacerbated workers' illiberal behaviors (Williams, 2016). Trump promised to restore industrial jobs blaming immigrants, Chinese industry, and minority groups for depleting the American labor market of industrial jobs, typically occupied by lower-educated males. Accepting Trump's perception that immigrants are criminals, American blue-collar workers could justify their own racial and ethnic prejudice. "When Mexico sends its people, they're not sending their best. . . . They're sending people that have lots of problems, and they're bringing those problems with us. They're bringing drugs. They're bringing crime. They're rapists. And some, I assume, are good people," claimed Trump (Phillips, 2017).

Like in the U.S., the recession and unemployment that swept across European countries in the aftermath of the global financial crisis of 2008 provided fertile ground for Trump's rhetoric of blaming immigrants and minorities for economic hardship. Trump's restrictive immigration policy instituted in 2017 was replicated by the Hungarian and Polish governments' opposing immigration (Applebaum, 2020, pp.50–51), even though anti-immigration policies diverged from the European Union mandate (Reuters, 2021). Appeals to nationalism and illiberalism dominated the political scene of many democratic countries—in addition to Poland and Hungary, populist leader Marine Le Pen embraced these sentiments in France in 2020, and so did German nationalists and neofascists. "The specter of authoritarian regimes is haunting Europe," wrote Political Capital (PCRCI) and Center for the Study of Democracy (Szicherle et al., 2021, pp.2–39).

Finally, in retrenching democracies, elected leaders to pass educational reforms, laws, and policies to control the education system (Economy, 2022; Xia, 2021). The possibility to amend the education of future generations, restrict science-driven knowledge, change schools' curricula, and replace university administrations with appointed loyalists swept across the European higher education milieu (Applebaum, 2020, pp.49–54). The U.S. single-term presidency of Donald Trump prevented a change in schools' curriculum; however, the appointment of a Trump supporter as the head of the education department laid the foundation for such reforms to evolve. Trump led a national conversation on *expanding private schools' education (called "choice schools") while limiting the role and funding of public schools*. He proposed to decrease the Department of Education's funding by 13.5% in 2018, 5% in 2019, and 10% in 2020 and reduce the Department of Education budget by 7.8% in 2021. Under his proposal, states would receive one lump sum of funds and had the autonomy to determine how to distribute those funds to local education agencies, including private schools. This policy served the most privileged groups while further disadvantaging public education attended by most American children. The policy further enlarged societal divisions and inequality (Lee, 2020).

Similarly, the democratic government of Poland planned to impose controlling regulations on the higher, university-level education system in 2018. The Polish government proposed establishing educational reform in state-run college-level education (Poland's highest-level undergraduate and graduate education) by appointing academically unaffiliated "university councils" to plan university curriculum reforms. The proposal met with countrywide protests from students and university faculty, forcing the government to withdraw the proposal (Ciupka, 2018).

The erosion of critical democratic institutions during Trump's presidency (Bauer & Becker, 2020) provided a model for democracies' retrenchments. The world's connectedness via mass communication systems and modern information technology helped to institutionalize newly established norms, including new acceptable populist behaviors in the political processes, depicted as *mediatization politics* (Moffitt, 2016, pp.74–93). Countries are similar by their level of development and democratic political systems, i.e., structurally equivalent (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018, pp.11–33), as well as located in spatial and geographical proximity, more rapidly mimicked political strategies of each other (Wejnert, 2005), leading to weakening of democracy worldwide. Also, countries within established networks more readily adopted similar political behaviors of other network members (Wejnert, 2014b).

Subsequently, the conditions of countries' structural similarity, spatial proximity, and networking enhanced the probability of adopting Trump's autocratic strategies by leaders of democratic countries. Trump's effect also signaled the vulnerability of the democratic system to *authoritarianization* and its backsliding into an authoritarian regime (Geddes et al., 2018). The erosion of American democratic institutions endangered global democracy, enabling less-established democracies to retrench into semi-autocratic regimes, including Hungary, Poland, Brazil, and Turkey. At the same time, Trump's politics embolden autocrats. For example, Trump's politics and sympathy for autocrats aided their justification of the brutal crackdown on democratic protests and citizens' objections against human rights violations,

including in Hong Kong and Iran. Unsurprisingly, American global reputation has declined since Trump's election in 2016 and during his presidency from 2016 to 2020. According to Pew Research Center, Trump has had the lowest international rating among U.S. presidents since 2009 (Wike, 2020).

### *Conceptualization of Trump's Effect on Democracy*

Across literature discussing populism and Trump demagoguery's impact on the weakening of democracies, many propositions have been put forth for the importance of politico-economic conditions as predictors of democracy retrenchment and autocracy rise. These include the effects of the strength of a national economy and economic crisis (Przeworski, 2019) and political conditions leading to an erosion of democratic institutions, like failing of political parties to guard against demagogues (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018, pp.97–118), or development of *autocratization* processes allowing erosion of democracy from within democratic governments (Geddes et al., 2018). Deriving from a vast body of literature on backsliding democracies and the upsurge of authoritarianism (Cianetti et al., 2018; Economy, 2022; Haggard & Kaufman, 2021; Przeworski, 2019; Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018; Wejnert, 2020), candidates other than economic and political processes are apparent during Trump's influence on American democracy and democracy worldwide. These processes can be clustered into a group of diffusion indicators.

In its most general sense, diffusion refers to the spread of innovations or practices due to their adoption by actors through communication. According to Rogers' classic definition, diffusion is "... a process by which an innovation is communicated through certain channels over time among members of a social system" (Rogers, 2003, p.5). Focusing on the structural components of diffusion, he identifies *transmitters* which are media, professional organizations and networks, and classes of *adopters* differentiated by the temporal adoption rate (i.e., innovators, early adopters, early majority, late majority, and laggards). According to Rogers, transmitters play a critical role in serving as a communication channel of diffusion in mimetic behaviors and learning processes between adopters and innovators. The adoption process of practices or strategies includes the mutual impact of innovators on adopters and vice versa (Glick & Hays, 1991; Silverberg, 1991), as when Trump adopted anti-LGBTQ child policy replicating Polish and French proposed laws (Cooke, 2020). Diffusion is enhanced by interactions between innovators and adopters and countries' leader-to-leader (i.e., actor-to-actor) or ruling regime-to-ruling regime interactions (Rogers, 2003).

Expanding Rogers's observation, scholars argue that practices diffuse particularly rapidly between structurally equivalent or spatially close adopters (Markoff, 2003, pp.85–116). For example, practices diffuse particularly rapidly across equally developed countries or countries located in spatial and geographic proximity (Wejnert, 2002, 2005). Standardized, institutionalized behaviors, policies, or cultural patterns diffused faster (Huntington, 1991). For example, rapidly accepted market strategies,

social policies, and development interventions that are internationally promoted (Dearing, 2009) are readily accepted by individual countries. Media communication aids the diffusion of practices and political processes through mediatisation politics (Moffitt, 2016, pp.74–93). Political messages, including terrorist messages, spread faster through social media and news media communication channels (Cambron, 2019, pp.293–325).

Subsequently, diffusion includes any processes or variables that alter adopters' probability of adopting an innovation, behavioral pattern, strategy, or action (Berry & Berry, 1990; Rogers, 2003; Starr, 1991; Valente & Rogers, 1995). In the aftermath of Rogers's influential study, diffusion analyses incorporated diverse social processes from agricultural practices and agribusiness farming (Mardiana & Kembauw, 2021), technological innovation (Wejnert, 2010, pp.197–217) to political reform, and political changes (Kneuer & Hamisch, 2016, pp.548–556; Lee et al., 2011, pp.444–544; Wejnert, 2014a).

This study on the global influence of Trump on democracy refers to diffusion as an overall process that altered the probability of adopting Trump-like populist rhetoric, behavior, or strategy by democratic countries that were "at risk of adoption," i.e., countries that were *subjected* to or witnessed Trump behaviors and actions. For the sake of simplicity, the study denotes a country where Trumpism was initiated as an innovator and countries that follow Trump's behavioral pattern and rhetoric as adopters in the diffusion process. The innovators and adopters were integral parts of the diffusion of Trump's effect. The dynamic trends of Trump's effect on democracy worldwide and within individual countries were enhanced by media communication. Furthermore, the institutionalization of Trump-like behaviors as an acceptable political strategy also promoted the diffusion of Trump's effect. Subsequently, diffusion occurred when countries-adopters were exposed to Trump's effect or witnessed and modeled on retrenching democracy in other countries.

To summarize, the diffusion factors were a significant force reinforcing Trump's effect on democracies and driving global democracy retrenchment (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018; Wejnert, 2020). The diffusion effect and countries' modeling of American and other retrenching democracies were generally enhanced by structural equivalence, the spatial proximity of countries, and countries' membership in the same country networks and because innovators influence the adopters and vice versa, the mimic of behaviors multiplied exponentially. Broadly available social and news media facilitated countries' imitation of populist Trump-like rhetoric and actions in an emerging culture that institutionalized illiberalism and populist political behaviors.

Following examples of Trump's effect described in the prior section, the study proposes the resulting conceptual model of multiple pathways of Trump's effect on American democracy and democracies worldwide (see Fig. 1).

In the future, diffusion processes will likely further augment the impact of the tenets of Trumpism on democratic retrenchment and autocracy rise in the U.S. and globally.

## Conclusion

Disproportional wealth accumulation in the hands of a marginal percentage of society (Galloway, 2022, p.77) and declining societal well-being increased the probability of democracy retrenching into autocracy (Houle, 2009). The economic crisis and unequal global development also augmented the potential for spreading Trump's effect, particularly when financial problems were exacerbated by the political decisions of democratically elected leaders promulgating economic inequality. For example, former President Trump cut the wealthiest individuals' taxes, increasing social disparities. Hence, in addition to the strength of a national economy (Przeworski, 2019) and political conditions that led to an erosion of democratic institutions (Geddes et al., 2018), the diffusion of Trump's effect was a significant force driving global democracy retrenchment. Also, the diffusion of Trump's populist behavior and his lies emboldened autocracies.

Subsequently, the depicted conceptual framework (see Fig. 1 above) incorporating countries' economic and political situations and factors of diffusion of Trump's effect define sets of prerequisites for the weakening of democracy, the warning signs of democracy retrenchment. The framework also provides a foundation for assessing the dynamic ebb and flow of democracy reduction within a particular country and globally. Therefore, it is vital to consider the diffusion of anti-democratic influences in the aftermath of the reverberations of Trump's effect. "Trump's four years in office and enduring political control over the GOP emboldens far-right ideologues and authoritarian regimes. It is important to remember that Trump's promotion of violent insurrection and white supremacy—most notably in the riots at the U.-S. Capital on January 6, 2021—were praised by autocratic leaders and radical groups around the world" (Darian-Smith, 2022, p.12).

American democracy, with its stable judiciary system, holds firmly upholding the rule of law despite the January 6 insurrection. In the midterm election of November 6, 2022, nearly all supporting Donald Trump deniers of President Biden's legitimacy and promoters of lies that the 2020 election were stolen lost their elections. However, in 2022, in the U.S., the right-wing group within the republican party prevented the appointment of a Republican Speaker of the House, Kevin McCarthy, until the speaker provided concessions to this far-right group. The situation indicated the continuing threat to democracy and reminded us that the danger to American democracy and democracy persists under rising populism and Trump's populist effect.

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# Trump, Authoritarian Populism, COVID-19 Pandemic, and Technopolitics: From a U.S. Perspective



Douglas Kellner

**Abstract** I engage the contemporary crises of health, the economy, and democracy in the United States during the era of Trump and the COVID-19 pandemic. I begin with a discussion of the COVID-19 pandemic in the United States and Trump's chaotic and inept responses. I follow with a discussion of Trump and Authoritarian Populism and argue that Trump's floundering fortunes in the context of a hotly contested 2020 presidential campaign triggered his chaotic and contradictory responses to the COVID-19 pandemic, producing a crisis of democracy, but which led to a decisive electoral defeat of Trump by Joe Biden in the 2020 election, inaugurating a post-Trump era. Finally, I argue that both the U.S. Presidential elections of 2016 and 2020 and the intense political struggles around authoritarian populism in the Trump era disclose the primacy of technopolitics for the future of democracy.

**Keywords** COVID-19 · Donald Trump · Authoritarian populism · Economic crisis · 2020 U.S. Presidential election · Crisis of democracy · Digital technologies · Social media · Technopolitics

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Many thanks to the anonymous reviewers for their comments and to Dr. Adebowale Akande for his professorial editorial assistance. Portion of the chapters were also in Kellner, D. (2018). Donald Trump and the Politics of Lying. In: Peters, M.A., Rider, S., Hyvönen, M., Besley, T. (eds) Post-Truth, Fake News. Springer, Singapore. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-10-8013-5\\_7](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-10-8013-5_7). With Springer Permission Granted to Re-use).

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## Introduction

With the election of Donald Trump in 2016 and rise of rightwing authoritarian governments across many countries, authoritarian populism threatens democracies and public safety throughout the world. With authoritarian populism accompanied by the COVID-19 pandemic, people suffering under autocratic and incompetent governments are struggling with dual viruses threatening the health of democracy and the polity, as well as human life.

In addition, the United States has been plagued since its inception by the original sin of racism, and the murder of African-American George Floyd by four Minneapolis police on May 26, 2020, triggered unparalleled resistance movements against police brutality and racism in the United States. The Floyd police murder was videotaped, and its repeated broadcast on television and Internet dissemination generated a viral media spectacle globally, as a policeman was shown nonchalantly holding Floyd down with a knee on his neck as Floyd repeatedly said “I can’t breathe,” replicating the death of African-American Eric Garner and many other people of color who were killed in similar fashion at the hands of the police.<sup>1</sup>

The powerful demonstrations against police brutality and racism in the United States exploded into a sustained movement that mobilized millions in protest in summer 2020. These movements arose during the COVID-19 pandemic, which has taken over 6.95 million lives globally and around 1,138,602 lives in the United States as I write in August 2023 with the United States now being the epicenter and most dangerous site of the pandemic that continues to careen out of control.<sup>2</sup>

In this paper, I will focus on the contemporary crises of health and democracy in the era of Trump and the COVID-19 pandemic. I begin with a discussion of the COVID-19 pandemic in the United States and Trump’s chaotic responses. I follow with a discussion of Trump and Authoritarian Populism and argue that Trump’s floundering fortunes in the context of a hotly contested 2020 presidential campaign triggered his chaotic, contradictory, and incompetent responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. Trump’s election fortunes required that he placate his base and try to assure them that, first, the COVID-19 pandemic was going to soon disappear, and

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<sup>1</sup> Vijay Prashad, “The murder of George Floyd is normal in an abnormal society,” *Monthly Review On-Line*, June 02, 2020 at <https://mronline.org/2020/06/02/the-murder-of-george-floyd-is-normal-in-an-abnormal-society/> (accessed August 10, 2020).

<sup>2</sup> McNeil Jr., Donald G. “The U.S. Now Leads the World in Confirmed Coronavirus Cases,” *The New York Times*, May 28, 2020 at <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/26/health/usa-coronavirus-cases.html> (accessed January 23, 2021). I got the statistics cited above from the Google COVID-19 page at <https://www.google.com/search?source=hp&ei=O4QMYLnCEbDE0PEP19-u0AE&q=covid-19&oq=CoV&gs> (accessed January 23, 2021). World Health Organization daily statistics are found at “WHO Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) Dashboard” at [https://covid19.who.int/?gclid=EA1aIQobChMIqPWSqb-T6wIV8R-tBh3xJQHvEAAAYASAAEgKVyfD\\_BwE](https://covid19.who.int/?gclid=EA1aIQobChMIqPWSqb-T6wIV8R-tBh3xJQHvEAAAYASAAEgKVyfD_BwE) (accessed August 11, 2020). By Fall 2021, US deaths from Covid viruses were around 700,000 with new cases mushrooming in areas with low vaccination rate.

that he had it under total control—both false as fact-based medical authorities and informed media commentators reported daily.

## COVID-19, Eco-crisis, and Global Viralization

As deaths and panic from the virus expanded in the United States by March 2020, Trump renamed the COVID-19 virus “the China virus,” and used the crisis to deflect blame on China, the World Health Organization, and other global entities, as he tried to deny the intensity of the crisis. Indeed, the virus was global in scope, illustrating the dark side of globalization that could transmit globally deadly viruses as well as goods, democracy, and interpersonal communication. Scientific experts believed that the COVID-19 virus arose in Wuhan animal markets which trafficked in illegal animals, like bats, which have previously conveyed deadly viruses to humans, as well as exhibiting dangerous interactions between humans and animals in what are called “wet markets.”<sup>3</sup> This called attention to the dangers of production of mass animal harvesting in animal breeding/feeding operations in factory farms in China, which contributes to global environmental crisis, as well as the slaughter of species of animals and dangers of viruses being transmitted from animals to humans.

The COVID-19 crisis thus illustrates what the Frankfurt School called “the revenge of nature,” as the destruction of animals, plant life, and the earth itself through the project of the domination of nature in which nature is subjected to exploitation and ravages as human beings colonize animals, plant life, and the earth for human use and profit.<sup>4</sup> Since the mass production of animals takes place throughout the globe, it intensifies species extinction, global eco-crisis, and the spread of diseases from one country throughout the world in an era of global commerce, trade, and population movement. The COVID-19 virus quickly spread through Asia, Europe, and the United States. After the outbreak in December 2019 in Wuhan, China, The World Health Organization declared the outbreak a Public Health Emergency of International Concern on January 30, 2020, and a pandemic on March 11, as the COVID-19 original virus spread through Italy, Iran, South Korea, Japan, and other countries from Asia to Europe.

The first cases in the United States were reported in January 2020 and continued to spread, but Trump refused to acknowledge any dangers, and assured Americans that he had the pandemic under control and that it would soon disappear—a line he continued to take up to the end of his presidency. By mid-March 2020, the Trump administration was forced to acknowledge the enormity of the crisis, created a

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<sup>3</sup>“Wildlife Markets and COVID-19,” Humane Society International, April 19, 2020 at <https://www.hsi.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Wildlife-Markets-and-COVID-19-White-Paper.pdf> (accessed on August 11, 2020). For background on viruses and on human animal markets see Quammen (2013).

<sup>4</sup>See the book from my University of Texas student Alford, C. Fred (1985) *Science and the Revenge of Nature : Marcuse and Habermas*. University Press of Florida.

Pandemic Response Team, and started conducting daily press briefings at the White House. Critical media voices pointed out that Trump had shut down the pandemic response group that Obama had established and ignored a pandemic presidential response plan that the Obama administration had produced in 2015, and thus the U.S. government had no coherent crisis response to the pandemic, a situation that has continued through Trump's presidency as COVID-19 cases continued to multiply and deaths continued to rise.<sup>5</sup>

Moreover, Trump has repeatedly uttered falsehoods regarding the pandemic, contributing to the more than 30,573 false or misleading claims he made as president, according to the final account of the *Washington Post* "Fact Checker" team—claims documented by other sources.<sup>6</sup> One theme of Trump's falsehoods is exaggeration of the constructive measures allegedly taken by his administration to control the virus and the great achievements of the private sector to produce a vaccine, under his leadership. Trump has also understated the projected time to produce a vaccine and promoted unapproved treatments such as hydroxychloroquine and chloroquine, even to the point of claiming that he has been taking hydroxychloroquine to protect himself against COVID-19, despite claims by Fauci and other experts that it does not work.

Trump's false medical advice feeds into an "infodemic" that describes an overload of information from public officials, media, the Internet, and social media. False information about the virus leads people to attempt dangerous medical solutions, often with fatal results. Facebook, Twitter, and responsible social media sites and medical authorities are forced to fight and respond to the dangerous misinformation, but in an infodemic it is difficult to get false information under control.<sup>7</sup>

Trump has repeatedly refused to admit mistakes as reporters confronted him with false statements or erroneous claims about the COVID-19 virus and crisis, instead blaming many others. The *Washington Post* estimated that around 15% of Trump's

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<sup>5</sup> Abigail Tracy, "How Trump Guttled Obama's Pandemic-Preparedness Systems." *Vanity Fair*, May 1, 2020 at <https://www.vanityfair.com/news/2020/05/trump-obama-coronavirus-pandemic-response> (accessed August 10, 2020).

<sup>6</sup> According to *The Washington Post* "Fact Checker" team "In four years, President Trump made 30,573 false or misleading claims," Updated Jan. 20, 2021 at <https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/politics/trump-claims-database/> (accessed on January 22, 2021). The Wikipedia entry on "Veracity of statements by Donald Trump" cites other data bases collecting his lies and offer well-documented examples of Trump's stunning amount of lying throughout his career at [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Veracity\\_of\\_statements\\_by\\_Donald\\_Trump](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Veracity_of_statements_by_Donald_Trump) (accessed on January 22, 2021).

<sup>7</sup> Twitter and Facebook both removed Trump from their social media sites near the end of his presidency, giving rise to furious debate over high-tech companies' right to censorship vs. freedom of speech. See *Kate Conger, Mike Isaac and Sheera Frenkel*, "Supported by Twitter and Facebook Lock Trump's Accounts After Violence on Capitol Hill. The moves came after critics and even some allies of the social media companies said they had failed to prevent the misinformation that led to chaos on Wednesday." *The New York Times*, January 6, 2021; Updated Jan. 14, 2021 at <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/06/technology/capitol-twitter-facebook-trump.html> (accessed January 23, 2021).

April 6–24 speeches were spent attacking others, with the most frequent targets being Joe Biden and Democrats, followed by the media, state governors, and China. Trump went accompanying the anxiety and deaths in the COVID-19 crisis has been a global economic crisis with massive unemployment, jobs disappearing, and sectors of the economy brought to a halt with economic futures impaired.<sup>8</sup>

In the United States, the economy was largely shut down for many months in large parts of the country, but because of the lack of a national plan, different states and even cities had wildly different shut-down and opening-back-up processes with uneven economic impact. Even though the Congress and the Trump Administration produced a relief package for families in the lowest economic categories, and loans to some small businesses through July 2020, many families and regions suffered economically. Further, throughout the pandemic, Congress and the Trump Administration could not agree on a relief plan to move forward and the U.S. economy appeared stalled and many families face bankruptcy, losing their homes, and worse—a desperate situation the new Biden administration is attempting to address at the beginning of its administration.

Moreover, as schools across the United States began to open in August 2020, parents, teachers, and citizens had to make difficult decisions whether to open schools and send their kids. Trump continued to urge in daily tirades to “open up the schools,” just as he as for months urged opening up businesses and the economy, with dire effect. As schools began to open, there were predictable reports of outbreak of COVID-19 in the schools, followed by quarantines and widespread panic and anxiety as individuals and regions were forced to decide how to protect their children as the President ranted until the end about opening the schools, leading to the slaughter of innocents and leaving the Biden administration to deal with the continuously raging pandemic, a task he took as one of his most important challenges.<sup>9</sup>

Despite the death, destruction, and chaos of the COVID-19 crisis, Trump continually claimed the pandemic was almost over, or simply ignored it, while his messaging often contradicted that of his administration’s public health officials

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<sup>8</sup> David Evans and Amina Mendez Acosta, “The Economic Impact of COVID-19: After Record Unemployment, Countries around the World Begin to Reopen Industries,” Center for Global Development, June 5, 2020 at <https://www.cgdev.org/blog/economic-impact-covid-19-after-record-unemployment-countries-around-world-begin-reopen> (accessed on August 11, 2020).

<sup>9</sup> Robin Foster and E.J. Mundell, “As Schools Reopen, Report Shows 97,000 U.S. Kids Infected With COVID in Late July.” *U.S. News and World Report*, August 10, 2020 at <https://www.usnews.com/news/health-news/articles/2020-08-10/as-schools-reopen-report-shows-97-000-us-kids-infected-with-covid-in-late-july> (accessed on August 13, 2020) and Adam K. Raymond, “As Schools Open, Coronavirus Outbreaks Follow,” *New York Times magazine*, Aug. 7, 2020 at <https://nymag.com/intelligencer/2020/08/as-schools-open-coronavirus-outbreaks-follow.html> (accessed on August 13, 2020). See also President Biden’s “FACT SHEET: PRESIDENT BIDEN’S NEW EXECUTIVE ACTIONS DELIVER ECONOMIC RELIEF FOR AMERICAN FAMILIES AND BUSINESSES AMID THE COVID-19 CRISES,” on the White House website, January 22, 2021 at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/01/22/fact-sheet-president-bidens-new-executive-actions-deliver-economic-relief-for-american-families-and-businesses-amid-the-covid-19-crises/> (accessed January 23, 2021).



and medical science experts. From January to mid-March, Trump downplayed the threat posed by the coronavirus to the United States, as well as the severity of the outbreak. He presented himself as a “cheerleader for the country”, claimed repeatedly that he had the virus under control, and from February until the end of his presidency, Trump would asserts that the coronavirus would “go away,” and simply disappear.<sup>10</sup>

## **Authoritarian Populism, COVID-19, and Crises of Democracy**

Recent studies have shown that authoritarian populism involves masses submitting to a leader’s authority, suggesting a continuity between the fascism and mass movements of the 1930s with today’s global profusion of authoritarian leaders and movements (Kellner, 2016, 2017). Just as the 1930s authoritarian movements led to war, economic and political chaos, and massive human tragedy, today’s authoritarians are bringing widespread economic crisis and uncertainty, political chaos, oppression and division, and human suffering that is cascading throughout the globe and intensifying in the COVID-19 crisis.

In this context, the Frankfurt School’s theories of the authoritarian personality, mass society and political movements, and the culture industry help illuminate the rise of autocrats and authoritarian movements, and the ways that demagogic autocrats in conjunction with mass movements and the mass media, help produce a massification of public opinion and demagogic authoritarian political leaders who present themselves as saviors of the people.<sup>11</sup> “I am the One,” the authoritarian leaders proclaim and the masses follow in obedience. The autocratic leader seeks a monopoly on political truth and action and attacks the media, the judiciary, political organs and representatives, and any person or institution that does not follow his way, that opposes him, or that he cannot control. The autocrat’s propaganda requires and elicits obedience and loyalty, and disdain for voices and institutions that oppose the Leader and his followers.

This authoritarian populism has shown the dangers of authoritarian leaders confronted with pandemic or health emergencies like the COVID-19 pandemic, as authoritarians are generally more concerned with their own interests, political power, and movements, rather than the health and welfare of the people. In the first half of this article, I showed how Trump’s attempts at deflection and failure to address the COVID-19 pandemic at the expense of his own efforts at self-promotion and his

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<sup>10</sup> Jessica McDonald, “Trump Baselessly Claims Coronavirus Will ‘Go Away’ Without Vaccine,” *Fact Check*, May 19, 2020 at <https://www.factcheck.org/2020/05/trump-baselessly-claims-coronavirus-will-go-away-without-vaccine/> (accessed on August 11, 2020).

<sup>11</sup> On the Frankfurt School and Authoritarian Populism, see the studies in Kellner (2016) and Morelock (2020).



presidential campaign paralyzed U.S. government response to the crisis and produced the world's largest, most deadly and out of control COVID-19 pandemic.

The United States is followed by Brazil which has suffered one of the most deadly COVID-19 pandemic crises resulting in 8.82 million COVID *cases* and 160,000 deaths as of January 24, 2021.<sup>12</sup> Like Trump, its authoritarian President Jair Bolsonaro has [dismissed the danger](#) posed by the virus, [sabotaged quarantine measures](#) adopted at the state level, urge Brazilians to continue working and keep the economy open, but also tested positive for the virus. The UK under Tory leader Boris Johnson suffered a devastating initial outbreak of the pandemic as Johnson, like Trump, failed to listen to expert medical advice and initially ignored the severity of the pandemic and failed to take measures, but Johnson got the COVID-19 virus himself, was hospitalized, and too late took the virus seriously, leading to many deaths and eventual economic crisis. Johnson's critics argued that his Tory party underfunded the British National Health Service, just as Trump cut Obama-era pandemic funding early in his administration, which undermined effort to stem the outbreak and save lives.<sup>13</sup>

Furthermore, in the United States and elsewhere, the pandemic crises and deaths have disproportionately harmed Black and Latino populations,<sup>14</sup> highlighting that Trump's failure to respond is marked by his racism as well as lack of empathy and his narcissist personality.<sup>15</sup> Hence, in this context, I would argue that the authoritarian leader is necessarily an enemy of the health and well-being of its citizens, as well as being hostile to democracy and democratic institutions. The autocrat

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<sup>12</sup>See the Google COVID-19 page at [https://www.google.com/search?source=hp&ei=raENYPqJsbEswXy4auoBw&q=brazil+covid+19+cases&oq=Brazil+Cov&gs\\_](https://www.google.com/search?source=hp&ei=raENYPqJsbEswXy4auoBw&q=brazil+covid+19+cases&oq=Brazil+Cov&gs_) (accessed on January 24, 2021). See also Manuela Andreoni, "Coronavirus in Brazil: What You Need to Know. How did Brazil become a global epicenter of the outbreak, and what have been the political consequences for its president, who has tested positive for the virus and dismissed the dangers?," *The New York Times*, August, 10, 2020 at <https://www.nytimes.com/article/brazil-coronavirus-cases.html> (accessed on August 11, 2020).

<sup>13</sup>**Rob Merrick**, "Coronavirus: Boris Johnson ignored expert evidence over pandemic, says ex-chief scientific adviser *The Independent*, April 2, 2020 at <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/coronavirus-boris-johnson-nhs-china-uk-cases-outbreak-a9443191.html> (accessed August 12, 2020). On the economic impact of the pandemic in the UK, see BBC News, "Coronavirus: UK economy hit by worst contraction in 41 years," *BBC News*, 30 June 2020 at <https://www.bbc.com/news/business-53231851> (accessed August 12, 2020). See also **Richard Partington**, "Covid-19: UK economy plunges into deepest recession since records began. GDP falls 20.4% – the worst of any G7 nation in the three months to June," *The Guardian*, 12 August 2020 at <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2020/aug/12/uk-economy-covid-19-plunges-into-deepest-slump-in-history> (accessed on August 12, 2020).

<sup>14</sup>**Richard A. Oppel Jr., Robert Gebeloff, K.K. Rebecca Lai, Will Wright and Mitch Smith**, "The Fullest Look Yet at the Racial Inequity of Coronavirus," *The New York Times*, July 5, 2020 at <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/07/05/us/coronavirus-latinos-african-americans-cdc-data.html> (accessed on August 11, 2020).

<sup>15</sup>Trump's niece Mary Trump, a clinical psychologist, has published a book that describes how Trump's authoritarian personality, lack of empathy, and extreme narcissism derive from his harsh family discipline at the hands of his authoritarian father Fred Trump, and a highly competitive family and business career that helped make him ruthless, uncaring, and authoritarian. See **Trump (2020)**.

mobilizes masses to follow autocratic rule and dictates, as he attacks democratic forces that oppose him. The autocrat is a demagogue who lies to the people and who attacks the very norms of truth, rational political discourse, and reason, truth, and science itself. While truth depends on curiosity, debate, and consensus, authoritarians insist on conformity to their dictates and complete loyalty to their person. They claim to represent the people and the nation and mobilize mass movements and supportive mass media to trumpet their every word and dictate.

Segments of the people identify with the leader who expresses their grievances, resentments, hates, and prejudice. The authoritarian leader attacks privilege and institutions that represent privilege, even though they may be part of the elite themselves. The autocrat uses his office to promote his own interests, often at odds with the people's or public interests, violating political norms and often engaging in outright criminality.<sup>16</sup>

Authoritarian populism often leads to and produces violence, as an enraged leader or group stigmatize and take out their grievances on minority groups who they blame for their own, or social, problems. This leads to demagoguery, outrage, and hate which produces societal division and violence. The autocrat chooses an "Other," who his followers see as an "enemy," dividing the society and polis into "Us" and "Them." Hence, Trump has blamed the COVID-19 pandemic on the Obama administration, the Media, the World Health Administration, the Democrats, and whoever else criticizes him or arouses his ire at a given moment.

Indeed, the COVID-19 pandemic shows that authoritarian populist leaders like Trump not only threaten democracy, but the health and well-being of the population. Yet authoritarian leaders may generate resistance—especially if the leader threatens the people with destructive wars or massive out-of-control pandemics like the current global epidemic. As people find themselves sick or dying, lose family friends, or loved ones, anger grows and people look to find who was responsible for pandemics like COVID-19 spreading without any significant government response or protections.<sup>17</sup> Further, institutions, groups, and individuals that the autocrat attacks, and that his followers are led to demonize and hate, may fight back, mobilizing individuals against the autocrat and his anti-democratic forces in newspapers, books, mass media, public demonstrations and oppositional movements—which we see happening as the pandemic continues to intensify in

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<sup>16</sup>Jeffrey Toobin (2020) presents a full inventory of Donald Trump's crimes, and *The New York Times* published a blockbuster investigation that showed Trump's father Fred engaged in income tax fraud and other criminality his whole life, based on analysis of his income tax returns and financial records which Mary Trump helped provide to the *Times* and drew on in her own book (Trump, 2020); see David Barstow, Suzanne Craig and Russ Buettner, "Trump Engaged in Suspect Tax Schemes as He Reaped Riches From His Father." *The New York Times*, Oct. 2, 2018 at <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2018/10/02/us/politics/donald-trump-tax-schemes-fred-trump.html> (accessed August 13, 2020).

<sup>17</sup>Many believe that Trump lost the 2020 U.S. Presidential election to Joe Biden because of his failed response to the COVID-19 virus. See Chris Cillizza, "How Trump lost the public on coronavirus" *CNN*, April 20, 2020 at <https://www.cnn.com/2020/04/19/politics/us-election-2020-week-ahead/index.html> (accessed January 24, 2021).

certain regions like the United States which was happening in the United States during the 2020 presidential election. In addition, significant Trump resistance movements arose in the multiple crises in response to the deadly virus attacking people's health, democracy, and the sustainability of human life on the planet, accompanied by other resistance movements like Black Lives Matter, the Dreamers, and earlier the Occupy movement.

Moreover, crises as intense as the COVID-19 pandemic that continues to rage globally as I finish this article, create opportunities for constructive and progressive change. The health systems of the U.S., U.K., Brazil and other major countries hit hard by the crisis have shown themselves to be inadequate and in many cases lacking requiring a focus on public health and more adequate health systems. To the question of how to pay for better government funded health care, the answer is provided by Bernie Sanders, who along with Senate colleagues offered a bill to "Introduce Tax on Billionaire Wealth Gains to Provide Health Care for All."<sup>18</sup>

The failures of authoritarian leaders, such as those I described above, show the necessity of electing leaders and governments that will protect the public, uphold their rights, and provide adequate health and welfare. Authoritarian leaders breed resistance, as I argued above, leading to the possibilities of governments that serve the needs and interests of the people rather than the Authoritarian Leader and his clique of insiders and political base.

We cannot see where our current plagues of the COVID-19 virus and authoritarian populism will take us, where the rising resistance and ever-expanding movements will go, or what impact global pandemics, ecological crises, and economic catastrophe will play in our crisis-infected futures. The COVID-19 pandemic has brought the global markets, capitalist expansion, and commerce to a massive slowdown that provides for the first time since at least WWII the possibility of actually transforming the world from an unsustainable economic (dis)order and polity into a more sustainable planetary community to deal with multiple crises of the future.

It is clear, however, that authoritarian populism has created crises and political oppression throughout the globe that threatens democracy, civility, and human life. It is also clear that global opposition movements are rising to challenge authoritarian populism and the key question we face—as many times before—remains: Which Side Are you On?

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<sup>18</sup>Bernie Sanders, "Rationale of the 'Make Billionaires Pay Act': It's good for our health. The pandemic is helping the rich get even richer. It's time to tax their obscene wealth," *The Guardian*, August 11, 2020 at <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/aug/11/the-pandemic-is-helping-the-rich-get-even-richer-its-time-to-tax-their-obscene-wealth> (accessed on August 12, 2020); see also Senator Bernie Sanders, "Sanders, Colleagues Introduce Tax on Billionaire Wealth Gains to Provide Health Care for All," August 6, 2020 at <https://www.sanders.senate.gov/newsroom/press-releases/sanders-colleagues-introduce-tax-on-billionaire-wealth-gains-to-provide-health-care-for-all> (accessed August 10, 2020).

## **Authoritarian Populism, Crises of Democracy, and the Dialectics of Technopolitics**

Since media and digital technologies are in any case dramatically transforming every sphere of life, the key challenge is how to theorize this great transformation and how to devise strategies to make productive use of the emergent technologies. Obviously, radical critiques of dehumanizing, exploitative, and oppressive uses of diverse technologies in the workplace, schooling, public sphere, and everyday life are more necessary than ever, but so are strategies that use emergent technologies to rebuild our cities, schools, economy, and society. I want to focus, therefore, in the remainder of this article on how diverse technologies can be used for increasing democratization and empowering individuals and groups against authoritarian populism.

In previous articles, I have argued that new technologies are creating a new public sphere, a new realm of cyberdemocracy, and are thus challenging public intellectuals to gain technoliteracy and to make use of the new technologies for promoting progressive causes and social transformation—themes that I develop in later chapters of this book. Given the extent to which capital and its logic of commodification have colonized ever more areas of everyday life in recent years, it is somewhat astonishing that cyberspace is by and large decommodified for large numbers of people—at least in the overdeveloped countries like the United States. In the United States, government and educational institutions, and some businesses, provide free Internet access and in some cases free computers, or at least workplace access. With flatrate monthly phone bills (which I know do not exist in much of the world), or connections to a business, University, or organization that provides free computer use, one can thus have access to a cornucopia of information and entertainment on the Internet for free, one of the few decommodified spaces in the ultracommodified world of technocapitalism.

Obviously, large sections of the world do not even have telephone service, much less computers, and there are vast inequalities in terms of who has access to computers and who participates in the technological revolution and cyberdemocracy today. Critics of digital technologies and cyberspace repeat incessantly that it is by and large young, white, middle or upper class males who are the dominant players in the cyberspaces of the present, and while this was once true, statistics and surveys indicate that many more women, people of color, seniors, and other minority categories are becoming increasingly active.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, it appears that computers and a diversity of digital devices are becoming part of the standard household consumer package and are as common as television sets in the contemporary moment, and certainly more important for work, social life, and education than the TV set. In addition, there are plans afoot to wire the entire world with satellites that

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<sup>19</sup>See PEW Research, “Internet/Broadband Fact Sheet,” June 19, 2019 at <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/fact-sheet/internet-broadband/> (accessed December 11, 2020). Introduction: Technology and the Demands of Democracy.

would make the Internet and communication revolution accessible to people who do not now even have telephones, televisions, or even electricity.

However widespread and common or not, computers and digital technologies become, it is clear that they are of essential importance for labor, politics, education, and social life, and that people who want to participate in the public and cultural life of the future will need to have computer access and digital literacies. Moreover, although there is the threat and real danger that the computerization of society will increase the current inequalities and inequities in the configurations of class, race, and gender power, there is the possibility that a democratized and digitized public sphere might provide opportunities to overcome these inequities. Indeed, during the Trump era there are copious examples of Trump and his forces using digital technology as well as oppositional groups making digital culture and technology a contested terrain upon which the fate of democracy will play out.

I will accordingly address below and in following chapters some of the ways that oppressed and disempowered groups are using the digital technologies and social media to advance their interests and progressive political agendas. Yet first I want to dispose of another frequent criticism of the Internet and computer activism. Critics of the Internet and cyberdemocracy frequently point to the corporate origins of the 'net and its central role in the practices of dominant corporate and state powers.' Yet it is amazing that the Internet for large numbers is decommodified and is becoming increasingly decentralized, becoming open to more voices and groups.

Thus, cyberdemocracy and the Internet should be seen as a site of struggle, as a contested terrain, and progressives should look to its possibilities for resistance and circulation of struggle. Dominant corporate and state powers, as well as conservative and rightist groups, have been making serious use of media and digital technologies to advance their agendas and if progressives want to become players in the political battles of the future they must devise ways to use these technologies to advance a progressive agenda and the interests of the oppressed and forces of resistance and struggle.

There are by now copious examples of how the Internet, social media, and cyberdemocracy have been used in progressive political struggles. A large number of insurgent intellectuals are already making use of these technologies and public spheres in their political projects. The peasants and guerrilla armies struggling in Chiapas, Mexico, from the beginning used computer databases, guerrilla radio, and other forms of media to circulate their struggles and ideas. Every manifesto, text, and bulletin produced by the Zapatista Army of National Liberation who occupied land in the southern Mexican state of Chiapas in 1994 was immediately Technopolitics and New Public Spheres 29 circulated through the world via computer networks. In January 1995, the Mexican government moved against the movement and computer networks were used to inform and mobilize individuals and groups throughout the world to support the Zapatistas struggles against repressive Mexican government action. There were many demonstrations in support of the rebels throughout the world, prominent journalists, human rights observers, and delegations traveled to Chiapas in solidarity and to report on the uprising, and the Mexican and U.-S. governments were bombarded with messages arguing for negotiations rather

than repression; the Mexican government accordingly backed off their repression of the insurgents and as of this writing in January 2021, they have continued to negotiate with them.

Moreover, a series of struggles around gender, sex, and race are also mediated by digital communications technologies, including in the last years of the Trump administration the Dreamer, #Me Too, Black Lives Matter, and Trump Resistance movements. Earlier, after the 1991 Clarence Thomas Hearings in the United States on his fitness to be Supreme Court Justice, Thomas's assault on claims of sexual harassment by Anita Hill and others, and the failure of the almost all male US Senate to disqualify the obviously unqualified Thomas, prompted women to use computer and other technologies to attack male privilege in the political system in the United States and to rally women to support women candidates. The result in the 1992 election was the election of more women candidates than in any previous election and a general rejection of conservative rule, and eventually several women Supreme Court Justices appointed to the court.

Many feminists have established websites, mailing lists, and other forms of cybercommunication to circulate their struggles.<sup>20</sup> Younger women, once deploying the concept of "riotgrrrls," have created electronically mediated 'zines, websites, and discussion groups to promote their ideas and to discuss their problems and struggles. African-American women, Latinas, and other groups of women have been developing websites and discussion lists to advance their interests. And AIDS and other health activists have used digital technologies and social media to disseminate and discuss medical information and to activate their constituencies for courses of political action and struggle—an effort especially relevant.<sup>21</sup>

During the 2020–2021 Global COVID-19 pandemic which has disproportionately hit communities of color. Likewise, African-American insurgent intellectuals have made use of broadcast and computer technologies to promote their struggles in movements from the 1980s through Black Lives Matter. John has described some African-American radio projects in the "technostruggles" of the present age and the central role of the media in struggles around race and gender. African-American "knowledge warriors" have been using radio, computer networks, and other media to circulate their ideas and counter-knowledge on a variety of issues, contesting the mainstream and offering alternative views and politics. In addition, activists in communities of color—like Oakland, Harlem, and Los Angeles—have been setting up community computer and media centers to teach the skills necessary to survive the onslaught of the mediatization of culture and computerization of society to people in their communities.

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<sup>20</sup>See the Duke University Press site "Feminism(s) and Tech" at <https://sites.duke.edu/womenandadvertising/exhibits/tech-ads-and-women/feminist-movements-technology-and-advertising/> (accessed on December 11, 2020).

<sup>21</sup>See the collection of essays with an Introduction by Harry Cleaver in *Zapatista: Neoliberalism, the Chiapas Uprising & Cyberspace*. Galmuri Publishing House, Seoul, Korea, 1998, on = line at <https://la.utexas.edu/users/hcleaver/bookoutline.htm> (accessed December 27, 2020).

Obviously, rightwing and reactionary groups can and have used the digital technologies to promote their political agendas as well. In a short time, one can easily access an exotic witch's brew of ultraright websites maintained by the Ku Klux Klan, myriad neo-Nazi groups including Aryan Nation and various Patriot militia groups, which have become all-too-visible during the Trump era in which miscreants such as the Proud Boys, QAnon conspiracy nuts, and other far-right groups of the Trump Storm Troopers who have gained media access, support, and a dark legitimacy through their embrace by Trump and his followers on the right. Internet discussion lists also promote these views and the far right is extremely active on many Internet forums, as well as having their radio programs and stations, public access television programs, video, and even rock music production.

These groups are hardly harmless, having promoted terrorism of various sorts ranging from church burnings to the bombings of public buildings, and in 2021 included the January 6, 2020 invasion of the U.S. Congress. Donald Trump's election and Nightmare Reign of Horror was in part facilitated by the intervention in Facebook and other social media by Russia and other interested parties (see Kellner, 2017; as well as the 2018 PBS Documentary "The Facebook Dilemma"). As I edit this book in January 2021, Trump has been permanently banned from Twitter after his encouragement of his far-right Storm Troopers to invade Washington and to storm the Capital on January 6, 2021, in the last days of his presidency in a failed attempt to overthrow the Electoral College tally of the election which decisively choose Biden as the winner.<sup>22</sup>

Adopting quasi-Leninist discourse and tactics for ultraright causes, these extremist groups have been successful in recruiting working class members devastated by the developments of global capitalism which have resulted in widespread unemployment for traditional forms of industrial, agricultural, and unskilled labor. In the 2016, U.S. Presidential election, social media played a major role in disseminating misinformation about Hillary Clinton and electing Donald Trump, while throughout Trump's reign his shock troops were spurred to acts of violence by Trump's daily incendiary Twitter feeds, a danger that continues as Trump is driven out of office after his defeat by Joe Biden, as he refuses to concede the election while claiming it was fraudulent, keeps his storm troopers riled up and Some Concluding Remarks 31 ready for disruption, leading to a White Riot and occupation of the Capital on January 6, 2021, driving the Democrats to impeach Trump for the second time.

The Internet and technoculture is thus a contested terrain, used by Left, Right, and Center to promote their own agendas and interests. The political battles of the future may well be fought in the streets, factories, parliaments, and other sites of past struggle, but political struggle today is already mediated by media, computer, and information technologies and will increasingly be so in the future. Those interested in the politics and culture of the future should therefore be clear on the important role of the new public spheres and intervene accordingly.

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<sup>22</sup>See [https://blog.twitter.com/en\\_us/topics/company/2020/suspension.html](https://blog.twitter.com/en_us/topics/company/2020/suspension.html) (accessed January 9, 2021).

## Conclusion

In the light of the projects of technocapitalism and rightwing politicians and regimes to dismantle the Welfare State and authoritarian populism to eliminate key institutions of democracy, it is up to citizens to create new public spheres, new politics, and to use the digital technologies and social media to discuss what kinds of society we want and to oppose the society we don't want, to demand more education, health care, welfare, and benefits from the state, and to struggle to create a more democratic and egalitarian society. Yet one cannot expect that generous corporations and a beneficent state are going to make available to citizens the bounties and benefits of the evolving info-technological economy. Rather, it is up to individuals and groups to promote democratization and progressive social change. Thus, to globalization from above of corporate capitalism, one could support a globalization from below, from individuals and groups in struggle using the digital technologies and social media to create a more egalitarian and democratic society. Individuals and groups all over the world are using digital technologies and social media to advance progressive goals and the new public spheres of cyberspace are more open to cultural and intellectual intervention than the media spaces controlled by the giant corporations.

Groups ranging from native peoples in the Mexican state of Chiapas, to dockworkers in London, to oppressed peoples of North Africa, to anti-corporate campaigns worldwide against McDonald's and Nike, to recent struggles by Dreamers, #MeToo, and Black Lives Matter have used digital technologies against the dominant corporate powers. Moreover, groups like African-Americans, Latinos, gays and lesbians, and others excluded from the democratic dialogue are using digital technologies and social media to promote democratization and advance their interests. Of course, the digital technologies might exacerbate existing inequalities in the current class, gender, race, and regional configurations of power and give major and statist and corporate forces powerful tools to advance their interests, as well as providing hostile states weapons to engage in asymmetrical warfare against the United States and other democratic countries. In this situation, it is up to the people, to us, to devise strategies to use digital technologies and social media to promote democratization and progressive social change.

For as digital technologies become ever more central to every domain of everyday life, developing a progressive technopolitics in the digital public spheres will become more and more important. Changes are certainly happening, we are undergoing a Great Transformation, but we are, I believe, too early in this adventure to determine its structure and the ways that it is transforming social relations, cultural forms, and effecting everyday life, and "creative destruction," innovation, and dramatic changes of the technoculture have characterized it from the beginning and no doubt will continue to do so. It is clear, however, that a technological revolution has been going on, that it has already had massive effects, and that it is a great challenge to us concerning how we will theorize and actually use digital technologies—or whether they and the forces that control them will themselves use us in their projects and we will uncritically surrender to the technoculture and the



objects it keeps providing us. Thus, it is not only a challenge to social theorists to theorize the always expanding digital technologies and their effects, and to activists to devise strategies for using technology and social media to promote progressive political change, but it is a challenge to each individual to determine how they will live with digital technologies and cyberspaces, how they will themselves deploy them, and whether digital technologies in their lives will ultimately be empowering or disempowering, and democratizing or de-democratizing. For as long as human beings have vision, goals, and autonomy, we can design, shape, and restructure our technologies, as well as being shaped and constrained by them, and the future of the human adventure is bound up with adventures with technopolitics.

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# Trump's *Big Lie* and the January 6th Attack on the U.S. Capitol: Going Beyond the Select Committee Report



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**Abstract** The final report of the House Select Committee of the U.S. Congress that investigated the riotously violent assault on the U.S. legislative seat of government, the U.S. Capitol, on January 6th (2021) by supporters of the former president, Donald J. Trump, who had authored the Big Lie that his electoral defeat in the 2020 elections was a result of rigged elections, came up with this major finding: The January 6th attack was premeditated and the work of one principal instigator and liar, Trump. The report was absolutely adamant: “None of the events of January 6th would have happened without him.” While this conclusion, on the face of it, is incontrovertible, it is a narrow one. A fuller understanding of the January 6th attack requires a deeper and wider contextual explanation. This chapter does that by focusing on two key themes: that January 6th was emblematic, on one hand of the historical racialization of U.S. democracy, and on the other, the evolution of a weakened form of democracy in the U.S. that one may label as “plutocratic democracy,” which represents a betrayal of the objective interests of the vast majority of the U.S. citizenry.

**Keywords** Donald J. Trump · January 6th capitol attack · Impeachment · Procedural democracy · Race · Right-wing populism · Plutocracy · Substantive democracy · United States House Select Committee to investigate the January 6th attack on the United States capitol

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## Introduction

Just as it had regularly done for more than two centuries, on November 3, 2020, the United States held its 59th presidential elections; the contenders were the incumbent, Donald J. Trump, a demagogic right-wing populist,<sup>1</sup> and Joseph (Joe) Biden, the former vice president of Barack Obama. The elections were peaceful, and on November 7th Biden was declared the winner by all the major media organizations. At the same time, a few days later, on November 12, 2020, the U.S. government's Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Agency, together with some civil society organizations, issued a statement saying, "the November 3rd election was the most secure in American history" (U.S. Government, 2020). Similarly, a few weeks later, on December 1, 2020, the U.S. Attorney General William Barr, among Trump's staunchest allies, who had earlier lent credence to the idea of a rigged 2020 election, surprisingly admitted that investigations by the Department of Justice had indicated no large-scale voter fraud that could have changed the election results (Balsamo, 2020). These authoritative pronouncements directly contradicted Trump's false allegation that he had begun to peddle, even before all the votes had been counted across the country, in the form of a "Big Lie"; namely, the elections were "rigged" against him and that is why he lost to Biden. As the "social media industrial complex," together with such right-wing corporate media outlets as *Fox News*, began to publicize his Big Lie, accompanied by bizarre conspiracy theories to back it up,<sup>2</sup> his supporters began to organize protests. One such protest was a 6-h-long prayer rally held on December 12, 2020, on the National Mall in Washington, D.C. that was attended by thousands of right-wing Christians (together with some conservative Jews) from all over the country. The rally, dubbed "The Jericho March," based on a story in the Bible (Joshua 5:13–6:27), was held in support of Trump's Big Lie of rigged elections.<sup>3</sup>

A brief history of Trump's penchant for Big Lies is necessary here, though that in turn calls for an explanation of what the concept of a Big Lie is. The Big Lie, which is usually a condensation of an outrageous conspiracy theory, is one of the foundational pillars of demagogic propaganda aimed at the masses. A Big Lie is a lie that is so bold and unbelievable that it has the perverse effect of convincing the public that it has to be true (since no one in their right mind would peddle such a lie); and with frequent repetition by its authors at every propagandistic opportunity, significantly large sections of the public soon come to internalize it and begin to spread it to each

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<sup>1</sup>Trump's politics have been variously described as nationalist populism, fascist politics, right-wing populism, and so on, which can all be subsumed, however, under "toxic antidemocratic politics." See, for example, this basket of sources, which must be accessed together: Diamond (2023), DiMaggio (2022), Müller (2016), Nacos et al. (2020), and Rowland (2021).

<sup>2</sup>There were several bizarre conspiracy theories making the rounds among Trump supporters; see Kuklychev (2021).

<sup>3</sup>Trump would express his pleasure at the rally by being flown over the crowd in the presidential helicopter (Global News, 2020).

other—often with embellishments, which may make the lie even more outrageous (see Snyder, 2017).

On August 1, 2016, at a rally in Columbus, Ohio, Trump started peddling the Big Lie of “rigged elections” or “stolen elections” months before the 2016 elections, in which he was a presidential candidate, were about to take place. As he told the crowd, “I’m afraid the election is going to be rigged, I have to be honest.” He would repeat this lie at other rallies. And as Stokols (2016), so presciently wrote about the significance of this lie that was unprecedented in U.S. history: “Asserting, specifically, that November’s election will be ‘rigged’ is, all at once:

- the musing of a candidate who often gives credence to conspiracy theories;
- a talking point aimed at a disaffected electorate;
- a presidential candidate, following a dip in the polls, contemplating defeat;
- an effort to delegitimize the democratic process that could bring that defeat to bear; and
- a thinly veiled threat by a litigious billionaire to contest such an election result in court.” (Listing format added.)

In the 2020 elections, Trump revived this lie well before the election date, just as he had done in 2016. For example, on August 17, at a rally in Oshkosh, Wisconsin, he told the crowd, “The only way we’re going to lose this election is if the election is rigged”. Interestingly, when Trump did win the 2016 Electoral College vote that put him in the White House, his bogus cries of “rigged elections” was then applied to the popular vote, which to his deep narcissistic-driven chagrin he had lost. Lemiere (2022) also suggests that the birth of Trump’s Big Lie can be traced to 2016. However, the fact is that Trump’s longstanding fraudulent playbook of conspiracies and rigged elections was authored by him long before he formally entered politics, going as far back as 2012 when President Barack Obama was reelected. Trump an ardent believer in the thoroughly discredited “birtherism” conspiracy theory (that is, President Obama was an illegitimate president because he was not a U.S. citizen by birth) called the reelection a “sham” and he posted a Twitter message saying “We can’t let this happen. We should march on Washington and stop this travesty. Our nation is totally divided!”<sup>4</sup> It is important to stress here that without the intermediary role of the media, Trump’s Big Lie may not have received the kind of publicity that it did, and therefore, possibly, J6 may not have happened (see Zakrzewski et al., 2023). The fact is that Big Lies have become an important part of a money-making cottage industry of manufacturing and disseminating all sorts of (primarily) right-wing conspiracy theories via social media, through which, as a consequence, flow millions of dollars that also benefits the capitalist class that owns and/or invests in this industrial complex. (However, even the regular media is complicit here by repeating the conspiracy theories as news, and thereby profiting from it too.)<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>See Smith and DiMartino (2020).

<sup>5</sup>For an overview of the social media industrial complex and its role today in undermining democracy and the rule of law, see Aral (2020) and Fisher (2022). On *Fox News* support of Trump’s

The Jericho March rally was, however, a dress rehearsal, albeit a peaceful one,<sup>6</sup> for another Big Lie rally, dubbed “March to Save America,” that would be held several weeks later (also in Washington). That rally was held at the specific invitation of Trump to coincide with the Congressional certification process of the Electoral College ballots that would take place at the Capitol, the federal legislative seat of the U.S. government, on January 6, 2021;<sup>7</sup> and it did *not* turn out to be peaceful—far from it. For, on that date, around 1:00 pm, after attending the rally at the Ellipse at which Trump would reiterate his Big Lie of a stolen election, thousands of his riotous supporters fired up with Trump’s provocative words—“We will never give up, we will never concede. . . . We fight. We fight like hell and if you don’t fight like hell, you’re not going to have a country anymore. So, let’s walk down Pennsylvania Avenue”—still ringing in their ears, marched to the Capitol, and mounted a violent attack on it. Their goal was a grossly misguided effort to halt the electoral certification process that was then underway.<sup>8</sup>

That assault on the Capitol, which has come to be known as the January 6th Capitol Attack (or simply January 6th or even just J6), was not only unprecedented in U.S. history, but the virulence and savagery of it left many within and without the U.S. aghast with absolute disbelief that such an event could ever take place in the twenty-first century in the self-proclaimed world’s citadel of democracy. What is more, to get a sense of Trump’s dangerous and vindictive state of mind, dear reader, ponder this: when he was told that about half of the 50,000 or so gathered for the rally were unwilling to be screened with magnetometers (mags) for weapons, because they did not want them confiscated, he responded “I don’t [fucking] care that they have weapons. They’re not here to hurt me. Take the [fucking] mags away. Let my people in. They can march to the Capitol from here. Take the [fucking] mags away” U.S. Government (2022b).<sup>9</sup>

Over 2 years on, as of this writing, the perpetrators and enablers of J6 are attempting to trivialize the Capitol attack as constituting nothing more than simply a protest where the citizenry were exercising their freedom of speech rights

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Big Lie, see Bort (2023), Serwer (2023) and Yoon (2023). Viewing the matter from another angle, going on the basis of a theory first articulated by the French intellectual Guy Debord (1991, reprint) on power as spectacle, Lynch (2017) cogently suggests that *all* corporate media, liberal, conservative, etc., was complicit in Trump’s journey to the White House, in their pursuit of—in the final analysis—of profits. J6 was of course the ultimate spectacle as the world tuned in to the live streaming of it.

<sup>6</sup>The rally did, however, attract many protofascists, who upon its conclusion embarked on an orgy of mayhem (Cheney, 2020).

<sup>7</sup>In the winner takes all electoral system, the Electoral College is a quirky constitutionally mandated device where voters in a presidential election, in each state, are in effect casting for a slate of electors who then, together with those of other states, vote for the appropriate presidential candidate in alignment, usually, but not always, with the national popular vote (see Keyssar, 2020).

<sup>8</sup>There are many videos on [YouTube.com](https://www.youtube.com) from reputable news organizations that can be accessed with the search phrase: “January 6 2021 live coverage.”

<sup>9</sup>Among the trademarks of right-wing populists is the use of profanity in private and in public as an instrument of anti-democratic politics (see Curtis, 2022).

guaranteed by the First Amendment (of the U.S. Constitution); and while a few among them became boisterous and got carried away a little, it does not merit any more attention than any other protest in the country's capital. What is more, not only is this view prevalent among large swaths of the U.S. citizenry, as indicated by various polls to date,<sup>10</sup> but the fact that Trump was the chief instigator of J6 and yet has felt politically comfortable enough to unashamedly announce another bid for the U.S. presidency, in 2024, speaks volumes about this view. Moreover, he continues to repeat his Big Lie at every opportunity.

Anyhow, regardless of whether J6 represented a legitimate exercise of freedom of speech, or not,<sup>11</sup> it quickly became an exercise in criminality by Trump's supporters. Consider: several people died as a direct outcome of the attack on the Capitol complex;<sup>12</sup> the Capitol police was at times brutally assaulted physically, as the mob breached and damaged government buildings (including defecating and urinating in hallways and offices and stealing government property);<sup>13</sup> and of course they tried to halt the conduct of super-important government business (the certification of the Electoral College ballots), in which they temporarily succeeded, as members of Congress were forced to spend hours hiding in the basement behind barricaded doors, literally fearing for their lives.<sup>14</sup> Ponder what the chief of the Capitol police, Steven Sund, would state in his testimony to Congress:

The events on January 6, 2021, constituted the worst attack on law enforcement that I have seen in my entire [30-year] career. This was an attack that we are learning was pre-planned, and involved participants from a number of states who came well equipped, coordinated, and prepared to carry out a violent insurrection at the United States Capitol. I witnessed insurgents beating police officers with fists, pipes, sticks, bats, metal barricades, and flag poles. These criminals came prepared for war. They came with weapons, chemical munitions, and explosives. They came with shields, ballistic protection, and tactical gear. They came with their own radio system to coordinate the attack, as well as climbing gear and other equipment to defeat the Capitol's security features (Sund, 2021).

And while all this was going on, what was Trump doing? According to the Co-Chair of the Select Committee, Liz Cheney:

Among the most shameful findings from our hearings was this: "President Trump sat in the dining room off the Oval Office watching the violent riot at the Capitol on television. For

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<sup>10</sup>In poll after poll, the consistent finding is that only about 50% of the U.S. citizenry believe that J6 was a serious breach of U.S. democracy—see the summary by Galston (2023). On the other hand, a survey of the literature on the subject by scores upon scores of academic scholars (albeit a cursory one via Google Scholar) are consistent in their view that J6 should not be taken lightly (the fact that it has merited attention by an appreciable number of scholars is in itself of course telling).

<sup>11</sup>See Policinsky (n.d.) for a legalistic analysis of this question.

<sup>12</sup>See Farley (2022).

<sup>13</sup>Estimates of the cost of the damages wrought by J6 were in the tens of millions of tax-payer dollars (Chapell, 2021).

<sup>14</sup>One can only shudder to think of what would have happened if the mob had gotten their hands on Pence, as well as others in Congress whom Trump had demagogically demonized over the course of his presidency (e.g., the women Democrats: Nancy Pelosi, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Rashida Tlaib, Ayanna Pressley, and Ilhan Omar). See also Edmondson (2022).

hours, he would not issue a public statement instructing his supporters to disperse and leave the Capitol, despite urgent pleas from his White House staff and dozens of others to do so. Members of his family, his White House lawyers, virtually all those around him knew that this simple act was critical. For hours, he would not do it. During this time, law enforcement agents were attacked and seriously injured, the Capitol was invaded, the electoral count was halted and the lives of those in the Capitol were put at risk” (U.S. Government, 2022b).

The U.S. Justice Department, with the Democrats occupying the White House (yes, this fact is necessary given the level of deterioration of consensual politics in the U.S. even with respect to criminality), did not sit idly by. At great expense to the taxpayer, the department to date has arrested almost a thousand defendants who participated in J6; they are from almost the entire country. Of these about half pleaded guilty to a variety of charges, including four who pleaded guilty to seditious conspiracy, with many facing incarceration. And the hunt for persons of interest connected with J6 continues.<sup>15</sup>

At the same time, J6 brought in its wake a second impeachment of Trump (see below), and an almost yearlong Congressional investigation by the *House Select Committee to Investigate January 6th Attack on the United States Capitol* (Select Committee). It is not just the fact that the live televised scenes of the J6 rampage that seemed to go on for eternity left not only the country but the world aghast, to put it mildly,<sup>16</sup> but consider this somber assessment, dear reader, by Bernie Thompson, Chairperson of the House select committee that investigated January 6th, from the perspective of the integrity of U.S. democracy:

When I think back to January 6th, after nearly a year and a half of investigation, I am frightened about the peril our democracy faced. Specifically, I think about what that mob was there to do: to block the peaceful transfer of power from one president to another based on a lie that the election was rigged and tainted with widespread fraud. . . .

But who knows what would have happened if Trump’s mob had succeeded in stopping us from doing our job? Who knows what sort of constitutional gray zone our country would have slid into? Who would have been left to correct that wrong? . . . (U.S. Government, 2022b).

Not surprisingly, the final report of the House Select Committee would conclude that J6 was premeditated and the work of one man, Trump, who in pursuit of power demagogically instigated a violent attack on another key branch of the government, the legislature. The report was adamant that, in its words, “evidence has led to an overriding and straight-forward conclusion: the central cause of January 6th was one man, former President Donald Trump. . . . None of the events of January 6th would have happened without him” (U.S. Government, 2022b). In the immediate sense, the

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<sup>15</sup>About 140 police officers (includes those from the Metropolitan Police) were assaulted. For specific figures on criminal charges, pleas, sentencing, etc., see U.S. Government (2023).

<sup>16</sup>There are many mind-numbing videos on the January 6th rioting on Google’s YouTube video channel that were broadcast by several well-known news agencies ranging from Al-Jazeera to PBS. Do a search, initially under this phrase: “January 6 2021 live coverage.” For an analysis of international reactions to J6 see Boone et al. (2022). For a timeline of J6, see Ballotpedia (n.d.) and Cohen and Lutz (2022).

Committee was quite correct in arriving at this conclusion. However, it is also true that this is a somewhat narrow reading of the socio-political context that had led to J6. A fuller understanding of the origins of a political event as serious in its constitutional implications as J6—undermining democracy and the rule of law—requires a deeper and wider contextual explanation that goes beyond one person. This chapter seeks to do that by focusing on two key themes: J6 was emblematic, on one hand of the historical racialization of U.S. democracy, and on the other the evolution of a weak form of democracy in the U.S. that one may label as “plutocratic democracy.”

However, before we continue, a brief note on method is necessary. The fundamental purpose of this chapter is not the generation of a new theory, or the empirical testing of hypotheses, but the *interdisciplinary* application of existing theory, by means of a *discursive discourse*, to descriptive data—gathered via library-based archival research, together with internet-based research, involving both primary and secondary sources.<sup>17</sup> That said, this chapter is informed by, not based on, perspectives and insights from a research methodology that is broadly qualitative (in contrast to quantitative); and within this broad categorization it is “pluralistic” (also known as mixed-methods)—characterized, specifically, by these three research approaches: critical interpretive, qualitative thematic synthesis, and grounded theory. Yes, the phrase “discursive discourse” may appear at first glance to be tautological; it is not. For our purposes, the key feature of discursivity is *interdisciplinarity*, where the discourse on a given subject is not restricted to a single disciplinary location—hence, by definition, placing considerable demands on the intellectual resources of the practitioner of this methodology, while at the same time challenging the generally politically determined fragmentation of knowledge production in research universities today. Of course it is true that a singular disciplinary location, depending upon the issue at hand, discourages superficiality by encouraging depth of analysis, both empirically and theoretically. However, it can also encourage tunnel vision and to that extent can vitiate analytical credibility (again, depending upon the analytical issue at hand).

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<sup>17</sup>The concept of discourse, *as used in this chapter*, is to be very loosely understood, even if Foucaultian in origin, as referring to descriptions, analyses, and the like that are presented with the aim of exposing the materiality of the power relations that underlie the political economy of a capitalist democracy (hence the concept has little to do directly with linguistics). See Bacchi and Bonham (2014), and of course the densely written Foucault (1972), which is also available in many reprints.



## J6 and the Select Committee Report

In light of the events of J6, it should not be surprising that the Democratic-led House of Representatives decided to impeach Trump for a *second time*,<sup>18</sup> on January 13, 2021; this was something that had never happened before in U.S. history (but then, neither had what Trump and his supporters attempted to do). The article of impeachment was for “incitement of insurrection,” and it was presented to the Senate on January 25 by the House, thereby requiring the Republican-led Senate to hold a trial, which would begin on February 9. And as with the first impeachment, the Republican-led Senate made sure that regardless of his guilt or innocence, Trump would be acquitted of the charge, which occurred a few days later on February 13, when, as expected, the Senate failed to get the required two thirds majority vote to convict.

However, the Democratic-led House was not done with Trump yet. A few months later, on July 1, 2021, the “United States House Select Committee to Investigate the January 6th Attack on the United States Capitol” (commonly known as the January 6th Committee) was instituted,<sup>19</sup> mainly on a party-line vote involving lack of cooperation from the cowardly House Republicans, with the exception of a notable few, as depressingly expected.<sup>20</sup> Over the course of next 6 months, the Committee received testimony from over 1000 witnesses—mostly Republicans, by design—and much of it via televised public hearings; at the same time, it acquired over a million documents. Their key finding, published in a hefty tome of more than 800 pages on December 22, 2022 (U.S. Government, 2022b), was unequivocal: the January 6 insurrection rested on the shoulders of Donald J. Trump. They then referred him to the Justice Department for possible prosecution (Broadwater, 2022).

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<sup>18</sup>The first impeachment was over the attempted bribery of Ukraine; see Dale (2019), and the Congressional House report (U.S. Government, 2019b)—an annotated version of which is provided by Wolf and O’Key (2019). In fact, the rot that Trump would bring with him to Washington was already beginning to be clear by another scandal that preceded this first impeachment; it was connected with the Russian interference in the 2016 elections in favor of Trump that was serious enough to prompt the FBI to open an investigation of the matter under the Special Counsel Robert Mueller (U.S. Government, 2019a).

<sup>19</sup>See U.S. Government (2021).

<sup>20</sup>It is instructive to compare here the high level of exemplary bipartisanship, in 1973, in the appointment, formation, proceedings, and recommendations of the *Senate Select Committee on Presidential Campaign Activities*, also known as the “Watergate Committee,” that investigated Richard M. Nixon’s involvement in the Watergate Scandal, and which eventually led to his resignation as president on pain of impeachment and conviction that the Committee recommended. (See an overview of the Committee and its work, U.S. Government, n.d.). But those were different times in that the level of economic inequality and desperation among the masses had not progressed to the extent it has today, thereby creating the conditions for the rise of the extremist politics of right-wing demagogic populism that in its arrogance and imbecility brooks no compromise.

## Looking Beyond the Select Committee Report

While the final report did a fairly good job in marshalling evidence in support of pinning J6 on Trump, from the broader perspective of U.S. democracy as a whole, one must go beyond this conclusion. It is possible, for example, to explore these avenues of causal analysis: the fact that the Big Lie became a money-making enterprise for Trump and his associates (and thereby laying the psychological groundwork among his supporters for J6 by fomenting among them a misdirected apoplectic outrage);<sup>21</sup> or the deleterious role of the social media industrial complex, especially in terms of conspiracy theories of the type known as QAnon; or the role of the Christian nationalist right; or the significance of that constitutionally mandated electoral anachronism in presidential elections that is the Electoral College.<sup>22</sup> However, given space limitations we will restrict our focus to only two factors that underlay J6—chosen because of their long historical standing from the perspective of determinatively influencing U.S. politics broadly—they are: race; and the nature of U.S. democracy itself.

### J6 as a Racial Project

Ask any college student in the U.S. who has taken a sociology course and they will probably tell you that race is a socially constructed category and hence not a biological category. However, if probed further to explain what that really means in practice and who constructed it and for what purpose, the response will generally be a blank. They may be surprised to learn that while among the pillars of Trumpian right-wing populism is the ideology of white supremacy, notwithstanding Trump's denials, and its accompanying "Great Replacement Theory" (see below), the so-called white race did not exist prior to the commencement of European imperialism with its launch of the Great West to East Maritime Project—of which the Columbian Project of course was integral—in pursuit of the unending Western dream of accessing Asian riches on the cheap. That is, before Christopher Columbus's inadvertent genocidal arrival in the Americas due to a navigational blunder of cataclysmic proportions, instead of the "white race" there were different

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<sup>21</sup>The House Select Committee did note that seemingly with the approval of the Republican Party, Trump and his enablers, ripped off their supporters by raising 250 million dollars from them for the supposed purpose of fighting the mythical "electoral fraud" and "defending" the outcome of the elections; however, it was diverted to other uses (see Appendix 3 of U.S. Government, 2022b). However, the Committee did not delve into this matter in terms of its broader significance for J6. Incidentally, the Committee was also told by Trump's son-in-law, Jared Kushner, that Trump wanted to trademark the phrases "rigged election" and "save America" (see the transcript of Jared Kushner's testimony released by the committee).

<sup>22</sup>On these issues, see, for example, Barack (2022), Jackson et al. (2023), Lezra (2019), Shaw (2022), and Sommer (2023).

ethnicities of Europeans, as is still the case today in Europe, ranging from the Irish to the Germans, from the French to the Scandinavians, from the English to the Poles, and so on. (The same of course was true of Black peoples as well.) They became the “white race” only with their illegal settlement of the Americas, which required the subsumption of their diverse ethnicities (as well as class differentiation) into the category “white” in the common task of eliminating the Native Americans and stealing their lands, where possible, and almost simultaneously appropriating the labor of millions of Africans via their transatlantic enslavement. In fact, we are witnessing today *how* the politics of the social construction of race works in practice; albeit in this case it is ethnicity, serving as a proxy for race. Reference here is to the ongoing illegal and brutal armed invasion of Ukraine by the Russians, which is being undertaken, in part, in the service of preserving the power of the Vladimir Putin-led Russian kleptocratic and authoritarian plutocracy (representing a longstanding Russian tradition, as Kotkin, 2016, reminds us, of using jingoism as a distractor for corruption, incompetence, economic backwardness, the brutal oppression of the citizenry, etc., by the Russian ruling elites, going back to the Tsarist days). The U.S. white supremacists appear not to understand that if their dreams were to come true, that is tomorrow all people of color disappeared from the U.S., their lot would probably get much worse, because class would no longer be obfuscated by race. Hence, *they* would now be the tomato pickers and the dishwashers, the hotel cleaning staff and the workers in the meat plants, the garbage collectors and the delivery persons, the hospital orderlies and the strawberry pickers, and so on. What is more, it is quite possible that the old European ethnic rivalries of their immigrant past would resurface with the current apartheid-like residential segregation determined primarily by ethnicity (rather than race, as it is today). On the other hand, not all among them dream of a land without people of color. Ponder this dear reader: about a fifth of Trump supporters believe it was wrong to abolish slavery in the U.S. (Vavreck, 2016). As for the infatuation of the protofascists among them with the Nazis, had they lived in the Nazi era, they would have probably ended up in Hitler’s gas chambers, or as slaves in his factories; for under Hitler’s mythical concept of “Aryaness” not all Europeans were considered to belong to the same white race as the Nazis—otherwise there would have been no Second World War in Europe in the first place, or even the First World War, for that matter.

The point of the foregoing is this: In historically-determined racially fragmented capitalist societies, such as in this instance the U.S., race (and/or its proxy, ethnicity) and its corollary racism/ethnocentrism, performs a number of functions for the ruling elites: from justifying labor exploitation to blunting class differentiation;<sup>23</sup> from creating pseudo-identities of whiteness to sublimating class struggles by replacing objective interests with subjective interests; from providing psychic solace to the white working classes to creating scapegoats for the socio-economic dysfunctions of unbridled capitalism; and so on. In other words,

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<sup>23</sup>The latest example of super-exploitation in the U.S. is that of unaccompanied immigrant children (Dreier, 2023).

besides economic exploitation, for the white ruling elites in the U.S., race as whiteness has always served as a versatile and potent political distractor, from the era of colonial settlement to the very present (vide the current obsessions with the so-called lost cause theory, critical race theory, replacement theory, etc.).<sup>24</sup>

For right-wing populism to take hold in any society, it needs scapegoats—a reminder: populism, especially right-wing populism, is *never* about diversity, equity, and inclusion. In the U.S. this role, historically, and up to the present, has almost always been assigned to people of color (Native Americans, Blacks, Latinos, Asians, non-white immigrants, and so on),<sup>25</sup> especially given their relative powerlessness in political and economic terms, albeit more so in the past than today. It should not be surprising, therefore, that when we look at J6 in a broader context of Trumpian right-wing populism it takes on the coloration of a racial project in at least following four ways—leaving aside (but without minimizing its import) the racist vitriol accompanied by physical assaults that were directed at the black officers of the Capitol Police by the J6 insurrectionists; and even the fact that there was hardly a black or brown face to be seen among the latter.

### ***Race and Voter Suppression***

Underlying the baseless claim that the elections were stolen was the age-old view among white supremacists that any election in which their candidates lost because of black voter participation were not legitimate elections. Consider, for example, the Wilmington massacre of 1898 when a mob of white supremacists, numbering possibly 2000, in this Black majority city in North Carolina overthrew a lawfully elected biracial state government, in the process killing, looting, and terrorizing many Black residents of the city (North Carolina, 2006). Another perhaps even more egregious example is that of the 1873 Colfax Massacre, in Louisiana, involving the cold-blooded murder of a large number African Americans over the issue of election results (Keith, 2009). Most of the frivolous challenges to the validity of the election results mounted by Trump and his supporters took place in electoral districts that commanded large Black voter turnouts. What is more, in the wake of J6, institutionalization of legislative strategies of voter suppression of minorities have accelerated with a vengeance (with the blessing, in effect, of the conservative majority on the U.S. Supreme Court).<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup>For sources on the foregoing part of this section of the chapter, see Blackburn (2010), Carleton (2017), Fields and Fields (2012), Harman (2017), and Jacobson (1998).

<sup>25</sup>The exception was during the period of mass European immigration at the turn of the preceding century, when the newly arrived European immigrants were also the targets of scapegoating.

<sup>26</sup>See, for example, the dissenting opinions authored by Justice Elena Kagan, in *Brnovich v. Democratic National Committee*, 594 U.S. \_\_\_\_ (2021), and the late Justice Badar Ginsburg, in *Shelby County v. Holder*, 570 U.S. 529 (2013). Yes, of course the majority opinions must also be read, but they merely confirm the point here about the conservative Court's tragic collusion in

## ***Race and Law Enforcement***

The Select Committee gave the law enforcement agencies virtually a pass on inadequate security preparations for the protection of the Capitol (considering that the social media industrial complex, at the very least, had been abuzz for days on the J6 intentions of some of the extremists). Moreover, they had already had a taste of the violence that could ensue from the presence of the protofascist thugs at the conclusion of the Jericho March protest some weeks earlier. But why was law enforcement so ill prepared? It would appear that race, specifically white supremacy, may have had something to do with it. Knowing that those attending the January 6th rally would be primarily, if not exclusively, whites, law enforcement were lax in their preparations. After all, there is ample evidence that U.S. law enforcement agencies, in general, falsely view domestic terroristic violence emanating from Muslims, Blacks, and other people of color, as worthy of much more serious attention, relative to right-wing terroristic violence by whites regardless of its motivational source: racism, anti-Federal government, anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, Sinophobia, anti-choice (regarding reproduction rights), anti-immigrants, and so on.<sup>27</sup>

## ***Race and Religion***

The report generally whitewashed the role of an outfit that was directly connected with the Trump Administration, a group of right-wing Christian nationalists called “Jericho March” in helping to prepare the ground for January 6th, who, bizarrely, believe that Trump is God’s instrument on earth.<sup>28</sup> As already noted, this outfit had organized a large rally on the National Mall on December 12, 2020, in support of Trump’s “Big Lie.” In fact, during J6, one could see in the videos that there were a sizeable number of insurrectionists who wore clothing with Christian symbols on them pointing to their membership of the white Christian nationalist movement—a far from benign movement from the perspective of democracy. On the contrary, it is a movement imbued with not only white supremacist racism, as manifest by

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racialized voter suppression. (An exception, in fact an aberration, albeit a welcome one, is its most recent June 2023 rulings on this subject.) For more on voter suppression in the U.S., *today*, see the sections on it at the websites of the Brennan Center and the NAACP Legal Defense Fund, as well as the analyses at the Democracy Docket website; plus Tensley (2021); and U.S. Government (2022a).

<sup>27</sup> See German and Robinson (2018), Parker (2021), and U.S. Government (2017).

<sup>28</sup> See Green (2021) and Posner (2023), and, more generally, Whitehead & Perry (2022). The great irony here is that these racist so-called Christians in their profound ignorance appear to be unaware that Jesus was definitely not a white European, but a Jewish person, that is, a Semite—a group that also includes Arabs and Palestinians (see Taylor, 2018). Another irony of course is that in their embrace of Trump, they ignore the fact that he is far from being a model Christian believer; rather the reverse is true.

Islamophobia, anti-Semitism, Sinophobia, etc., but cultist support for Trumpian right-wing populism.

### ***Race and Protofascism***

Although the Select Committee did pay attention to the significant role of the protofascists with respect to J6, such as the so-called Proud Boys and the Oath Keepers, but as with other issues raised in this chapter, the Committee did not situate the reemergence of protofascism in the U.S. in the broader context of Trumpian right-wing populism, which, at the very least, has enabled protofascists to come out of the shadows, with the social media industrial complex playing an important intermediary role. But what does one mean by protofascism? From the perspective of the U.S. today, it refers to an ideology that is somewhat fuzzy but highly dangerous and evil (in a nonreligious sense) that brings together extremist violence, virulent racism (in the form of white supremacy—undergirded by the so-called Replacement Theory—Islamophobia, anti-Semitism, Sinophobia, anti-non-white immigrationism, etc.), misogyny, a disdain for democracy and the rule of law, authoritarianism, jingoism, the politics of profanity, and neoliberal capitalism.<sup>29</sup>

Trump has enabled the habilitation of protofascism as a legitimate political “movement” in U.S. politics, in three ways: publicly aligning with groups such the Proud Boys; creating the requisite political ambience that has permitted the election to Congress of some Republicans with protofascist leanings; and appointing one of the movement’s prominent members as the head of his electoral campaign in 2016, and later bringing him into the White House as his chief strategist and senior counselor for the better part of 2017—reference here is to, one, Steve Bannon. As an ardent Trump supporter and protofascist, Bannon very early on was involved with the effort to lay the groundwork for J6, as the Select Committee report points out. It may also be noted here that Bannon was subpoenaed to testify by the Committee, but

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<sup>29</sup>The presence of occasional black and brown faces in protofascist groups in the U.S. should be considered as aberrations that are very specific to those particular groups. Moreover, it is unclear on where they stand on the two key drivers of protofascism in the U.S. among whites: first is the toxic and irrational notion, going by Berlet & Lyons (2000), of “persecution” from above, by parasitic elites (e.g., international bankers, globalists, socialists, secular humanists, Jews, government bureaucrats, liberals, Democrats, etc.), and persecution from below, by “lazy, sinful, subversive parasites” (e.g., the lazy, represented by Blacks and other People of Color, all immigrants of non-European ancestry, “undeserving poor” etc.; the sinful, represented by non-Christians, feminists, abortionists, the LGBTQ communities, etc.; and white subversives, represented by labor and community organizers, social and economic justice activists, Antifa, and so on). Second is the so-called “Great Replacement Theory,” imported from France where it was originally conceived, that advances the fallacious belief that whites will soon be rendered a minority, demographically, by Blacks and other people of color (see Chamie, 2022).

he arrogantly refused to comply; as a consequence, he was later indicted and found guilty of contempt of Congress.<sup>30</sup>

## J6 and “Plutocratic Democracy”

J6 was also about preserving what may be called “plutocratic democracy.” Before elaborating on this point, it is necessary to first define specifically what democracy has come to mean today, in its generic sense, in the U.S.

### *Democracy*

Democracy, which by its nature is always a work in progress given the vicissitudes of unequal relations of power in any society, is therefore an aspirational concept as it has evolved in the USA over the course of many centuries, in terms of both ideology and practice. At the same time, in its holistic sense, as we have come to understand it today, it comprises two fundamental symbiotic halves: the *procedural* and the *substantive* (or authentic), where the former is a means to the latter.<sup>31</sup> Moreover, the first half itself is made up of three subparts: institutional, cultural, and interpersonal. As for *Substantive democracy*, it refers to the *equitable* access of *all* (repeat, all) to the four universally fundamental human needs—security, food, shelter, and health—without which procedural democracy is meaningless. The roots of holistic democracy in the U.S., lie in the political influences of the English, the Greeks, etc., on one hand, and on the other, Native Americans in the Northeast, specifically the Haudenosaunee;<sup>32</sup> and it has been nurtured along the way by the blood, sweat, and tears of millions (flowing from a series of landmark struggles and tragedies that would include: Native American wars of resistance, the War of Independence, the Trail of Tears, the U.S. Civil War, the first wave women’s rights movement, the shameful birth of Jim Crow upon the dastardly annulment of Reconstruction, the First and Second World Wars, the New Deal program in the aftermath of the Great

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<sup>30</sup>Bannon’s exemplary moral character is further indicated by the fact that his dalliance with the courts has also included indictments for fraud at both federal and state levels (though he was pardoned by Trump for the federal part), and being sued by his former lawyers for unpaid legal fees amounting to about half a million dollars. For more on Bannon, in addition to U.S. Government (2022b), see: Braune (2020) and Thompson (2023). For more on Trump and protofascism, see Cole (2018), Stanley (2020), and Street (2021). To track the activities of protofascists and rightwing extremists in the U.S., there is a great internet resource maintained by [splccenter.org](http://splccenter.org).

<sup>31</sup>The literature on democracy (and the integral concept of the rule of law) is vast, and that is an understatement; however, for our purposes these three, considered together, should suffice: O’Donnell (2004), Pansardi (2016), and Pettit (2015).

<sup>32</sup>See Johansen (1982), and Lyons et al. (1992).

Depression, and the struggles of Native Americans, the U.S. labor movement, the U.S. civil rights movement, the second wave women's rights movement, and so on.

Those familiar with U.S. history will realize from considering these historical landmarks that the journey toward democracy in the U.S. has never been unilinear, but instead has often been marked by setbacks (as in one step forward and two steps back). The reason: the inordinate power of the elites, from the very beginning of the founding of the U.S. as a European settler colony, guaranteed by capitalism—first in its mercantile form and later in its industrial form, and today in its techno-financial transnational monopoly form. Recall, dear reader, that the American Revolution of 1776 was not like the French Revolution of 1789 that it would inspire only a decade or so later; the former was primarily a revolution from above (internal elites versus external elites),<sup>33</sup> while the latter was a revolution from below, the masses versus the nobility. In other words, the full power of the ruling elites has never really been decisively challenged by the masses in the U.S. (and therein lies the real American exceptionalism, not that other stuff—the destiny to do good in the world because of the country's history as a multi-ethnic European settler colony). So, where does that leave us, in terms of the nature of U.S. democracy? It has always been tilted toward the interests of the very wealthy (colonial elites, slave owners, merchants, industrialists, financiers, corporate elites, and so on); hence perhaps the best characterization of U.S. democracy is that it is a “plutocratic democracy,” but where there is sufficient give to generate an ebb and flow in the power of the wealthy, depending upon the countervailing strength of the masses at any given time—mediated, today, by the quality of universal suffrage from state to state across the country against the background of the vagaries of the Electoral College, on one hand, and U.S. Supreme Court decisions on the financing of electoral campaigns, as well as avenues of voter suppression generally.<sup>34</sup>

On the basis of the foregoing, it should be abundantly clear that the health of U.S. democracy, to be understood in its holistic sense as just defined above, has suffered considerably through the agency of the practices, policies, and behavior of Trump to date. What is more, the Republican establishment (with rare exception) has been complicit here, either because they have been enchanted by Trumpian right-wing populism and/or because of their own selfish political/economic agendas. Consider, for example, the role played by his former vice president, Mike Pence. While Pence deserved some credit for his constitutionally-mandated principled stand on refusing to abort the certification of Biden's victory, the Select Committee report failed to present the other side of the coin: Pence's typical failure to contradict his boss, this time on the very serious issue of the Big Lie that his boss had been propagating for weeks, given that he had been among the most strategically loyal

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<sup>33</sup>The iconic “Boston tea party” of 1773 was about a luxury drink, imported from India via Britain, drunk by the elites; it was not a drink of the masses, the majority of whom were rural people. The masses drank alcohol (often safer than water in those days).

<sup>34</sup>For more on plutocracy in the U.S., see: Ehrenberg (2022), Hacker and Pierson (2011), Mazo and Kuhner (2018), and Pizzigati (2012).



supporters of Trump over the years (Baker et al., 2021). That is, up until J6, Pence had remained silent, thereby encouraging the extremists in their effort to try and stop the certification of the ballots. The issue for Pence, relative to Trump, has always been that while he probably did not and does not like Trump personally, he has always liked Trumpism (on matters ranging from opposition to reproduction rights to support for neoliberal capitalism), even before Trump came on the scene. Of course, it was not Pence alone who would remain silent in the face of Trump's incessant Big Lie mantra; almost the entire Republican establishment did the same thing as Pence.<sup>35</sup> In other words, Pence and others at the higher levels of the Republican Party were guilty of "collusion by silence" in the birth of J6.

However, there were also some among them who went beyond silence by demagogically encouraging their supporters to come to Washington to defend Trump's Big Lie (Edmonson & Broadwater, 2021). At the same time, few appear to know that within Congress many of the Republicans went out of their way to aid and abet Trump on this matter. For example, ponder these two facts about the Congressional Republicans with respect specifically to J6: When the attack on the Capitol began, 147 Republicans in Congress were stunningly engaged in absolutely ludicrous debates that were frivolously aimed at challenging the certification of the Electoral College ballots (that is, in effect, they sided with Trump on his Big Lie of "stolen elections"). And it is important to point out here that when the press agency Reuters called the offices of every one of these Republicans, most dodged the question on whether they truly believed Trump's Big Lie of stolen elections (Reuters, 2021). Second, among those Republicans who refused to convict Trump upon his impeachment, included Republican leaders who had minced no words in condemning Trump in the heat of the immediate aftermath of the attack; vide:

Quotes about J6, from House Minority Leader, Kevin McCarthy (2022):

- I had it with this guy [Trump]. What he did is unacceptable. Nobody can defend that, and nobody should defend it.
- We cannot just sweep this under the rug. We need to know why it happened, who did it, and people need to be held accountable for it. And I'm committed to make sure that happens.

Quotes about the Big Lie from Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (2021):

- President Trump claims the election was stolen. The assertions range from specific local allegations to constitutional arguments to sweeping conspiracy theories. I supported the president's right to use the legal system. Dozens of lawsuits received hearings in courtrooms all across our country, but over and

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<sup>35</sup>See Woodward and Costa (2021). An exception regarding support for Trump within the Republican establishment are a small group (George Conway, Steve Schmidt, John Weaver, and others) that formed a political action committee called the Lincoln Project, in 2019, aimed specifically to engineer Trump's exit from presidential politics, on grounds of defending democracy. Visit their site [lincolnproject.us](http://lincolnproject.us) for more on them.

over, the courts rejected these claims, including all-star judges whom the president himself has nominated.

- If this election were overturned by mere allegations from the losing side, our democracy would enter a death spiral. We would never see the whole nation accept an election again. Every 4 years would be a scramble for power at any cost.

What we learn from this hypocritical behavior is that Trump has never been alone in virtually every effort he has made to weaken U.S. democracy and the rule of law, he has been aided and abetted, for the most part, by the majority of the top echelons of the Republican establishment.<sup>36</sup> In fact, here, one can go a step further and point out that while the coloration of nuances may be unique to Trump in his anti-democratic right-wing populist crusade, from the perspective of U.S. history he is simply an heir to others who have come before him who were also engaged in this effort. As Milbank (2022, p. 9), reminds us: “The Trump phenomenon cannot be understood without its many antecedents. . . the Vince Foster ‘murder,’ Ken Starr’s smut, the violence of the militia movement, the lies that started the Iraq War, the use of the ‘War on Terror’ to impugn Democrats’ patriotism, the racism of the ‘Birther’ Movement, the antigovernment rage of the Tea Party, the lies about the Affordable Care Act, the politicization of the Supreme Court from *Bush v. Gore* to *Citizens United*—and much more.”<sup>37</sup> However, this long trail of unsavory political strategies, raises yet another question: to what end?

## *Plutocratic Democracy*

Simple: the quest for Republican electoral victories (especially at the Congressional level). Yes, yes, that is obvious. But does that merit this deep trail of shenanigans—extending all the way to the present, where, for example, Republican leaders of Congress can shamelessly refuse to convict Trump, while even condemning him for not upholding his oath of office to protect and defend the U.S. Constitution? Or the fact that they have, with rare exception, remained silent on almost every egregious move he has made in terms of democracy and the rule of law; a stance that continues to the present day? The answer, in brief (given space limitations) is the defense of plutocratic democracy, which in turn, has evolved, especially after the election in 1980 of Ronald Reagan as president—in which the Iranians (generally political rubes who have never learned anything when it comes to internal U.S. politics) of course had an inadvertent hand,<sup>38</sup>—to create and nurture the prevalence of a

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<sup>36</sup>See Shay (2021) and Barak (2022).

<sup>37</sup>For more on the historical antecedents of Trumpism, see also Andersen (2021), Berlet & Lyons (2000) Komlos (2019), Lucks (2020), and Peters (2022).

<sup>38</sup>See, for example, Bowden (2007).

globalized form of anti-dirigisme capitalism, called *neoliberalism*,<sup>39</sup> the operationalization of which has been dependent on vanquishing the *class struggles* of the masses by means of relentless *class warfare* (to be understood here in their ordinary non-Marxian senses) on their quality of life, and on their ability to organize against it, involving the antidemocratic *plutocratic political capture* of the state by capital in its single-minded pursuit of its *raison d'être*: *accumulation* by any means necessary.<sup>40</sup>

In other words, as history also bears out, in the United States, and across the world as well, ruling elites will never willingly give up power. And, today, in the era of modernity, if that involves manipulating the democratic electoral process, then so be it, provided it takes place within what is perceived by most (if not all)—that is, in mature democracies, such as the U.S.—as “legal bounds.” And no matter that the definition of “legal bounds” is malleable because the institutions entrusted with adjudicating on it are also tainted; vide, for example, the U.S. Supreme Court and its 5-4 ruling in *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission*, 558 U.S. 310 (2010) that essentially opened the flood gates of “dark money” in elections, favoring the wealthy—individuals *and* corporations. The latter were included because the Court long ago cunningly ruled that corporations are “persons” via the concept of “corporate personhood” based on the deliberate misinterpretation of the Equal Protection Clause of the 14th Amendment (which, recall, was specifically adopted to protect the rights of the newly freed enslaved African Americans in the wake of the U.S. Civil War). And what Trumpian right-wing populism represents, despite Trump’s bogus agenda of “draining the swamp” (the key posts in

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<sup>39</sup>From an ideological perspective, neoliberalism (or neoliberal capitalism) is about the place of the capitalist system in democratic societies; that is, how should capitalism relate to the State (to the extent that the State, through democratic processes, exists to protect the interests of the masses—at least in theory—“government of the people, by the people, for the people”). Champions of neoliberalism believe that the best arrangement for all concerned in a society is that the relationship of the state to capitalism should be similar to that of relations between human beings during a pandemic; one involving masking and social distancing. In other words, all policy barriers (in terms of allocation/movement of capital, goods, services, labor, etc. within and between countries) should be swept aside—including those that protect society as a whole—if they interfere in any way with the relentless and unlimited accumulation of wealth by the capitalist class. (See Komlos, 2019; as well as Cahill & Konings, 2017; Toussaint, 2011.)

<sup>40</sup>Yes, it is true that another major factor motivating the current resurgence of populism in the West generally has been “identity politics” (involving *otherization*; specifically, in terms of a demagogic cultural assault on people who are categorized as “they-are-not-like-us,” thereby upending the inclusivity that is integral to the concept of democracy. However, at the end of the day, economic anxiety—real or imagined—still informs this cultural assault; for, you cannot eat culture on an empty stomach. As Mudde (2019, p. 101), an astute long-time student of the far-right, points out: “It is the socio-cultural translation of socio-economic concerns that explains most support for far-right politics.” He continues, “egged on by nativist narratives in the political and public debates (e.g., “immigrants are taking your jobs *and* your benefits”), many far-right voters link immigration to economic problems, either for them personally or for the region or state they live in.” At the same time, it should also be noted, for right-wing populist leaders like Trump, and the Republican governors of states like Florida, identity politics also serve as a “weapons of mass *distraction*.”

Trump's administration were filled, to a noticeable extent, by billionaires and millionaires), is the legitimization of plutocracy by means of right-wing populism at a time when there is much ferment among the masses arising from decades of neoliberal capitalist policies, which in practice has meant, for example:

- massive and ever-expanding *politically-engineered* absolute and relative economic inequality (especially as manifest along the rural-urban divide, as well as the obscene conspicuous consumption of the super-rich, which is often publicized in the media for the titillation of the masses),<sup>41</sup>
- widespread unemployment in traditionally high-wage economic sectors, in part because of globalization and in part because of computerized automation;
- the plutocratic capture of government at both federal and state levels by corporate capital;
- the stagnantly low wages relative to inflation;
- the legal and illegal tax-evading practices of the wealthy;
- the relentless effort to weaken the trade unions, the traditional bulwark against the virulence of capital's permanent class warfare;
- the deep erosion of the social safety net (modest though it is, in comparative terms, despite U.S. wealth);
- the pollution of life-sustaining environmental systems;
- the grotesque distortion of national budgetary priorities by a bloated military industrial complex;
- the weakening of public educational systems, thereby not only undermining opportunities for social mobility, but undermining support among the citizenry, in practice, for democratic norms and values (due to inadequate or no educational preparation for critical thinking, democratic civic engagement, nurturing a healthy civil society, and so on).

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<sup>41</sup>A great eye-opening and sobering resource on *politically engineered* inequality in the United States is the website maintained by the Institute for Policy Studies known as [Inequality.org](https://inequality.org), which looks at unjustifiable inequality in the United States and elsewhere in the world. Regarding the United States, specifically, they point out in their latest report (Institute for Policy Studies, 2023, p. 15):

For every \$100 of wealth created in the United States over the past decade, \$37.4 has gone to the top 1 percent, while the bottom 50 percent received only \$2. In other words, the richest 1 percent has gained nearly nineteen times more wealth than the bottom half of the country's population since 2012. The wealth of Americans worth \$50 million and above—currently the richest 0.02 percent—has surged by 53.9 percent between 2012 and 2022. This calls attention to the extreme levels of wealth concentration and the astonishing inequality that persists in the country.

See also the report by Oxfam (2023) that talks about “greedflation” as a corollary of the post-pandemic inflation that is currently buffeting the poor in the United States and around the world, and the latest income inequality data for the United States covering the period 1913–2021 by the World Inequality Database (2022). By way of another historical comparison of inequality in the United States relevant to the rise of right-wing populism, see Pizzigati (2012), and Ferguson (2004). Note: the two books should be read together.

- the relentless assaults on the biosphere (the consequences of which include global warming and climate change);
- the corruption of democratic political processes (while pretending to adhere to the rule of law);
- the criminal provision by corporate capital of lucrative logistical support to the narco-military-industrial complex; and so on.<sup>42</sup>

The Trumpian slogan “Make America Great Again” has never been about extending the principle of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness to all, *regardless of color, creed, class, gender, etc.*, but it is really about the demagogy of white supremacy where the white masses are coned into supporting the white-dominated plutocracy via a two-pronged strategy: the social construction of race, and the false promise of a better life by excluding and scapegoating the *Other* (Blacks, Native Americans, Latinos, Asians, non-white immigrants—documented or otherwise—and so on, who are all supposedly hogging resources away from the white masses, thus explaining their *relative* pauperization). It is for this reason that the white ruling elite, includes the Republican establishment and corporate executives, while initially suspicious of Trump as a loose cannon (given his narcissistic glory-seeking obsessions, characteristic of demagogues) soon realized that his other obsession, acquisition of limitless wealth, would guarantee continuation of the pursuit of their unending agenda of neoliberal policies—ranging from unjustified tax-cuts for the wealthy to a socially most egregious regime of dismantling hard won regulations aimed at enhancing substantive democracy, in the socio-economic sphere; see, for instance, ABC News (2017). To put it in another way in order to drive home this important point, here is how Pierson (2017), for example, explains it:

The ever-greater concentration of economic and political resources within a tiny stratum of wealthy Americans has limited the impact of a diffuse ‘populism’ and diverted it towards the Republican Party’s already well-established policy agenda. In the realm of rhetoric, right-wing populism remains robust. In actual government, the interests and concerns of plutocrats have typically prevailed. . . . Trump has continued to present himself in populist garb, but it has rarely carried over to policy. Whatever label one might attach to his substantive actions as president, one would be hard pressed to call most of them populist. Trump has filled his administration with a mix of the staggeringly wealthy and the staggeringly reactionary. On the big economic issues of taxes, spending and regulation—ones that have animated conservative elites for a generation—he has pursued, or supported, an agenda that is extremely friendly to large corporations, wealthy families, and well-positioned rent-seekers. His budgetary policies (and those pursued by his Republican allies in Congress) will . . . be devastating to the same rural and moderate-income communities that helped him win office.

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<sup>42</sup>For more on neoliberal capitalism, see Cayla (2021), Cockburn and Jeffrey St. Clair (2022), Dasie et al. (2021), and Harvey (2007).

## Conclusion

It is clear that *when viewed in a broader context*, J6 was not simply the work of one single person; rather it was emblematic of an extreme form of right-wing populism (in this case Trumpian-flavored right-wing populism, but which in turn has not been bereft of historical antecedents) to which large sections of the U.S. citizenry are in thrall, aided and abetted by the ruling elites, among whom the Republican establishment considered as a whole is particularly blameworthy. In resolutely standing by Trump in his highly egregious and unprecedented mountebankery vis a vis democracy and the rule of law (for a list, see for example, Italiano, et al., 2023) in pursuit of its own plutocratic neoliberal agenda, it has demonstrated time and again that the sacred oath of democracy to “support and defend the U.S. Constitution”, which all members of the three branches of the U.S. government, including members of Congress and the U.S. president, must take upon commencing official duties for the first time, has absolutely no meaning—notwithstanding the fact that the oath’s sacrosanctity has been underwritten by, literally, the blood of millions across U.S. history. In fact, Congressional House Republicans have even gone so far as to brazenly and unashamedly suggest that Congress should expunge Trump’s two impeachments from its records, as if they never happened (Morgan, 2023). In other words, Trump is as much a creature of the U.S. ruling elites, as well as U.S. history, as he is of his own less than savory lifelong biography. (This line of analysis, incidentally, applies, more or less, to all right-wing populist leaders across the planet, today, in countries as varied as Brazil, Hungary, India, Israel, Russia, the U.K., and so on.) At the same time, given that race has never been absent as a determinative factor from U.S. politics and economy from the very moment the first European colonists arrived in North America, an event as politically significant as J6 was not going to be immune from the politics of race.

As for the future, on the basis of the foregoing one can state that tragically Trumpian right-wing populism will endure beyond Trump (and with it, replays of versions of J6), unless a way is found to mount a successful assault on the current plutocratic neoliberal agenda of corporate capital, by replacing it with what may be called “socially responsible capitalism”—which the climate crisis and the inequality crisis within and between nations that are among the very serious ills facing us today, at the very least demands.<sup>43</sup> It should also be noted that the despair that one often sees expressed today by U.S. politicians (usually those who are liberal-minded) about extreme “polarization” as impeding mutual discourse among the U.S. citizenry, appear not to understand that given the fundamental differences on how one defines

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<sup>43</sup> See, for example, Henderson (2020), and Reid (2022). One should also note, however, that at this particular point in time there is little chance (if ever) of coming anywhere near this form of capitalism dominating the U.S. economic landscape, as indicated, for instance, by the passage of a bill sponsored by the Republicans in the U.S. Senate to prevent retirement plan managers from taking into consideration environmental, social, and governance (ESG) factors when making investment decisions (Aronoff, 2023).

democracy (for example, one side defining it on the basis of white supremacy, while the other on the basis of diversity and inclusivity), it cannot be otherwise. That is, given the nature of right-wing populism with its inherent tendency toward what Diamond (2017) calls “creeping authoritarianism”, we are not dealing with a case of a deep misunderstanding between well-meaning individuals and groups among the populace that can be resolved simply by mutually respectful discourse. Why? Because for one side divisiveness and noninclusiveness *is* the name of the game! What is even more frighteningly tragic is that in a country where gun-ownership is not only legal but viewed by many, bizarrely, to be a birthright, on par with access to food, water, healthcare, etc., thanks to the successful self-aggrandizing propaganda efforts over the years of the gun manufacturers, and where mass shootings average about two a *day* (repeat, two a day!), a significant number believes that political violence in support of their positions is justified.<sup>44</sup> What is the solution then? Simple. Banishment of right-wing populism. But how? Via political marginalization, by means of the ballot box, of the ignorant and the confused,<sup>45</sup> that is, the right-wing zealots among the masses, who are not all Republicans it is important to stress, but who all appear to be unwilling to renounce the steady diet of lies, conspiracy theories, and the like, that they are constantly being fed via the social media industrial complex and right-wing corporate media. That in turn, however, will require the arduous work of mass mobilization of the relevant sections of the masses, even in the face of Republican strategies of voter suppression, including those who while unimpressed with right-wing populism remain politically apathetic. In this effort, all who truly care about democracy (i.e., in its holistic sense), the rule of law, civic engagement, human rights, climate change, and so on, must put their shoulders to the wheel; apathy is no longer an option. For, anecdotally speaking, the general tendency of most “liberals” and “progressives” in the U.S., and possibly elsewhere, is toward a perverse form of ivory tower hubris where the default position on the urgent necessity for deep grassroots-level “get your hands dirty” civic engagement is to simply hunker down on the misguided assumption that what is good for the U.S. populace (and for humanity as a whole, given the dominant role the U.S. plays in the world economy, as well as with respect to global warming considering that it is the world’s largest *per capita* greenhouse gases polluter) will eventually become self-evident, with time, to all—as in cream always rises to the top—is at best naïve and at worst dangerous, most especially in this age of the social media industrial complex, now increasingly buttressed by, on one hand, a misunderstanding of the autonomy principle behind U.S. First Amendment rights, and on the other, by the misuse of A.I., artificial intelligence. (On these diverse but related

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<sup>44</sup>See, for example, Draper (2022) and Milbank (2022). On political violence, see Kornfield and Alfaro (2022) and Pape (2022).

<sup>45</sup>On the issue of general ignorance: no dear reader, this is not a gratuitous flourish of an ad hominem attack; what one has in mind here is the dynamic mutually reinforcing operation of the Dunning–Kruger Effect (Dunning, 2011) at a mass level, facilitated by the corporate right-wing media, the social media industrial complex, and so on.



matters, see Hsu & Thompson, 2023; Lockwood & Lockwood, 2022; and Wells, 1997.)

One more matter before closing this chapter: What did Trump hope to achieve, *in terms of concrete practical steps*, with J6 when it unfolded the way it did and he, more or less collusively, remained silent for hours watching it being streamed on television by the media? We have an inkling from what he would say later. It appears that Trump's intention was to reinstall himself illegally as president by, if necessary—that is if the legislative and judicial branches of government did not cooperate—suspending the constitution via a personal decree (whether the U.S. armed forces would have gone along with this scenario is another matter—see Esper, 2022). In fact, Trump recently voiced something that comes close to this scenario (Holmes, 2022). And judging by the support he continues to enjoy to this day among Republicans, even after the findings of the House Select Committee, most of them would have gone along with this strategy.<sup>46</sup> And recall that he had also boasted that as president he could pardon himself for any crimes he could be indicted for; hence, providing yet another window into his deeply corrupt way of thinking regarding grave constitutional matters.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>46</sup>On Trump's continued support among Republicans, see Greenwood (2023). Bizarrely, this support appears to have not only hardened in the face of the self-inflicted legal morass that Trump is battling today (see Levitz, 2023), but has served to pull in donations to the tune of millions of dollars from his rank and file supporters to help with his legal expenses—notwithstanding the fact that Trump is supposed to be a billionaire! Gullibility appears to be boundless among his supporters.

<sup>47</sup>See Mordacq (2020), on the unconstitutionality of self-pardons.



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**Part III**  
**The Nexus of Populism and Foreign Policy**

# In Search of the Elusive Trump Doctrine



Luis da Vinha  and Anthony Dutton 

**Abstract** For the past two centuries, the U.S. has witnessed the proliferation of numerous foreign policy doctrines that allegedly serve to guide the nation's international relations. In recent years, there has been considerable debate around the question of whether there is a Trump doctrine and, if so, what its main features are. Several officials in the Trump administration have adamantly insisted that the Trump doctrine is a radical rearticulation of U.S. foreign policy. Others, however, have rejected the mere idea of a Trump doctrine. To address the questions regarding the Trump doctrine, we employ a longitudinal comparative design and use a structured focus comparison to analyze Trump's Middle East policy—namely the decision to surge U.S. forces in Afghanistan, the U.S. military strikes in Syria (2017 and 2018), the cancellation of the strike on Iran after the downing of a U.S. drone, the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Syria, and the killing of Iranian General Qasem Suleimani. Our case studies confirm that Trump's unique management style hindered the development of a coherent and consistent set of principles that could guide U.S. foreign policy, and we argue for a foreign policy decision-making process that is based on a more informed and judicious assessment of the challenges to America's national interest.

**Keywords** “America First” · Donald Trump · Foreign Policy Doctrines · Middle East · Trump Doctrine · U.S. Foreign Policy

## Introduction

For impoverished minds simplicity brings rigidity rather than flexibility.—William Overholt and Marylin Chou, *Foreign Policy Doctrines*

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Four decades ago, Cecil Crabb Jr. (1982: p. 8) argued that “since the early nineteenth century, the tendency of the United States to embody the guiding principles of its foreign policy in diplomatic doctrines has been a conspicuous element in the American approach to external affairs.” The author referenced an American penchant for ascribing quasi-sacred axioms to certain presidential foreign policy statements. The most venerated, 1823s Monroe doctrine, established the foundations of American hegemony in the Western Hemisphere. The Monroe doctrine stands out for its longevity, guiding U.S. foreign policy for generations (Gilderhus, 2006). Likewise, 1947s Truman doctrine is considered a watershed in U.S. foreign policy for signaling America’s commitment to be a global power (Merrill, 2006). Since then, scholars, the media, and the American public have sought to attribute a set of doctrinal principles to almost every presidential administration. Thus, we find references to the Eisenhower (Hahn, 2006), Johnson (Rabe, 2006), Nixon (Kimball, 2006), Carter (da Vinha, 2017), Reagan (Scott, 1996), Bush I (Rauch, 1998), Clinton (Brinkley, 1997), Bush II (Jervis, 2003), and Obama (Rohde, 2012) doctrines.

Despite the research dedicated to America’s serial foreign policy doctrines, underlying principles and application remain contentious. In fact, many doctrines have been subject to substantial criticism and even repudiation. Nonetheless, foreign policy doctrines seem “to elevate policy to a higher plain” and, as H. W. Brands (2006: p. 4) suggests, “Every president conceives himself a statesman and deserving of a doctrine.” Not surprisingly, there has been considerable debate around the very existence or main features of a Trump doctrine. Several Trump administration officials asserted that the Trump doctrine is a radical rearticulation of U.S. foreign policy (c.f., Anton, 2019; Carafano, 2017; Goldberg, 2018). Others rejected the mere idea of a Trump doctrine (c.f., Hassan & Featherstone, 2021; Lissner & Zenko, 2017).

To assess the Trump doctrine, we employ a longitudinal comparative design, allowing us to observe a small number of cases over an extended period of time (Menard, 2008). We use a structured-focus comparison, asking a set of standardized, general questions of each case, assuring a controlled comparison across them. Building on previous research on Trump’s foreign policy (da Vinha, 2019; da Vinha & Dutton, 2021, 2022), we frame the analysis with the following questions: (1) What is the role of the president in the advisory system? (2) What is the role and relationship among the advisors in the advisory system? (3) What are the procedures for managing the advisory system? and (4) What is the general dynamic of the decision-making process? To further control for situational variables, we restricted cases to the Trump administration’s policy in the Middle East. Despite Trump’s goal of extricating the U.S. from the region, the administration was continuously involved in regional politics. More importantly, as Ambassador James Jeffrey (2021: p. 12) notes, in the Middle East we can best explore the contours of a Trump doctrine since there “we see the biggest diversion from not only the Obama administration’s policies but arguably those of at least the last two before him.” Moreover, Trump’s advocates place his greatest foreign policy legacy in the Middle East (Diehl, 2020).

Thus, the region provides ample opportunity for a comprehensive analysis of the principles underscoring Trump's foreign policy over his 4 years.

The chapter begins with the concept of foreign policy doctrines, highlighting their main elements and characteristics. We continue with a brief assessment of debate surrounding the Trump doctrine, highlighting points of contention. Subsequently, we use a structured focus comparison to analyze Trump's Middle East policy, namely the decision to surge U.S. forces in Afghanistan, U.S. military strikes in Syria (2017 and 2018), cancellation of the strike on Iran after it downed a U.S. drone, withdrawal of U.S. troops from Syria, and the killing of Iranian General Qasem Soleimani. We conclude by reflecting on the existence and potential implications of a Trump doctrine.

## American Foreign Policy Doctrines

While widely celebrated by academics, commentators, and the public alike, foreign policy doctrines often elude precise definition and articulation of their main features. In the enthusiastic attempt to attribute foreign policy doctrines, conceptual issues regarding what constitutes a doctrine receive scant attention. Not surprisingly, we find divergent assessments of each individual doctrine. More troubling, with few exceptions, scholars cannot agree on a tally of all U.S. foreign policy doctrines. While there is consensus regarding the Monroe doctrine (Crabb Jr., 1982; Gilderhus, 2006), Truman doctrine (Gaddis, 1974; Merrill, 2006), and the Carter doctrine (da Vinha, 2016; Leffler, 1983), there is contention over the essence, even the existence, of a Stimson/Hoover Doctrine, a Weinberger/Powell doctrine, and a Clinton doctrine, among others.

In fact, the few studies on the concept of foreign policy doctrines highlight the complexity of identifying and analyzing them systematically. First, many statements elevated to doctrines were not intended as such. For example, the Reagan doctrine was first identified and articulated by the news columnist Charles Krauthammer in a *Time* magazine piece. He constructed the so-called doctrine from President Reagan's 1985 State of the Union address. However, as diplomatic historian Chester Pach (2006: p. 77) notes in his research on Reagan's foreign policy, the president "never intended, modestly or otherwise, to proclaim a foreign-policy doctrine in his State of the Union address." Moreover, many foreign policy doctrines are, in fact, formulated and promoted by others. For example, Mark Gilderhus (2006) argues the Monroe doctrine owes much of its substance to Secretary of State John Quincy Adams' policy recommendations. Similarly, the Powell doctrine was developed by Major-General Colin Powell, announced by Secretary of Defense Casper Weinberger in the early Reagan presidency and intermittently invoked in subsequent administrations (LaFeber, 2009).

We start from William Overholt and Marilyn Chou's (1975: 149) canonical definition and understanding that foreign policy doctrines typically consist of "unilateral declarations of policy designed to elicit domestic public support, to serve as

axiomatic policy guidelines for domestic decisionmakers and bureaucrats, and to announce basic policy to foreign governments.” A doctrine’s unilateral quality derives from its affiliation with the American president. For some authors, doctrines always stem from the president, and their prominence derives from the executive branch formulating and managing the conduct of U.S. foreign policy. They are a mechanism that allows the executive branch to communicate principles to guide America’s foreign policy. They are not, as some authors claim, intended “to create grand strategy” (c.f., Colucci, 2012). Despite his arguments on the strategic nature of doctrines, Colucci (2012: p. 6) acknowledges that most “fail to rise to the level of grand strategy in a true way.” This is not their purpose. America’s national security strategy results from a comprehensive interagency process that integrates political, military, and economic considerations to define the challenges facing the nation, its principal goals and objectives, as well as the resources and capabilities required to achieve them (Heffington et al., 2019; Leffler, 1990).

In contrast, presidential doctrines provide a shorthand to communicate overarching principles guiding U.S. foreign policy in a specific political and historical context. The Carter doctrine demonstrated the nation’s resolve in the Middle East by warning the Soviet Union and its proxies of consequences to denying America access to the region’s oil. However, the annunciation of the Carter doctrine in the 1980 State of the Union was not a brave rearticulation of U.S. policy. In fact, as recent archival research demonstrates, the Carter administration had been developing a much more assertive policy vis-à-vis the Soviet Union for several years (da Vinha, 2015b; Michaels, 2011). The same was true for the Reagan doctrine. While Krauthammer “uncovered” the doctrine’s key principles in the 1985 State of the Union address, many of its main pillars were already codified in strategic documents like the 1982 U.S. National Security Strategy and 1983’s National Security Decision Directive 75 (Pach, 2006). If foreign policy doctrines cannot provide grand strategic designs for America’s global endeavors, their enduring appeal stems from being “declarations of purpose” summarizing one or more critical principles underscoring U.S. foreign policy in order to inform, galvanize, and/or caution different audiences (Brands, 2006). Despite these differences, their allure derives from the simplicity, conciseness, and lucidity of principles, as well as their abstractness and flexibility (Overholt & Chou, 1975).

Most foreign policy doctrines are defensive in nature. As Cecil Crabb Jr. (1982: p. 410) suggests, “the main doctrines of American foreign policy have forcefully communicated what the United States was *against* in foreign affairs.” Most doctrines are reactions to actual or perceived international crises (Colucci, 2012; Siracusa & Warren, 2016). Thus, the Bush doctrine must be understood in the post-September 11 security environment and America’s new focus on fighting global terrorism (Gaddis, 2002; LaFeber, 2002). Even the nineteenth-century Monroe doctrine “emerged in response to the exigencies of European politics at the end of the Napoleonic Wars” (Gilderhus, 2006: p. 6). Furthermore, the reactionary nature of most foreign policy doctrines implies that they are formulated hastily, without a comprehensive deliberation process taking account of long-term strategic considerations underlying America’s national interest (Crabb Jr., 1982). In contrast to the

national security strategy, doctrines tend to be episodic and reflect “American society’s traditional eclectic approach to problem solving” (Idem: 388).

Foreign policy doctrines frequently hinge on domestic politics. They are informed by considerations of public opinion (Crabb Jr., 1982) and regularly are formulated to mobilize public support and unity and to legitimize American power abroad (Idem; Siracusa & Warren, 2016). On other occasions, doctrines are employed to “preempt domestic debate,” as Walter LaFeber (2002: p. 549) suggests the Bush administration did in the aftermath of September 11, 2001. Doctrines also serve to guide the public bureaucracy, emphasizing the executive branch’s main focus and priorities. Due to their reliance on standard operating procedures, government bureaucracies look to doctrines for main policy goals and align policy-making with the broad principles outlined in foreign policy doctrines (da Vinha, 2017). Likewise, doctrines may warn potential adversaries of America’s intent and resolve. In the Carter doctrine, there was little margin for the Soviets to misinterpret the nation’s response if it, or one of its proxies, tried to restrict American access to Persian Gulf oil: “An attempt by any outside force to gain control of the Persian Gulf region will be regarded as an assault on the vital interests of the United States of America, and such an assault will be repelled by any means necessary, including military force” (Carter, 1983).

Most foreign policy doctrines do not radically break from existing policies. Rather, they tend to be adaptations to the context facing America at a particular historical moment (Crabb Jr., 1982; Siracusa & Warren, 2016). John Lewis Gaddis (1974: p. 389) claims that, while the Truman doctrine broadened America’s global commitment to containing communism, it did not overhaul existing policy since “the course of action which Truman proclaimed on March 12 was very much in line with the belief, then almost a half-century old, that American security depended upon the maintenance of a European balance of power.” Later, the Bush doctrine embodied America’s “quest for primacy, its desire to lead the world, its preference for an open door and free markets, its concern with military supremacy, its readiness to act unilaterally when deemed necessary, its eclectic merger of interests and values, its sense of indispensability” (Leffler, 2011: p. 43).

Foreign policy doctrines generally have no legal standing, but they carry discursive power. As statements regarding policy, they have an impact domestically and internationally (Crabb Jr., 1982). This aligns with constructivist arguments that “reality” is socially constructed and that language is a vital instrument in this process since “it is through the combination of words, phrases, sentences, and other linguistic symbols that we describe, report, explain, and interpret all types of situations and affairs” (da Vinha, 2015a: p. 103). Accordingly, foreign policy doctrines shape mental maps of the political world, particularly regarding the threats and opportunities facing the U.S. They do the same for America’s allies and adversaries. Thus, the same way the Monroe doctrine asserted America’s intent to exercise preeminence in the Western Hemisphere, restricting European intervention and establishing a regional order favorable to its own political and economic interests (Gilderhus, 2006), the Bush doctrine signaled that the U.S. was not a status quo power and would use unilateral, preventive military force to bring about wholesale

transformations of societies in order to make the world safe for American interests (Jervis, 2003). Regardless of the inconsistencies and contradictions underlying the articulation and application of these doctrines (and others), the fact is they markedly impacted international politics by inspiring U.S. foreign policy-making and affecting other actors' behavior. Yet many are swiftly consigned to oblivion, while others generate persistent contention over main assumptions, application, and efficacy. Some statements raise the question of whether they constitute a doctrine at all.

This applies to the Trump presidency and disagreement over whether a Trump doctrine exists or, if so, what constitute its main principles. Several authors reject the existence of a Trump doctrine, arguing the president's leadership style uncondusive to formulating a coherent foreign policy doctrine (Hassan & Featherstone, 2021; Larison, 2019; Lissner & Zenko, 2017). Others confirm the essence of a Trump doctrine while diverging considerably in identifying its main principles. The Trump administration promoted a doctrine in a summary of its foreign policy accomplishments titled *The Trump Doctrine: Terrorists Lose and Peace Wins* (The White House, 2020a), but failed to identify its main contours. In light of this oversight, academics, and commentators stepped in to clarify the situation and interpret the doctrine's pillars. For example, political scientist Stanley Renshon (2021) argues that the Trump doctrine rearticulates America's role in the world by embracing the principle of "Conservative American Nationalism." Renshon identifies six pillars of Trump's Conservative American Nationalism doctrine: (1) "America First," (2) push back against liberal cosmopolitanism, (3) American resolve to stand apart and alone if necessary, (4) strength and resilience, (5) repeated pressure in pursuit of key goals, and (6) maximum flexibility in realizing core goals. While many of the arguments fail to stand up to historical and empirical scrutiny, Renshon (2021: p. 6) further undercuts his own claim by stating "the Trump Doctrine owes as much to the president's psychology as it does to his policies. Indeed, it is hard (. . .) to imagine the latter without the former." Renshon acknowledges that Trump is impulsive and impatient and has a penchant for improvisation, providing examples of this undermining his own policies.

A more common interpretation of the Trump doctrine highlights the concept of "principled realism." In fact, Trump initially articulated his foreign policy agenda by employing the concept in his 2017 Arab Islamic American Summit and UN General Assembly speeches, further codifying it in the 2017 U.S. National Security Strategy (Ettinger, 2020). Unlike the more ambiguous references in the president's speeches, the National Security Strategy offered insight into Trump's view of international relations:

An America First National Security Strategy is based on American principles, a clear-eyed assessment of U.S. interests, and a determination to tackle the challenges that we face. It is a strategy of principled realism that is guided by outcomes, not ideology. It is based upon the view that peace, security, and prosperity depend on strong, sovereign nations that respect their citizens at home and cooperate to advance peace abroad. And it is grounded in the realization that American principles are a lasting force for good in the world. (The White House, 2017a: p. 1)

While the concept of principled realism fell out of use early in Trump's presidency, according to former national security official Michael Anton (2019), it embodied the core assumptions of a Trump doctrine. However, Anton does not provide any principles for guiding U.S. foreign policy, limiting his interpretation to denouncing globalization and internationalism and embracing a nationalist policy to safeguard America's interests.

Other administration officials sought to articulate a Trump doctrine, with former Director of Policy Planning at the U.S. Department of State, Kiron Skinner, defining the precept of "America First" as guiding U.S. foreign policy. Writing during the 2016 campaign, Skinner (2016) claimed that Trump challenged established dogmas of U.S. foreign policy and that once elected would follow a policy sustained by American strength and unpredictability. At the State Department, Skinner (2019) outlined five key pillars of the Trump doctrine: (1) prevalence of national sovereignty, (2) U.S. national interest above multilateralism, (3) reciprocity of international agreements and trade negotiations, (4) greater burden sharing in global security among allies, and (5) new regional partnerships to address emerging crises. However, Skinner's (Idem) description of China as a "great power competitor that is not Caucasian" quickly sparked criticism that the administration endorsed a "clash of civilizations" approach to U.S. foreign policy, ultimately speeding her departure from the State Department (Sanger et al., 2019).

A thorough review of the literature reveals the most consistent characteristic associated with the Trump doctrine is unpredictability. Authors highlight Trump willfully espousing unpredictable policy responses to specific international challenges—e.g., North Korea (Tanter & Stafford, 2017) and the Middle East (Daghir, 2020). However, several scholars argue that unpredictability was *the* overarching principle guiding his administration's foreign policy and *the* foundational element of the Trump doctrine (Bentley & David, 2021; Lerner, 2021; Stigler, 2022; Turner & Kaarbo, 2021). As Michelle Bentley and Maxine David (2021: p. 386) clarify, "Far from the typical constancy often associated with foreign policy doctrine, Trump's 'rule'—or pattern of behaviour—is to be as variable and arbitrary as possible: never let them know what you will do." They acknowledge that to appreciate a doctrine of unpredictability, we have to change our vocabulary and understanding of doctrines. However, the required reconceptualization of doctrines to fit the personal traits of one individual undercuts attempts to systematically study foreign policy doctrines.

In reality, it is acknowledged that most foreign policy doctrines reveal a level of flexibility and ambiguity (Crabb Jr., 1982). Andrew Stigler's (2022) research on strategic unpredictability attests that several American administrations have employed unpredictability by implementing surprise changes in the nation's policy trajectory, implementing policy with unusual speed, and acting with unusual aggression or assertiveness. While such approaches have advantages, Stigler (2022: p. 56) also highlights associated risks and notes it "is difficult to summon clear instances of successful applications of the [unpredictability] strategy, which could itself be a reason to have reservations about it." Similarly, in his work on U.S. containment strategy, John Lewis Gaddis highlights the advantages and disadvantages of what he

designates as symmetrical and asymmetrical policy approaches. In reality, the strength of foreign policy doctrines is they tend to provide a sense of predictability—or symmetry in Gaddis' terminology—that fosters stability in international politics (Gaddis, 1987; Colucci, 2012). As Cecil Crabb Jr. suggests in evaluating the Truman doctrine, the most significant and durable contribution of successful doctrines lies in their predictable nature:

it induced greater rationality and restraint in Soviet behavior, thereby preparing the way for the next stage in Soviet-American relations – détente – which was to follow. Insofar as international peace and stability are generally enhanced by making the behavior of powerful states more predictable to other countries (especially to possible adversaries), the major doctrines of American foreign policy have contributed to that result. (Crabb Jr., 1982: p. 410)

Regardless of the debate surrounding conceptual elements of the Trump doctrine, some pundits reject the need to articulate a precise doctrine. Rather, these individuals assert its main principles were illustrated by the president's actions rather than his words (Carafano, 2017; Douthat, 2019). Thus, in the following sections, we analyze the administration's Middle East policy to assess the arguments surrounding the Trump doctrine.

## Searching for the Trump Doctrine in the Middle East

### *The Surge in Afghanistan*

Trump's national security advisory structure started in disarray, a discordant transition from the Obama administration followed by the fractious 24-day tenure of Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs (APNSA), General Michael Flynn and subsequent appointment of General H.R. McMaster. A pressing security matter was the review of U.S. policy in Afghanistan, where military leadership argued that troop levels were dictating American strategy. 8500 U.S. troops struggled to control an expanding conflict that the Department of Defense attributed to as many as 20 active terrorist groups (Byman & Simon, 2017). The growing consensus of the intelligence community, the Pentagon, the State Department, and the NSC was that the U.S. needed to increase troop numbers in Afghanistan to counter the resurgent violence, but Trump had consistently criticized America's continued involvement, calling for a complete withdrawal of forces (Landler & Haberman, 2017). Trump campaigned on a promise to end America's nation-building agenda in the Middle East, condemning his predecessors for squandering America's resources (Nakamura & Philip, 2017). Yet in February, while the administration settled in and the NSC was in disarray, the military leadership in Afghanistan called on Congress for an additional "few thousand" troops to resolve the "stalemate" of the war (Gordon, 2017).

McMaster attempted to reconcile the president's position with Defense's calls for a greater commitment to Afghanistan. He presented the "4Rs" strategy by late March



2017, scarcely a month after taking the role of APNSA. In it, he called for the military to reinforce, realign, reconcile, and regionalize the conflict, strengthening the Afghan government and engaging other regional states to stabilize the situation and weaken the Taliban, with the end goal a political settlement to the conflict. By May, the NSC presented a proposed deployment of 3000 to 5000 new troops to support the revised strategy in Afghanistan (Nakamura & Philip, 2017).

Deep divisions split the Trump administration, not only regarding Afghanistan, but between internal factions vying to influence the president and gain advantage. McMaster, Mattis and Secretary of State Rex Tillerson argued for consistency with previous administrations' policies in support of the liberal international order, representing the "realist internationalist" perspective. As the traditional backbone of the national security structure, they sought to maintain American leadership in multilateral institutions, affirm international commitments, and support continuity (Pfiffner, 2018). A second, "nationalist" faction coalesced around White House Chief Strategist Steve Bannon, who took a deeply skeptical view of the liberal international order. This faction sought to extricate the U.S. from Afghanistan as quickly as possible, following the "America First" campaign rhetoric. McMaster attempted to "depoliticize" the strategy review by conducting it within formal national security bureaucratic structures (Jaffe & Rucker, 2017). His end goal was to shore up the U.S. position in Afghanistan and establish the upper hand in negotiating a settlement with the Taliban. Bannon and Jarred Kushner proposed using private military contractors to withdraw U.S. troops without appearing to cede Afghanistan to the Taliban, saving face and appearing to end America's involvement in a war soon to rival Vietnam in length (Landler et al., 2017). Neither faction envisioned an indefinite commitment, the McMaster faction proposing a version of "peace with honor" (Daddis, 2017), and the Bannon faction the privatization of the conflict. But Bannon tapped into President Trump's deep antipathy to the role of the United States as a leader of the liberal international order, and so Trump rejected the NSC proposal to deploy thousands more troops, declaring that the U.S. military and his security advisors continued to support failed strategies and that the U.S. was "losing" the war in Afghanistan (Landler & Haberman, 2017).

While the president's rhetoric and personal sentiments aligned with the "nationalist" perspective within the White House, the appointment of General John Kelly as Chief of Staff in July 2017 strengthened the position of the national security team and traditional institutional structures. Kelly attempted to formalize communication channels within the White House, managing access to the president and reordering the decision-making process (Haberman et al., 2017). Bannon was increasingly excluded from strategy and policy meetings, and the formal national security advisory structure reasserted its influence.

Discussion in the August 18 meeting at Camp David, organized by Kelly, to develop the administration's Afghanistan strategy centered around three options presented to the president, representing a broad spectrum of action. At one extreme, the withdrawal of U.S. forces, and at the other an increase in troop deployment aligned with the Department of Defense's request to Congress in February. A third alternative called for transition from an overt military presence to a covert



counterterrorism mission (Landler & Haberman, 2017). The national security team argued a U.S. withdrawal would further strengthen the Taliban and other terrorist organizations in the region, prompting the Afghan government's collapse. Mattis suggested that the resulting power vacuum would parallel the Obama administration's actions in Iraq, which contributed to the emergence of ISIS and the United States recommitting troops. Director Mike Pompeo indicated that the CIA would likely require two years to implement a counterterrorism campaign in the place of a military mission. McMaster argued that without viable options for withdrawal or a covert mission, the best alternative was to deploy the additional 4000 troops and maintain the current overall strategy in Afghanistan.

While the proposal did not align with Trump's rhetoric and personal assessment of U.S. prospects in Afghanistan, it was a chance to underscore fundamental strategic difference from the Obama administration. Mattis' linking the proposed withdrawal to Obama and Iraq likely nudged Trump to adopt the course that initially appealed to him least, precisely because it contrasted with his predecessor (Woodward, 2018). Announcing the increase in troop levels, Trump defined victory as "attacking our enemies, obliterating ISIS, crushing al Qaeda, preventing the Taliban from taking over Afghanistan, and stopping mass terror attacks against America before they emerge." He admitted "my original instinct was to pull out," but that "a hasty withdrawal would create a vacuum that terrorists, including ISIS and al Qaeda, would instantly fill." Referencing Obama's withdrawal from Iraq, Trump framed his new position as a means of securing the sacrifices American military personnel had already made (The White House, 2017b). With that, he reluctantly approved the NSC strategy which embodied McMasters' 4Rs and mobilized an additional 4000 troops to Afghanistan.

### *Responding to Syria's Chemical Weapons Attacks*

While grappling with Afghanistan strategy, news of a major chemical weapons attack on Khan Sheikhoun, Syria, broke on April 4, 2017. Trump reacted strongly to images of the dead—men, women and children—and after his presidential daily briefing instructed the Secretary of Defense to draw up military responses to Syria's violation of the faltering ceasefire brokered by Russia and Turkey (Hartmann & Kirby, 2017). Trump, Mattis, Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman, General Joseph Dunford, as well as Secretary Tillerson advocated a military response to continued use of chemical weapons by the Bashar al-Assad regime (Dawsey, 2017). This was not the first time that a U.S. administration considered a military response to the regime's use of such weapons against its own people.

Press Secretary Sean Spicer issued a statement later that day, laying blame for the Khan Sheikhoun attack at the feet of Assad and former President Obama, for failing to enforce a "red line" on Syria's use of chemical weapons in 2013 (Merica et al., 2017). Trump reinforced that in his own statement, blaming Obama for not acting decisively to resolve the Syria crisis. Asked by a reporter if the attack at Khan

Sheikhoun had crossed a red line for him, the president responded emphatically, in his trademark fashion “It crossed a lot of lines for me. When you kill innocent children, innocent babies—babies, little babies—with a chemical gas that is so lethal—people were shocked to hear what gas it was—that crosses many, many lines, beyond a red line. Many, many lines” (cited in The White House, 2017c).

When Trump met with senior members of the NSC on April 6, they examined four proposed responses (Hersh, 2017). The first was to step back and do nothing, however, the president’s statement the day before meant that would seriously undermine the administration’s credibility. The second proposal was reportedly called the “gorilla option,” a strike on a Syrian airbase as a public display of action, but only after alerting Russia in order to reduce the risk to Russian personnel supporting the Assad regime. The effect in Syria would be minimal, but the administration would be seen to be enforcing the “many, many lines” Assad’s regime had crossed. The remaining two options were escalating packages of military strikes, one based on the response considered by Obama with bomber strikes against multiple airbases and the other attempting to “decapitate” the regime (Woodward, 2018). After several hours of deliberation, President Trump instructed his advisors to flesh out the more modest military options.

Trump’s immediate, visceral reaction to the use of chemical weapons on civilians weighed against his reluctance to commit the U.S. military to new overseas engagements. He had no interest in unilaterally eliminating Assad, was unenthusiastic about a major military response, but needed some action that appeared assertive. President Trump’s primary motivation may have been contrasting himself with President Obama. Shortly after Khan Sheikhoun, he reportedly told associates that Obama’s failure to enforce the red line made him appear “weak, just so, so weak” (Trump cited in Dawsey, 2017). One aide present stated that Trump “was looking for something aggressive but ‘proportionate’ that would be sufficient to send a signal—but not so large as to risk escalating the conflict” (Shear & Gordon, 2017). The president held a final “decision meeting” with the national security team on April 6, at Mar-a-Lago, and then authorized the strike (Gordon et al., 2017).

The U.S. took the “gorilla option,” with the navy employing standoff weapons to minimize risk to American lives. When Obama considered military strikes against Assad, four years earlier, Trump and other critics insisted the administration needed congressional approval before it could act. In 2017, the Trump administration launched 59 Tomahawk missiles at the al-Shayrat airfield in Syria, making “a conscious decision not to seek permission from Congress” (Dawsey, 2017). The attack struck a single airfield, destroying aircraft, hangers, fuel, munitions, and radar equipment (Hartmann & Kirby, 2017). In his war powers letter to Congress on April 8, Trump declared the strike essential to the vital security interests of the nation (The White House, 2017d), but it was not followed by further military action.

In effect, the strike was little more than a forceful gesture, but it brought acclaim both from allies and a domestic audience (BBC News, 2017). Compared with Obama’s “red line” in Syria, Trump appeared resolute and challenged narratives that he was unfit to serve as president. The speed of decision-making contrasted with Obama’s reported indecisiveness. And in light of ongoing disputes over Afghanistan

policy, this strike, developed with Mattis, Tillerson and McMaster, countered reportedly dysfunctional decision-making in the Executive. With Bannon recently removed from the national security advisory team, Tillerson and McMaster could point to the strike as evidence that they “were wielding influence over critical national security decisions” as they briefed the press (Landler, 2017).

Any illusion that the administration’s strike fundamentally altered Assad’s willingness to use chemical weapons evaporated a year later, when approximately 70 people were killed and at least 500 injured on April 7, 2018, in the rebel-held town of Douma. Syria claimed that the rebels deployed the weapons against advancing Syrian forces, but images of civilian bodies including children argued otherwise (Shaheen, 2018). The State Department insisted the “Assad regime and its backers must be held accountable, and any further attacks prevented immediately” (Hubbard, 2017). Trump reportedly was frustrated that the 2017 strike had not deterred Syria, and sought a rapid, impactful response (Lucey & Colvin, 2018). He tweeted “President Putin, Russia and Iran are responsible for backing Animal Assad. Big price. . . to pay” (Trump, 2018a). The unambiguous statement of culpability and the precedent set a year earlier implied a quick response to the new chemical attack (Rucker et al., 2018) but advisors Mattis and Dunford called for patience and time to assess options, examine possible consequences and coordinate with allies (Crowley & Restuccia, 2018).

Over the next days, Trump alternated between acknowledging the deliberative process and posting open threats on Twitter. He tweeted on April 11 that<sup>1</sup> “Russia vows to shoot down any and all missiles fired at Syria. Get ready Russia, because they will be coming, nice and new and ‘smart!’” (Trump, 2018b). Administration officials could not have anticipated such an aggressive message. At this point, U.S. intelligence was still examining details of the attack and developing options—no official decision to intervene had been agreed. In fact, the final attack options and recommended targets did not reach the president’s desk until the day after the tweet. (Rucker et al., 2018). While the administration’s decision-making process took longer than in 2017, it was less structured.

The U.S. response launched 2 days after the president’s tweet taunting Russia. Using stand-off weapons again, the U.S. struck multiple sites in Syria associated with chemical weapons research and development, weapons depots in Damascus and Homs, and elements of command and control infrastructure (Crowley & Restuccia, 2018; Rucker et al., 2018). Announcing the strike, Trump declared “The purpose of our actions tonight is to establish a strong deterrent against the production, spread, and use of chemical weapons” (The White House, 2018a). The next morning he declared “Mission Accomplished!” and Secretary of Defense Mattis later described the intervention as a ‘one-time shot’ (Trump, 2018b). The administration could tout an increased scope of the response from its first strike to its second, but the limited scale and clear signals that strikes would not continue indicated the extent of its interest in confronting Assad or his Russian ally.

## ***Pulling Back from Striking Iran***

One of candidate Trump's early refrains, which continued after he won the presidency, was that previous administrations showed poor negotiating skills in diplomacy and trade. After announcing the U.S. withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), Trump authorized economic sanctions while mobilizing U.S. forces in the region to exert "maximum pressure" on Tehran (Bergman & Mazzetti, 2019). There was not a coherent, consistent approach across the administration, however, in the following months. In July 2018, the president surprised advisors by offering to meet with Iranian leaders with no preconditions, despite repeatedly threatening Tehran throughout the spring.

The relations between the U.S. and Iran in 2018 had devolved into a tit-for-tat series of confrontations, rhetoric alternating with provocation. One such event was the June 19 downing of an unmanned American RQ-4 Global Hawk surveillance drone over the Strait of Hormuz. Iran claimed that the drone breached its airspace, and so unlike in past incidents it acknowledged shooting down the U.S. aircraft. Commander in Chief of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps, Hossein Salami, declared the U.S. had crossed "our red line" and that Iran responded in order to protect its sovereign territory (Shear et al., 2019b).

The U.S. disputed that the drone had violated Iranian airspace, and the group recommended that the administration respond militarily to what it viewed as a major provocation (Baker et al., 2019a). The Pentagon suggesting the U.S. sink an Iranian missile boat currently in the Gulf of Oman while Pompeo and Bolton calling for a more assertive strike against a "comprehensive list" of targets within Iran. The Pentagon's proposal was to be roughly proportionate to the drone downing, and recommended warning Tehran when the attack was imminent so they could reduce the risk of casualties. The Bolton/Pompeo proposal would be a significant escalation. Ultimately, the national security team agreed to a pared-down list of three missile batteries and radar installations within Iran, acknowledging the need for an expeditious response (Baker et al., 2019b).

Prior to meeting with advisors, Trump struck a confrontational tone, tweeting "Iran made a big mistake" (reproduced in Olorunnipa et al., 2019). Now the national security team presented their recommendation for the limited strike, estimating roughly 150 Iranian casualties. In discussion, General Dunford struck a more cautious tone and emphasized that the strike be proportionate to the initial Iranian action, to reduce the likelihood of continued escalation and placing U.S. forces and their allies in the region at greater risk (Baker et al., 2019a). Though Trump did not formally authorize the proposed strikes, the national security team left the meeting convinced that he intended to do so. They therefore began to mobilize the needed military resources (Baker et al., 2019b).

The president, however, confounded them when shortly afterward, he downplayed the significance of the drone downing to Canadian Prime Minister, Justin Trudeau. He suggested the incident was likely the act "of somebody who was loose and stupid" and not a directed provocation, despite Tehran explicitly claiming

responsibility (cited in Olorunnipa et al., 2019). President Trump's assessment of the situation appeared to be evolving during the course of the day out of synch with his national security advisors. That evening, meeting some of his top advisors in the Oval Office, Trump appeared concerned about repercussions of the proposed strikes and the potential for significant casualties (cited in Ibid.). Rather than noting General Dunford's advice earlier in the day, the president repeatedly referenced General Jack Keane's description of the accidental downing of an Iranian commercial airliner by U.S. forces in the region, in 1988. Keane appeared on the Fox News evening show and compared the two events—if the airliner had been shot down as the result of a mistake, perhaps too the drone. Several of the advisors present in the evening meeting believed that “Keane's brief history lesson exacerbated Trump's preexisting doubts about carrying out the strike” (Johnson, 2019).

Trump's advisors restated the case for a military response. Not only had the Iranian government acknowledged downing the drone, U.S. forces were prepared for an anticipated presidential authorization. More than 10,000 U.S. personnel were poised and retaliatory strikes stood ready (Ibid.). The president refused to be moved by the recommendations from the advisors present, and notable absences of Vice President Mike Pence, Secretary Pompeo, and APNSA Bolton removed from the discussion two of the key figures in advancing the strike proposal. Trump fixated on the 150 estimated casualties and chose to call off the retaliatory strikes (Olorunnipa et al., 2019).

The decision to stand down and leave the Revolutionary Guards Corps' direct military provocation unanswered caught many advisors off-guard. The president's tweets implied decisive action, but the lack of a military response ran counter to Trump's tone. Pompeo and Bolton believed the president's decision would embolden Iran to take more aggressive action (Baker et al., 2019b). It also sparked criticism from Congress. Where the initial Syria “red line” response garnered broad support, Liz Cheney (R-WY) declared the lack of response to Tehran a “very serious mistake” while Adam Kinzinger (R-IL) expressed disappointment (Olorunnipa et al., 2019; Shear et al., 2019a). Trump defended his decision by tweeting “We were cocked & loaded to retaliate last night on 3 different sights [sic] when I asked, how many will die. 150 people, sir, was the answer from a General. 10 minutes before the strike I stopped it” (reproduced in Diamond et al., 2019). Trump reasoned that Americans would not equate 150 deaths with the loss of a drone worth \$130 million, noting to aides that “the dollar figure would resonate less with U.S. voters than the potential casualties” (Bender & Lubold, 2019).

### ***Withdrawing U.S. Troops from Syria***

The president's penchant for policy-making by tweet continued as the administration responded to further challenges in Syria. Unlike Obama, Trump as both candidate and president downplayed the importance of removing Bashar al-Assad from power. Instead, he prioritized defeating ISIS (Langley & Baker, 2016). President Trump

resisted committing the U.S. to any greater role in Syria. Meanwhile, administration members Mattis and Tillerson regularly argued for finding a political settlement for Syria's domestic conflict, to stabilize the region (BBC News, 2018a; Worth, 2018). When Trump came to office, the U.S. already deployed troops to Syria in response to ISIS. He reluctantly acceded to maintaining those forces, while assuring the American public they would be withdrawn "very soon" (BBC News, 2018b). Ordering the suspension of financial recovery assistance for Syria, on April 3, 2018, Trump instructed the NSC to prepare for withdrawal of U.S. forces. Mattis and Dunford argued a sudden withdrawal would provide ISIS the opportunity to fill the void, and would reinforce the regional standing of Russia and Iran (Davis, 2018; DeYoung & Harris, 2018). Trump again, reluctantly, accepted that withdrawal should not be precipitous. But he emphasized the need to prepare for U.S. troops to leave Syria.

While U.S. troops remained, the national security team maintained contingency plans for potential actions of the Assad regime against its own citizens, including further chemical attacks on civilians or escalation of fighting with opposition forces in Idlib province (Bolton, 2020). Meanwhile Pompeo and Bolton pursued a policy of applying "maximum pressure" on Tehran to challenge its increasing assertiveness in the region (Kube & Lee, 2018; Seligman, 2019) and Syria was important as a place where both the U.S. and Iran were active. The new Secretary of State argued that the U.S. should leverage economic sanctions, military deterrence, and count on domestic opposition in Tehran to drive change (Pompeo, 2018).

While administration officials foresaw a prolonged commitment in Syria, Trump, and President Recep Erdogan of Turkey sparred over diplomatic matters that led to tit-for-tat sanctions (Bolton, 2020). That conflict eased during a bilateral meeting between Trump and Erdogan at the G20 in Buenos Aires. The two spoke by telephone on December 14, and Erdogan stated a recurring concern over U.S. support for Kurdish forces operating near the Turkish border (Seligman & Hirsh, 2018). Erdogan identified dual threats he saw in ISIS and the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), and Trump seized on the opportunity to withdraw American cooperation with Kurds in Syria in exchange for Turkey taking responsibility for combatting ISIS. The president then told Bolton to plan for removing U.S. forces as Turkey would take over its role (Bolton, 2020).

Bolton, Pompeo, and Mattis attempted to slow the withdrawal of American troops, again arguing that ISIS would reconstitute itself in the vacuum and that Iran would benefit (Bergen, 2019). Four days after the conversation between Erdogan and Trump, Bolton, Mattis, Pompeo, Dunford, Gina Haskel (CIA Director), Dan Coats (Director of National Intelligence), and other officials met at the Pentagon to discuss options to fulfill the president's orders. Dunford stated it would take roughly 4 months to remove U.S. troops (Bolton, 2020). That timeline was undermined the next day, when the president independently tweeted "We have defeated ISIS in Syria, my only reason for being there during the Trump presidency" (reproduced in Seligman & Hirsh, 2018), followed shortly by a promise to bring U.S. troops home (Landler et al., 2018). Again, the president made a major policy decision and announced it publicly, without preparing the national security team. The Press Secretary issued a statement that this marked the beginning of the "next

phase” of the conflict with ISIS, and the Pentagon confirmed it would begin removing U.S. forces from Syria, but neither could provide any concrete details (Borger & Chulov, 2018).

Trump’s departure from policy processes and his unconventional communication had ripple effects. Mattis made one final effort to convince the president to delay the withdrawal, arguing that Obama made the same mistake and was forced to change course when threats rebounded. He also described the U.S. commitment as important to allies and international organizations, finally noting that Kurdish forces bore the brunt of the fighting. Trump refused to change his position, and Mattis resigned, declaring “you have the right to a Secretary of Defense whose views are better aligned with yours on these and other subjects” (cited in Woodward, 2020). The president did slow the pace of withdrawal after Lieutenant General Paul LaCamera assured Trump his forces could destroy the caliphate and then react to any ISIS recurrence from bases in Iraq. Dunford had estimated 4 months for the withdrawal, but Trump extended his own timeline for LaCamera to 4 weeks (Bolton, 2020). Addressing American troops, Trump declared “There will be a strong, deliberate, and orderly withdrawal of U.S. forces from Syria – very deliberate, very orderly – while maintaining the U.S. presence in Iraq to prevent an ISIS resurgence and to protect U.S. interests, and also to always watch very closely over any potential reformation of ISIS and also to watch over Iran” (The White House, 2018b).

In spite of President Trump’s rhetoric, withdrawal proceeded gradually (Seligman, 2019). Trump was forced to refocus on Syria throughout the summer as Erdogan threatened to invade the north. Speaking again by phone with Erdogan on October 6, Trump then ordered the final withdrawal of U.S. troops. That quick change again blindsided administration officials and criticism centered on the abandonment of America’s Kurdish allies (Barnes & Schmitt, 2019).

### *Killing General Qasem Suleimani*

Tensions with Iran remained constant through 2019, despite Trump’s decision not to respond to the June downing of the U.S. RQ-4 Global Hawk drone over the Strait of Hormuz. Iranian-backed militia groups within Iraq continued rocket attacks on bases housing American forces and one paramilitary group in particular, Kata’ib Hezbollah, received weapons and support to carry out multiple rocket attacks (Baker et al., 2020). On December 27, 2019, it fired roughly 30 rockets at Iraq’s K1 military base in Kirkuk, leaving one Iraqi-American civilian interpreter dead, and three U.S. soldiers as well as two Iraqi police officers wounded (Bender et al., 2020; Ryan et al., 2020). The incident marked an escalation and the next day the president received options for military response, including strikes on Iranian-backed militias operating in Iraq or on Iranian ships and missile facilities. According to reports, officials “also tacked on the choice of targeting the commander of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards’ Quds Force, General Qasem Suleimani, mainly to make other options seem reasonable” (Cooper et al., 2020). Trump set aside the targeted



assassination of General Suleimani in favor of retaliatory strikes on militia targets along the Iraq-Syria border.

On December 29, the U.S. Air Force killed over 25 members of Kata'ib Hezbollah and injured more than 50 in several airstrikes (Ryan et al., 2020). Two days later, pro-Iranian militia members and their supporters, numbering in the thousands, attempted to storm the American embassy in Baghdad. The U.S. quickly dispatched more than 100 marines from Kuwait and the situation ended with no American casualties while the crowd dispersed (Baker et al., 2020), but Trump and his advisors could not help but reflect upon the 2012 storming of the U.S. mission to Libya in Benghazi (Cooper et al., 2020). After Benghazi resulted in four American deaths, including Ambassador Christopher Stevens, Trump decried the government's response as a bigger scandal than Watergate, tweeting "Don't let Obama get away with allowing Americans to die. Kick him out of office tomorrow" (reproduced in Osborne, 2017). Only slightly less bombastic while in office himself, Trump responded to events in Baghdad with the tweet "Iran will be held fully responsible for lives lost, or damage incurred, at any of our facilities. They will pay a very BIG PRICE! This is not a Warning, it is a Threat. Happy New Year!" (reproduced in Harding & Borger, 2019, caps in original). Trump also upbraided Iraqi officials for failing to control the crowd and protect the embassy.

While the events in Baghdad unfolded, APNSA Robert O'Brien circulated a top-secret memo identifying targets for retaliatory strikes, among them high-profile Iranian officials (Baker et al., 2020). Suleimani had long been known to the U.S. administration and some blamed him for hundreds of American deaths in the region (Crowley et al., 2020). The two previous presidential administrations, however, considered assassination of high-level Iranian officials as too provocative and counterproductive, opting to take other measures. Where Bush and Obama refused to target Iranian officials, Trump had been considering the assassination of Suleimani for months. He first mooted killing him in spring 2017, when Iranian-supported rebels from Yemen attacked Riyadh on the eve of Trump's first visit to Saudi Arabia. Targeting Suleimani was Trump's periodic response to escalating tensions with Tehran (Sonne et al., 2020). Pompeo long advocated a more belligerent approach to Iran, and after the attack on the Baghdad embassy, he urged the president to authorize the mission to kill Suleimani (Wong & Jakes, 2020). Haspel provided support, citing intelligence that the Iranian general was organizing further attacks on U.S. assets, and declaring that not acting would have graver consequences than taking decisive action (Baker et al., 2020).

Intelligence soon provided an opportunity, with reports Suleimani would travel to Baghdad on Friday, January 3, 2020. Trump was in Mar-a-Lago for the holidays, so on January 1 his national security team arrived to discuss killing Suleimani. Alternatives to the assassination were on the table, including new attacks on Iranian-backed Iraqi militias, or Iranian ships and missile sites. Trump, however, chafed at again being warned against bold action as threatening U.S. security (Schmitt et al., 2020). In this instance, several advisors suggested Iran was emboldened by past failures to respond assertively, noting Trump's very public cancelation of airstrikes after the loss of the Global Hawk drone. They represented it as a sign of hesitancy



and weakness (Ryan et al., 2020). Appearing weak greatly concerned Trump and ordering the killing of Suleimani would provide evidence to the contrary. It also showed marked contrast with his predecessor, as Trump later implied, saying “it was going to be another Benghazi, had they broken through the final panels of glass. Had they gotten through, we would have had either hundreds of dead people or hundreds of hostages,” further stating “We did exactly the opposite of Benghazi, where they got there so late” (cited in Boyer, 2020).

The mission to kill Suleimani received Trump’s approval on Thursday, January 2 (Schmitt et al., 2020). Several Pentagon officials were surprised by the course of action because they considered assassination to be the most extreme option and did not believe the president would adopt it. They especially were concerned by anticipated Iranian reprisals, which would put U.S. troops at risk, and the precedent set by assassinating a foreign government official (Cooper et al., 2020). Because deliberations were limited to the few closest advisors, they were quick (Schmitt et al., 2020), and the mission was carried out quickly, too, as it did not involve consultation with members of Congress, American allies, many administration officials or military outside of those necessary to implement the strike (Bender et al., 2020).

On January 3, 2020, the day after Trump’s authorization, an American MQ-9 Reaper drone struck Suleimani’s convoy as it left Baghdad airport, killing ten, including the general (Baker et al., 2020). At 9:46 pm, the administration issued a short press release confirming the strike and Trump denounced Suleimani as “the number-one terrorist anywhere in the world” who was in the process of “plotting imminent and sinister attacks on American diplomats and military personnel” (The White House, 2020b). Administration members repeated the justification that Suleimani was a threat behind imminent attacks and therefore was a legitimate target (Ryan et al., 2020).

That rationale faced scrutiny, both at home and abroad, while relations between the U.S. and Iran worsened. Trump, on the other hand, appeared increasingly confident, now overruling his military advisors to make aggressive decisions. After numerous reshuffles, the national security team which early in the administration had shown resistance was now wholly aligned with Trump’s worldview and decision-making. The president abandoned his early deference to military advisors and replaced enough civilian advisors that he no longer faced resistance from them. The decision to assassinate Suleimani showed a growing trend for short deliberation and the administration’s rejection of traditional formal structures for decision-making.

## Conclusion

For two centuries, the U.S. witnessed numerous foreign policy doctrines attempting to guide international relations. Each doctrine reflected the international challenges facing a specific administration, however, common themes such as American

exceptionalism, a sense of mission—i.e., “manifest destiny”—a faith in democratic systems of government, confidence in America’s international role, and a disposition to act unilaterally underlay most foreign policy doctrines (Colucci, 2012; Crabb Jr., 1982). Over the centuries, these doctrines acquired a revered status among political officials, media, and the American public. Moreover, almost every modern president aspires to articulate a series of foreign policy principles that can be codified in a doctrine of their own.

However, while foreign policy doctrines are appealing for their simplicity and alleged acumen, research demonstrates that their influence on U.S. foreign policy-making is manifestly overstated. More importantly, confusion exists between foreign policy doctrines and strategy. Developing a national security strategy involves broad deliberation that integrates political, military, and economic considerations in defining the challenges facing the U.S., as well as its main goals and the resources and capabilities required to realize them. As Cecil Crabb Jr. (1982: p. 403) argues in his exhaustive study on America’s early foreign policy doctrines, “Admittedly, no single doctrine of American foreign policy – nor all of them collectively – can be said to constitute a comprehensive and coherent ‘philosophy’ of foreign relations.” Doctrines serve to plainly communicate an administration’s guiding principles, highlight its goals, and mobilize the public, the bureaucracy, and U.S. allies, while warning America’s adversaries of its resolve.

As the case studies confirm, Trump’s unique management style hindered the development of a coherent and consistent set of foreign policy principles. The analysis also confirms our previous claim that Trump’s mercurial personality and instinctual behavior hindered the development of a structured and comprehensive framework for guiding U.S. foreign policy and promoting America’s long-term national interest (da Vinha & Dutton, 2022). Not surprisingly, the administration struggled to rally the American people around its policies (Fagan & Mordecai, 2020). The administration’s behavior also puzzled U.S. allies which increasingly questioned America’s reliability as a partner and its commitment to existing agreements and the international order the U.S. created and led for over seven decades (Wike et al., 2020). Trump’s penchant for ad hoc decision-making also befuddled the military and diplomatic bureaucracy, keeping them guessing what the president was thinking and playing catch up with his impromptu decisions. Moreover, adversaries were not deterred from challenging America’s interests in the region and beyond, confirming the claim that “credibility requires consistency, not belligerency” (Yarhi-Milo, 2018: p. 72).

Ultimately, a sound foreign policy, which safeguards and promotes American interests, cannot rely on slogans and personal whims. As we have argued before, foreign policy decisions should be “based on an informed and judicious assessment of the challenges to America’s national interest” (da Vinha & Dutton, 2021: p. 255). This does not mean there is no place for foreign policy doctrines. The redistribution of power in the international system constantly creates new challenges for the U.S. and its allies. Surmounting these challenges requires a national security strategy capable of pragmatically assessing the emerging threats and opportunities we face. However, it also requires officials capable of articulating and communicating them

in a way that creates broad consensus, domestically and internationally, on the critical pillars underscoring America's engagement on the global stage, leaving no doubt as to the consequences for those that threaten them.

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# Ever Enough: The Policy “Deals” of Trump White House



Cassandra D. Chaney

**Abstract** The purpose of this chapter is to examine five policies put forth or created under the Donald J. Trump Administration as well as the consequences of these policies for families and the entire American citizenry. In particular, the author will examine policies related to healthcare, immigration, education, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer issues, and crime and justice. Donald Trump questioned the reliability of democratic institutions during his unconventional presidency, including the federal judiciary, the free press and the election itself. Stacked the courts with zealous conservatives, undoing Donald Trump’s damage is going to be hard work.

**Keywords** Crime and Justice · Donald J. Trump · Education · Healthcare · Immigration · LGBTQ · Policy courts, zealous conservatives · Social Welfare Programs · United States

## Introduction

### *The Policy Implications of President Donald J. Trump*

One of the most significant hallmarks of an American president is the policies that he signs into law. For example, President George Hebert Walker Bush signed the Americans with Disabilities Act, which forbade discrimination in employment, public accommodations, and transportation (National Center for Learning Disabilities, 2020a, b).<sup>1</sup> President William Jefferson “Bill” Clinton signed the Family and

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Many thanks to the anonymous reviewers for their comments and to Dr. Adebawale Akande for his professorial editorial assistance.

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<sup>1</sup>President George Herbert Walker Bush signed this law on January 26, 1990.

<sup>2</sup>President Clinton signed this law on February 5, 1993.

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Medical Leave Act (FMLA) into law, which enabled millions of workers to take up to 12 weeks unpaid leave to care for a new baby or ailing family member without jeopardizing their job (U. S. Department of Labor, 2021).<sup>2</sup> President Barack Obama established the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (ACA), colloquially known as Obamacare, which extended medical care to some 18 million uninsured Americans<sup>3</sup> (Grunwald, 2016). In this chapter, we examine six policies of President Donald J. Trump. In particular, we highlight policies related to healthcare, immigration, education, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer (LGBTQ) issues, and crime and justice.

## Background and Rationale

In the months leading up to his presidency, Trump made 282 promises (Johnson, 2016). While page constraints do not allow us to review all of these policies, we focus on Trump's most controversial policies (Simmons-Duffin, 2020; Vazquez, 2021), specifically those on which the authors have scholarly and applied knowledge, namely policies related to healthcare, immigration, education, LGBTQ issues, and crime and justice.

We will first examine Trump's position on Obamacare. Several days before his 2016 election to the presidency, Donald Trump confidently promised his voters: "*When we win on November 8th and elect a Republican Congress, we will be able to immediately repeal and replace Obamacare.*" (Scott, 2021). We will examine whether Trump was able to repeal and replace Obamacare. Second, Trump brazenly promised to build a wall to prevent illegal immigrants from entering the United States. In addition, Trump promised Mexico would pay the entire costs associated with building the wall. He stated, "*I would build a great wall, and nobody builds walls better than me, believe me, and I'll build them very inexpensively. I will build a great great wall on our southern border and I'll have Mexico pay for that wall.*" (Timm, 2021). To this day, not only is the wall not complete, but the Department of

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<sup>3</sup>President Obama signed this into law on March 23, 2010.

<sup>4</sup>1. School choice: "As president, I will establish the national goal of providing school choice to every American child living in poverty. If we can put a man on the moon, dig out the Panama Canal and win two world wars, then I have no doubt that we as a nation can provide school choice to every disadvantaged child in America." September 2016.

2. Funding his school choice plan: "If the states collectively contribute another \$110 billion of their own education budgets toward school choice on top of the \$20 billion in federal dollars, that could provide \$12,000 in school choice funds to every single K-12 student who today is living in poverty." September 2016.

3. Common Core: "I have been consistent in my opposition to Common Core. Get rid of Common Core." February 2016.

4. America's schools: "We need to fix our broken education system!" February 2016.

5. Local control of education: "Keep education local!" February 2016.

6. Government's role in education: "There's no failed policy more in need of urgent change than our government-run education monopoly." September 2016.

Homeland Security (DHS) provide several reasons why a wall between the United States and Mexico will not end crime (Brookings Felbab-Brown, 2017). Third, Trump also promised the state of education would increase (Duncombe, 2020). Although Trump made 16 comments regarding education in the United States,<sup>4</sup> we focus on the areas of sexual harassment, loan forgiveness, and gun violence. On February 27, 2016, Trump sent the following Tweet: “*We need to fix our broken education system!*” (Wright, 2016).

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7. American education in an international context: “We’re twenty-sixth in the world. Twenty-five countries are better than us at education. And some of them are like third world countries. But we’re becoming a third world country.” June 2015.

8. Higher education loans: “A four-year degree today can be expensive enough to create six-figure debt. We can’t forgive these loans, but we should take steps to help students. . . . There is no reason the federal government should profit from student loans. . . . These student loans are probably one of the only things that the government shouldn’t make money from, and yet it does. . . . Those loans should be viewed as an investment in America’s future.” November 2015.

9. The U.S. Department of Education: “No, I’m not cutting services, but I’m cutting spending. But I may cut Department of Education.” October 2015.

10. Education spending: “We’re number one in terms of cost per pupil by a factor of, worldwide, by a factor of many. Number two is so far behind, forget it.” January 2016.

11. American history: “I was listening to some Europeans once and they seemed to agree that Americans didn’t seem to know their roots. Of course, their roots go back for many more centuries than ours and may be easier to decipher because many of us have ancestors from different countries. But it gave me a reason to think about what they said, and I realized in many cases they were right.” March 2010.

12. Comprehensive education: “Comprehensive education dissolves the lines between knowing too much and knowing too little on a variety of subjects—subjects that are necessary for success.” March 2010.

13. Citizenship education: “Public education was never meant to only teach the three R’s, history, and science. It was also meant to teach citizenship. At the lower levels it should cover the basics, help students develop study habits, and prepare those who desire higher education for the tough road ahead. It’s a mandate the public schools have delivered on since their inception. Until now.” January 2000.

14. Teachers’ unions and politics: “Our public schools have grown up in a competition-free zone, surrounded by a very high union wall. Why aren’t we shocked at the results? After all, teachers’ unions are motivated by the same desires that move the rest of us. With more than 85% of their soft-money donations going to Democrats, teachers’ unions know they can count on the politician they back to take a strong stand against school choice.” January 2000..

15. Education and antitrust: “Defenders of the status quo insist that parental choice means the end of public schools. Let’s look at the facts. Right now, nine of ten children attend public schools. If you look at public education as a business—and with nearly \$300 billion spent each year on K-through-twelve education, it’s a very big business indeed—it would set off every antitrust alarm bell at the Department of Justice and the Federal Trade Commission. When teachers’ unions say even the most minuscule program allowing school choice is a mortal threat, they’re saying: If we aren’t allowed to keep 90% of the market, we can’t survive. When Bell Telephone had 90% of the market, a federal judge broke it up.” January 2000.

16. School safety and school learning: “Our schools aren’t safe, which is bad enough. On top of that, our kids aren’t learning. Too many are dropping out of school and into the street life—and too many of those who do graduate are getting diplomas that have been devalued into “certificates of attendance” by a dumbed-down curriculum that asks little of teachers and less of students. Schools are crime-ridden and they don’t teach.” January 2000.

Fourth, Trump promised to befriend the LGBTQ community, yet some assert he weakened the social position of these individuals in eight areas (Baume, 2020). Although the Republican National Convention (RNC) stated Trump took “unprecedented steps” to support the LGBTQ community, Human Rights Campaign (HRC) President Alphonso David provided this response: “*The RNC is hallucinating and advancing misleading and disingenuous rhetoric. Yes, Trump has taken many ‘unprecedented’ steps, but those steps have been to undermine and eliminate rights protecting LGBTQ people, not empower us. Appointing a small handful of gay people out of thousands of nominations and making a very few -- and unfulfilled -- pledges can hardly qualify as accomplishments. Don’t gaslight us. The Trump-Pence administration is the most virulently anti-LGBTQ administration in decades -- the RNC cannot put lipstick on a pig.*” (Human Rights Campaign, 2020). Finally, Trump promised an end to police murders, crime, and violence by promising a country built on “law and order” (Johnson, 2016). Some, however, regarded Trump’s proclamation of “law and order” as nothing more than a political dog whistle that targeted minoritized groups (i.e., Blacks and Hispanics). With regard to his claim to restore “law and order” for the nation, Trump provided the following Tweet: “*If I don’t win, “America’s Suburbs will be OVERRUN with Low Income Projects, Anarchists, Agitators, Looters and, of course, ‘Friendly Protesters.’”*” (Schwartzapfel, 2020).

### **Donald Trump and Healthcare Policies**

Leading up to his presidency, Trump announced that he would overturn the policies of the Affordable Care Act (ACA). To understand the potentially detrimental effects of Trump’s eradication of the ACA, one must understand its origin. In July 2009, Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi presented the bill, H.R. 3962 to the House of Representatives. Although many Republications opposed this bill, after alterations by the Senate, in March 2010, the bill passed and President Barack Obama signed the bill to enact the ACA. In the first 90 days, the ACA made several changes to the structure of healthcare. For example, small businesses received a tax credit for up to 35% of insurance premiums to remove some of the burden that came with providing health care benefits to employees, and previously denied individuals received a subsidy for coverage. Essentially, the ACA made it possible for millions of people to qualify for low-cost medical coverage and/or qualify under Medicaid expansion. This was a game changer for individuals in low-income communities that previously were not able to ascertain coverage.

In light of the healthcare benefits of the ACA, the Trump administration made it difficult for families to keep coverage, because changes in tax mandates and insurance premiums spiked insurance costs (Steinbrook, 2018). Limiting access to medical care by tactics of “repeal, replace, and repair” to ACA, Trump offered no alternative health care options. In particular, removing the mandate that individuals must purchase insurance or receive penalties under ACA caused insurance premiums to escalate (Steinbrook, 2018) and allowed states to deny Medicaid coverage to

unemployed individuals that were not actively seeking employment. Essentially, many healthcare strategies implemented by the Trump Administration further disenfranchised the poor and provided tax breaks for the wealthy (Dyer, 2018).

Trump promised healthcare for everyone and much lower deductibles yet only a modest amount of his time went to healthcare policies while in office. During much of his presidency, Trump followed the lead of Paul Ryan, who did not demonstrate a high level of investment in healthcare initiatives and policies. The few times that he introduced healthcare policies was to avoid a filibuster in the Senate and his efforts to repeal ACA largely failed due to his inability to introduce an adequate healthcare policy replacement (Jost, 2017). Even though Trump was able to repeal the ACA, his administration succeeded in removing several ACA polices intended to generate revenue and maintain coverage for mostly low-income racial minority groups. Essentially, Trump’s efforts to repeal certain sections of ACA caused an already struggling minority population to be restricted from affordable healthcare coverage and eligibility for Medicaid coverage (Grogan, 2017; Himmelstein & Woolhandler, 2017).

The opioid epidemic was a powerful example regarding the detrimental effects of healthcare under the Trump Administration. In 2016, more than two million Americans had an addiction to prescription or illegal opioids (The White House, n.d.). During the following year, the United States recognized this as a nationwide public health emergency. On Thursday, October 26, 2017, upon the request of President Trump, Acting Health and Human Services (HHS) Secretary Eric D. Hargan issued the following statement upon declaring a nationwide public health emergency regarding the opioid crisis:

*Today’s declaration, coupled with the President’s direction that executive agencies use all appropriate emergency authorities and other relevant authorities, is another powerful action the Trump Administration is taking in response to America’s deadly opioid crisis.*

*President Trump has made this national crisis a top priority since he took office in January, and we are proud to be leading in this effort at HHS. His call to action today brings a new level of urgency to the comprehensive strategy HHS unveiled under President Trump, which empowers the real heroes of this fight: the communities on the frontlines of the epidemic. (The U. S. Department of Health and Human Services, n.d.).*

Instead of reversing this trend, many believed Trump’s proposed Medicaid cuts would exacerbate opioid use by cutting access to treatment for individuals who are addicted (Wen et al., 2017). Not only is this an issue for healthcare, it directly relates to families of individuals with Substance Use Disorders (SUD). Lander et al’s (2013) work highlights the negative impacts on developmental tasks within the family when a member has an SUD, specifically focusing on couples that are married and do not have children, childbearing families, families with preschool children, families with school-age children, families of teenagers, families launching children, middle-aged parents, and aging family members.

SUDs among individuals that are married without children generally leads to poor communication, impairment of emotional and physical intimacy, increased conflict. SUDs among childbearing families’ leads to families that are unable to provide homes that are physically or emotionally safe, which decreases secure attachments.

SUDs among families with preschool children usually have marital conflict and engage in inconsistent parenting, possibly abuse and/or neglect their children, which usually involves Child Protective Services (CPS), and the removal of children from the home. SUDs among families with school-age children oftentimes results in the educational needs of children not being met, possible domestic violence, and conflict at home. SUDs within families of teenagers frequently results in teens following the models provided by their parent/s, which usually results in children having difficulties forming healthy peer relationships, school/legal problems, family conflict, as well as anxiety, depression, and oppositional disorders. SUDs among families launching young adults exists in the form of failure to launch children because they are unable to support themselves, which in turn, escalates relationship conflict between family members. SUDs among middle-aged parents can lead to marital conflict and adult children's disconnect from their parents and not wanting them to be around their young children. SUDs among aging family members can lead to isolation, depression can lead to SUD or vice versa (Lander et al., 2013)

Since families are a system in which the actions of one member directly affect the actions of other family members, some may feel that Trump's proposed cuts to Medicaid directly contrasted with his own family's experience with addiction. While speaking to reporters in the East Room of the White House in October 2017, he said, *"I had a brother, Fred—great guy, best-looking guy, best personality. But he had a problem. He had a problem with alcohol, and he would tell me, 'Don't drink. Don't drink.' . . . He would say it over and over and over again. I learned because of Fred. I learned. It is time to liberate our communities from this scourge of drug addiction."* While many may argue that Trump's personal connection to the opioid epidemic demonstrates empathy for all race individuals that have an addiction, others may not necessarily agree with this perspective.

Most opioid addictions are White, yet the reason for this racial discrepancy are racial stereotypes regarding Blacks.<sup>5</sup> Specifically, the stereotype that Blacks are more likely to abuse and sell prescription painkillers made healthcare providers less likely to prescribe opioids to this minoritized group. It is important to note "historical patterns of opioid use from 1993 to 2009 show a disparity between the rate of prescription opiates in white Americans (~16/100,000) and that in African Americans (~7/100,000); these values were directly correlated with opioid overdose rates (~15/100,000 for white Americans and 5/100,000 for African Americans)." (Om, 2018, p. e614). Since Whites are more likely to receive prescription opiates, they have a greater likelihood of becoming addicted to opiates than Blacks. When the drug crack ravaged poor, inner-city communities during the 1980s, law enforcement's immediate response was to criminalize Black addicts. Consequently, this tough on crime, "lock them up" stance resulted in the substantial rise of Black males in the prison industrial complex during the 1980s, and that continues today (Alexander, 2016). On the other hand, since the majority of Whites have opiate addictions, the federal government's response has been to categorize this as "America's deadly

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<sup>5</sup>The authors use the terms "African American" and "Black" interchangeably in this chapter.

opioid crisis,” and to assist individuals, who through no fault of their own, are coping with a mental health situation. Stated simply, Black addicts received prison sentences while White addicts received compassion (Powers et al., 2019). We concur with Om (2018) when she wrote, “The fact that our most recent drug crisis has disproportionately affected white Americans (nearly 90% of addicts are white) seems insidiously linked to the government response to the epidemic” (p. e615).

In 2018, Trump unveiled his Initiative to Stop Opioid Abuse, which confronted the driving forces behind the opioid crisis. This initiative had three parts. Part 1 involved reducing demand and over-prescription of drugs, including educating Americans about the dangers of opioid misuse. Part 2 involved “cutting down on the supply of illicit drugs by cracking down on the international and domestic drug supply chains that devastate American communities.” Part 3 involved providing assistance for individuals “struggling with addiction through evidence-based treatment and recovery support services.” (The White House, n.d.). The Trump Administration produced four historic actions. The first action was securing \$6 billion in new funding over a two-year window to fight opioid abuse. The second action was implementing a Safer Prescribing Plan to curb over-prescription and cut opioid prescription fills by one-third within 3 years. The third action was to fight to keep dangerous drugs out of the United States by securing land borders, ports of entry, and waterways against smuggling. The final action was the passage of the SUPPORT Act, the single largest legislative package addressing a single drug crisis in history in 2018. (The White House, n.d.).

## **Donald Trump and Immigration Policy**

There was a time when criminal law and immigration law were fundamentally distinct. This meant that if an individual committed a crime, there was a uniform enforcement of criminal law regardless of whether the person was a citizen (Arriaga, 2016). However, in 2006, the concept of “cimmigration” first emerged to explain the connection between immigration and criminal law as the practices initially used to enforce criminal laws began to criminalize both immigration and enforcement policies (Arriaga, 2016; García Hernández, 2014; Stumpf, 2006).

Since 2006, the United States federal government has increasingly engaged in policy decision-making that has resulted in the criminalization of immigration further restricting access to citizenship in the United States (Bolter et al., 2022; Cowger et al., 2017; Pierce, 2019; Pierce et al., 2018; Pierce & Selee, 2017). To understand the importance of immigration policy to American constituents, Donald Trump built his presidential campaign primarily on immigration. He did this by promising to “build a wall” to restrict entry at the Mexico-U.S. border, making extensive cuts to legal immigration, and otherwise greatly limiting the entry of refugees and those with temporary visas (Bolter et al., 2022; Pierce, 2019; Pierce et al., 2018). As a result, in 2016 Donald Trump became the first and only candidate to run and win the U. S. presidency using a presidential campaigning platform that



centered on promises to change core components of the immigration system (Bolter et al., 2022).

From the onset of his presidency, Trump made good on his campaign promises regarding immigration. During the first 100 days of his presidency, President Trump issued executive orders pertaining to (1) travel bans and refugee resettlement, (2) border security, (3) immigrant enforcement within the United States, and (4) immigration for the purposes of employment (Bolter et al., 2022; Cowger et al., 2017; Pierce, 2019; Pierce et al., 2018; Pierce & Selee, 2017). Though many of his executive orders were challenged and blocked through state court rulings, the Trump “administration set an unprecedented pace for executive action . . . [completing] 472 executive actions affecting U.S. immigration policy, with 39 more proposed but unimplemented [policies] when the administration ended” (Bolter et al., 2022, p. 1). Trump’s administration restricted entry into the United States from seven countries by executing a travel ban, partially contested during litigations, legal injunctions, and proclamations that the order violated aspects of the Constitution (Pierce & Selee, 2017). His administration then became famous for significant and sweeping changes to the interior immigrant enforcement policies, including technical changes made to immigrant and visa worker application processes (Bolter et al., 2022; Pierce et al., 2018). Enforcement policies were expanded to include not only the authorized detention of immigrants who committed crimes, but to legally detain immigrants stopped by local police and identified as undocumented thereby expanding jurisdiction and discretion of local and state law enforcement through the restoration of the Security Communities nationwide security system (Bolter et al., 2022; Pierce et al., 2018). The discretion of immigration court judges was limited in decision-making regarding deportation, asylum seeking, and the like; and the application process for visa workers. In addition, additional stipulations placed on refugees and other noncitizens increased application screening rigor for new applicants, required additional interviews for temporary guest workers, and suspended admissions for immediate family members of refugees (Pierce & Selee, 2017).

Under the Trump administration, an unprecedented expansion of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) Detention Centers occurred as ICE contracts signed with over 40 new detention facilities, totaling over 220 federal facilities across the country (American Civil Liberties Union, 2020). These facilities were located in various parts of the United States, such as San Luiz, Arizona; Honolulu, Hawaii; New Orleans, Louisiana; Reno, Nevada; Central Falls, Rhode Island; Hurricane, Utah; and El Paso, Texas (U. S. Immigration and Custom Enforcement, n.d.). Many of these facilities had the reputation of housing offenders with criminal convictions and in some cases, experienced contract terminations under previous administrations due to the abuse, maltreatment, and poor conditions of the facilities (American Civil Liberties Union, 2020). Under the Trump Administration, new detention facilities criminalized immigrants and as a result, these individuals lost all protections maintained by previous presidential administrations (Cowger et al., 2017). Executive orders under the Trump Administration removed protections instilled by previous presidential administrations whose purpose was to temporarily protect unauthorized

immigrants from deportation (e.g., Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals or DACA, Temporary Protected Status or TPS; Pierce et al., 2018) thereby increasing their vulnerability to deportation and criminal charges.

Changes to immigration policy made it difficult for refugees to seek asylum in many sanctuary cities in the United States. These changes were evident in the unprecedented reduction of refugee admissions during 2014 and 2019: There were 53,716 refugees in FY 2017, yet this number reduced to 12,154 admissions in the first 6 months of FY 2019 (Pierce, 2019). Additionally, because of the heightened restrictions and new expectations of treatment, anxieties rose as spouses and children of U.S. immigrant residents were unable to reunite with foreign loved ones (Bolter et al., 2022). Immigrants, documented, and undocumented alike, began to fear losing previously guaranteed government TPS protections and sought refuge from neighboring countries elsewhere (e.g., Haitian communities fled to Canada; Pierce, 2019). Moreover, nonimmigrants such as lower income migrant workers, students, tourists, foreign nationals, and those who obtain temporary visas to enter, visit, attend school, or work became susceptible to increased vetting during visa renewal processes. The aforementioned individuals were vulnerable to deportation if newly administered changes were not properly adhered to (Bolter et al., 2022; Cowger et al., 2017; Pierce, 2019; Pierce et al., 2018; Pierce & Selee, 2017).

### **Donald Trump and Education Policy**

When Trump took office, his mission was to undo several policies made by the previous administration. In March 2017, he overturned two Obama-era regulations, which would require federally funded teacher training programs to evaluate student performance and provide guidance for states to identify failing schools and fix them (115<sup>th</sup> Congress, 2017a, b). On April 26, 2017, Trump signed an executive order, which directed the Secretary of Education, Betsy DeVos to rescind regulations that exercise control over areas that are subject to state and local control (Executive Office of the President, 2017). Despite the drastic differences in quality of education between districts, with the poorest communities often having the worst education standards (Aikens & Barbarin, 2008; Duncombe, 2017), the Trump administration was determined to overturn any national standards established in previous administrations (Wright, 2016). This lack of a national standard led to disparities in funding, teaching practices, test scores, and literacy within different districts across the U. S. (Aikens & Barbarin, 2008).

In June 2017, under the guidance of Trump and DeVos, the Department of Education (DoE) delayed the implementation of the Borrower Defense Rule, established by the Obama administration to allow students to seek loan forgiveness in the event of fraud by a college or university (Chappell, 2017; Cowley, 2018). This decision was later determined to be “arbitrary and capricious” by Judge Randolph D. Moss, who ruled the Department must implement the rule because of a lawsuit brought on by attorney generals within 18 states and the District of Columbia (Chappell, 2017; Cowley, 2018). In October 2017, DeVos revoked 72 guidance

documents, which outlined the rights of students with disabilities under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (Balingit, 2017). In February 2018, DeVos moved to delay another Obama-era rule, which intended to prevent schools from disproportionately placing minority students in special education services (Green, 2017). In 2020, African American students were more than twice as likely to be in special education than students of other races, and the rule has still not been implemented (National Center for Learning Disabilities, 2020a, b).

**Sexual Assault on College Campuses** Sexual harassment and assault are shockingly pervasive on college and university campuses. According to recent statistics, 13% of all students experience rape or sexual assault through physical force, violence, or incapacitation (among all graduate and undergraduate students). In addition, 9.7% of female and 2.5% of male graduate and professional students experience rape or sexual assault through physical force, violence, or incapacitation. Furthermore, 26.4% of female and 6.8% of male undergraduate students experience rape or sexual assault through physical force, violence, or incapacitation, and 5.8% of students have experienced stalking since entering college. Although men and women are targets of violence on campus, sexual assault disproportionately affects college women and impedes survivors' ability to participate fully in their education (Rape, Abuse, & Incest National Network, RAINN, 2022).

On September 22, 2017, DeVos published an interim guide regarding how college campuses should handle cases of sexual misconduct. This guide focused on ensuring an "objective and impartial" investigation and ensuring that all parties involved in a sexual misconduct investigation have access to all information regarding the investigation (U. S. Department of Education, 2017, 2018). The purpose of these regulations were to protect men from false accusations of sexual assault on campus; however, opponents of the document argued this change came at the expense of sexual assault victims (Kreighbaum, 2017). Changes made under the Trump administration included stipulations the assault must have happened on school property, there must be extensive evidence, it must be "objectively offensive," and all parties must receive information about the report (Bedera, 2020). These changes arguably did nothing but create hoops for survivors to jump through to receive justice for an assault.

Trump's creation of additional barriers for victims of sexual assault is no surprise to individuals that draw attention to the numerous allegations of sexual misconduct made against Trump over the years. Perhaps the most notable among these was his lewd claim that famous men had the right to "grab them [women] by the pussy" (Levin, 2020). To date, 26 women have publicly accused Trump of sexual misconduct. Some of these actions include kissing women without their consent (E. Jean Carroll), reaching his hands up their skirts and touching their vaginas without their consent (Jessica Leeds), touching their buttocks without consent (Melinda "Mindy" McGillivray), and brazenly ogling them as they were changing (and oftentimes nude) and/or getting dressed for the Miss America pageant (Tasha Dixon) (Relman, 2020). Although Trump categorically denied every accusation made against him (Relman, 2020), many would no doubt believe that his wanton disrespect and

disregard for women make him a poor spokesperson for sexual assault against women.

**Addressing Gun Violence in Schools** In February 2018, Trump hosted a listening session where he made suggestions to reduce school violence, including improved background checks, increasing the age of purchasing a firearm to 21, opening residential mental health institutions, arming school personnel with firearms, and ending active shooter drills (Taylor, 2018). In March 2018, he proposed a plan to establish the Federal Commission on School Safety (FCSS) to investigate school violence and provide recommendations to enhance school safety (Bender, 2018; FCSS, 2021; White House Archives, 2018). On March 14, 2018, the House passed the STOP School Violence Act, which proposed providing for enhanced training for law enforcement and school staff, an anonymous reporting system for suspicious activity, and school threat assessment and crisis intervention teams (115th Congress, 2018). Notably, there was no mention of gun restrictions in the Act. In December 2021, the FCSS, led by DeVos, released their final report, which included recommendations such as reducing access to violent media, improving mental health screening for children, storing firearms safely, improving campus security, specialized safety training, and improving and utilizing the FBI hotline (FCSS, 2021). The commission found no evidence to put age restrictions on firearm purchases but maintained that active shooter drills are essential, claiming that, although MSDHS had an active shooter drill just 6 weeks before the shooting, the number of casualties “could have been higher” without this drill (FCSS, 2021).

Despite evidence that most mass shooters purchase their guns legally (National Institute of Justice, 2022); most of the deadliest mass shootings in the U.S. involve handguns or semi-automatic rifles. According to the National Institute of Justice (2022), the majority of individuals that engaged in mass shootings used handguns (77.2%), and 25.1% used assault rifles. In addition, “of the known mass shooting cases (32.5% of cases could not be confirmed), 77% of those who engaged in mass shootings purchased at least some of their guns legally, while illegal purchases were made by 13% of those committing mass shootings. In cases involving K-12 school shootings, over 80% of individuals who engaged in shootings stole guns from family members” (National Institute of Justice, 2022). In addition, while gun restrictions have reduced mass shootings in other developed nations, the Trump administration did not include gun restrictions in any of the recommended changes (115<sup>th</sup> Congress, 2018; Statista Research Department, 2022). Unfortunately, since the implementation of these changes, there have been numerous school shootings across the country, most notably the massacre at Robb Elementary School in Uvalde, Texas, where 19 students and 2 teachers were murdered (Despart, 2022). During this tragic incident, the shooter legally purchased an AR-15 style rifle at 18 years old, and despite extensive training, the police did not enter the classroom for 74 min after arriving on the scene (Despart, 2022; Hernandez & Diaz, 2022; Oxner, 2022; Winter, 2022).

In the wake of this tragedy, Trump’s position on guns has not changed. In fact, 3 days after the Uvalde school massacre, Trump resisted new gun restrictions,

advocating instead for increased mental health services and school security measures. While speaking during a National Rifle Association (NRA) convention in Houston after the shooting in Uvalde renewed attention on the nation's gun laws, Trump acknowledged the "heinous massacre" that was "horrible" to see, watch and hear about, yet chastised Democrats for promoting an "extreme political agenda." He further stated, "*Now is the time to find common ground. Sadly, before the sun had even set on the horrible day of tragedy, we witnessed a now familiar parade of cynical politicians seeking to exploit the tears of sobbing families to increase their own power and take away our constitutional rights.*" (Zhang, 2022).

### **Donald Trump and the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBTQ) Community**

Trump's presidency and administration had several consequences for the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBTQ) community. For example, LGBTQ people experienced a rise in mental and emotional distress when compared to non-LGBTQ people (Daftary et al., 2020; Kuroki, 2021; Gonzalez et al., 2018b). In fact, LGBTQ people had a 3.8 percentage point increase in mental and emotional distress after Trump's presidency became an actual possibility in 2016 (Kuroki, 2021). Additionally, the LGBTQ community experienced a culture of discrimination after Trump's election (Daftary et al., 2020) and some LGBTQ individuals experienced family discord and social alienation post-Trump's election (Gonzalez et al., 2018a).

Scholars and researchers assert the LGBTQ community experiences various forms of oppression, subjugation, exploitation, and manipulation, namely political pandering, de-democratization, political homophobia, and homonationalism under the Trump administration. During Trump's run for election, he pandered to the LGBTQ community (Moreau, 2018). Political pandering refers to a campaigning tactic of appealing to popular public opinions and subgroups to secure votes and political support (Trombetta, 2020). First, former President Trump promised to be a "real friend" of the gay community (Diamond, 2016; Moreau, 2018). Second, former President Trump's former press secretary Sean Spicer published a book with supportive LGBT statements in late July 2018. This book carried the favor of Robert Sinners, a delegate from Washington, D.C. (Browning, 2018; Moreau, 2018). Third, while standing on stage, Former President Trump held a rainbow flag with the words *LGBTs for Trump* (Lambert, 2016; Moreau, 2018). Fourth, Former President Trump sold the rainbow-colored *Pride Men's Tee* with the slogan *LGBT for Trump* via his campaigning website. However, upon inauguration, former President Trump and his administration immediately removed their public support of the LGBT community from [whitehouse.gov](http://whitehouse.gov) (Oppenheim, 2017).

De-Democratization is the destruction of liberal democracy (Tilly, 2007) and entails 'net movement toward narrower, more unequal, less protected, and less binding consultation (Tilly, 2007, p. 14).' President Trump engaged in de-democratization by reversing many of former President Barack Obama's policies

that protected the rights of LGBT individuals (Frum, 2017; Huq & Ginsburg, 2017; Moreau, 2018). For example, Former President Trump denounced transgender military troops’ rights to serve. On July 26, 2017, Former President Trump tweeted that transgender service members are a burden and will not be “accept[ed] or allow [ed]” in the U.S. military (Engel Bromwich, 2017). On July 26, 2017, Former President Trump signed a directive to ban transgender individuals from serving in the military. Former President Trump reversed the LGBT antidiscrimination, which left the transgender population vulnerable to discrimination and harassment in the workplace (Oppenheim, 2017).

For many, the basis of Trump’s statements regarding members of the LGBT community are political homophobia, or the use of anti-LGBT sentiment to gain political support (Corrales & Kiryk, 2022; Moreau, 2018; Reed, 2021). Trump and his administration openly made anti-queer, homophobic, and transphobic statements (Mahler, 2018). For example, Former President Trump spoke during the annual conference of an anti-LGBT group, a classified hate group (Oppenheim, 2017). The Family Research Council consists of conservative Christians who oppose same-sex marriage, same-sex civil unions, and LGBT adoption. Former Vice President Mike Pence has a history of political homophobia when he occupied the role as the US Congressman and Governor of Indiana (Girard, 2017). For example, in March 2015, Mike Pence signed the Indiana bill known as the Religious Freedom Restoration Act, which allowed businesses to refuse services or goods to LGBTQ people for religious reasons (Girard, 2017).

Homonationalism is a process through which certain LGBT members gain acceptance, while racialized others do not receive acceptance and scholars posit Trump’s administration excludes LGBT members who are people of color or transgender (Moreau, 2018; Puar, 2007). For example, Former President Trump failed to acknowledge the Latinx LGBT hate crime victims at the Pulse Nightclub on June 12, 2016. Instead of acknowledging the attack of victims due to their sexual orientation, Trump omitted this detail, discussing the tragedy as if all victims were White (Randell-Moon, 2022). Further, Trump’s administration conveys LGBT people as victims of the racialized “others.” For example, Trump expressed anti-Muslim rhetoric during the Republican National Convention and justified his actions by stating it was in defense of LGBT victims (Moreau, 2018; Politico, 2016).

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<sup>6</sup>June 25, 2020: House passes Justice in Policing Act

June 24, 2020: Senate motion to begin debate on Justice Act fails

December 20, 2018: House passes FIRST STEP Act, Trump signs into law

December 18, 2018: Senate passes FIRST STEP Act

November 14, 2018: Trump backs FIRST STEP Act

May 22, 2018: House passes bill to reduce recidivism

April 11, 2018: Trump signs online sex trafficking bill

## Donald Trump and Federal Policy on Crime and Justice

Trump's presidency resulted in several policies related to crime and justice.<sup>6</sup> This section of the chapter will focus on three of these policies, namely the George Floyd Justice in Policing Act, the Justice Act, and the FIRST STEP Act.

Over the past several decades, members of law enforcement have murdered an increasing number of unarmed African Americans (Chaney & Robertson, 2013, 2015; Embrick, 2015; Hall et al., 2016; Smith Lee & Robinson, 2019). The media's attention on these murders greatly intensified when Derek Chauvin, a White former Minnesota Police Officer knelt on the neck of George Floyd, a Black man for 8 min and 46 s on May 26, 2020 (Hill et al., 2020). In the wake of the national and international attention that this murder received, the House passed HR 7120, the George Floyd Justice in Policing Act, by a vote of 236-181. The bill proposed nine things. The first proposal related to banning chokeholds at the federal level. The second proposal related to banning no-knock warrants at the federal level. The third proposal involved limiting qualified immunity as a defense for law enforcement officers. The fourth proposal involved lowering "the criminal intent standard—from willful to knowing or reckless—to convict a law enforcement officer for misconduct in a federal prosecution." The fifth proposal involved requiring states to "report data on use-of-force incidents." The sixth proposal involved requiring officers to have implicit bias and racial profiling training. The seventh proposal involved making lynching a federal crime. The eighth proposal involved limiting the transfer of military equipment to local police departments. The final proposal involved requiring officers to wear body cameras (Behrmann & Santucci, 2021).

While Congressional Black Caucus Chair Karen Bass (D-Calif.), the bill's sponsor, praised the passage of the bill,<sup>7</sup> President Trump opposed the bill, stating, "They want to take away a lot of the strength from our police and from law enforcement generally, and we can't live with it. We can't live with it." Although Trump claimed the bill would diminish the strength of law enforcement, the passage of this bill could

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March 20, 2018: Sessions issues memo on using death penalty in drug-related cases

March 7, 2018: Trump issues executive order establishing the Federal Interagency Council on Crime Prevention and Improving Reentry

July 25, 2017: Sessions announces criminal justice grant requirement changes

July 19, 2017: Sessions announces revised policy on civil asset forfeiture

May 10, 2017: Sessions issues memo on mandatory minimum sentences

May 9, 2017: Trump fires FBI Director James Comey

February 10, 2017: Trump signs three crime and public safety executive orders

November 2016: Trump's "Contract with the American Voter"

<sup>7</sup>"Today's bipartisan passage of the George Floyd Justice in Policing Act in the House is not just a victory for the Congressional Black Caucus and its founding members who first championed legislation to address the issue of police brutality. This is a victory for our entire country. For far too long, Black Americans have endured systemic racism and discrimination—especially from police. Congress may have written this bill, but the people own it. Now that this historic bill has passed the House, we call upon our colleagues in the Senate to commit to a good faith negotiation on the provisions put forward by the House in the George Floyd Justice in Policing Act."



have decreased the likelihood that African Americans would be racially profiled (i.e., Philando Castille), die by illegal chokeholds (i.e., Eric Garner), or no-knock warrants (i.e., Breonna Taylor). Furthermore, requiring that police officers complete implicit bias and racial profiling training could make these officers more aware of how they think, feel, and behave toward minoritized groups (James, 2018; Price & Payton, 2017). Another act sought to provide federal incentives to law enforcement agencies that enhance the physical, economic, and social well-being of Black communities.

**The Justice Act** In light of the historical and contemporary acrimonious relationship between Blacks and members of law enforcement (Chaney & Robertson, 2013, 2015), in 2021, The Justice Act sought to “help bridge the gap between law enforcement and communities by increasing training, transparency, and accountability.” This act sought to do this by awarding federal grants to state and local police departments that banned the use of chokeholds, reported data about uses of force and no-knock warrants, required officers to wear body cameras, and trained officers to de-escalate situations. Additionally, the bill proposed making lynching a federal crime, increasing penalties for false police reports, increasing access to police records for hiring decisions, and increasing minority hiring. It also proposed creating a commission to investigate issues facing Black men and boys, and a commission to review the U.S. criminal justice system (Turner, 2020).

#### *Law Enforcement Reform*

- The JUSTICE Act strengthens the training methods and tactics throughout law enforcement jurisdictions, especially regarding de-escalation of force and the duty to intervene, providing law enforcement with new funding to do so, and will also end the practice of utilizing chokeholds.
- Additionally, the bill will reform hiring practices by providing more resources to ensure the makeup of police departments more closely matches the communities they serve.
- The JUSTICE Act also ensures when a candidate is interviewed, the department looking to hire will have access to their prior disciplinary records.

Too often, after a tragic incident, we have learned the offending officer had a disciplinary past in another jurisdiction of which their current employer was unaware

#### *Accountability*

- Studies show that when body cameras are properly used violent encounters decrease significantly.
- The JUSTICE Act will put more body cameras on the streets and ensure that departments are both using the cameras and storing their data properly.
- JUSTICE also requires a report establishing best practices for the hiring, firing, suspension, and discipline of law enforcement officers.

#### *Transparency*

- Currently, only about 40 percent of police officers from jurisdictions nationwide report to the FBI after an incident where an officer has discharged his or her weapon or used force.
- The bill will require full reporting in these two areas.
- There is also very little data as to when, where, and why no knock warrants are used, and the JUSTICE Act will require reporting in this area as well.



*Additional Steps*

- The JUSTICE Act will finally make lynching a federal crime.
- It also creates two commissions to study and offer solutions to a broader range of challenges facing black men and boys, and the criminal justice system as a whole.

Given the increasing number of African Americans that have died at the hands of police (Chaney & Robertson, 2015; Hawkins, 2022; Singletary, 2022), Blacks were more likely to report both personal and vicarious experiences and were less trusting of and satisfied with police (Pickett et al., 2022; Pryce & Gainey, 2022). In addition to receiving harsh treatment, many Blacks have concerns regarding the lack of accountability and transparency that exists within offices of law enforcement (Robertson & Chaney, 2019).

Since most African Americans do not feel protected by the police, The JUSTICE Act would have been a monumental first step to help Blacks have more trust in police. During a speech on the Senate floor after the bill failed to move forward, Sen. Tim Scott (R-S.C.), the bill's sponsor, shared his personal experiences as a Black man with law enforcement and his choice to spearhead the bill. He said, *"I'm the person in our conference who has experienced firsthand racial discrimination, racial profiling by law enforcement, and I'm still a fan because I believe most law enforcement officers are good. ...This is an issue for every poor kid growing up in every poor neighborhood in this nation who feels like when I leave my home for a jog, I might not come back."* Scott also discussed the defeat of his bill saying, *"Today, we lost a vote on a piece of legislation that would have led to systemic change in the relationship between communities of color and the law enforcement community. We would have broken the concept in this nation that you have to be for law enforcement or for communities of color. That is a false binary choice."* (T. Scott, Press Release, Wednesday, June 24, 2020).

Even though The Justice Act presented to Congress after Trump left office, it is important to note his position on violence against Black bodies *during his time in office*. During a press conference on Tuesday, July 14, 2020, Trump dismissed outrage over police murders of Black people and made comparisons by saying "more white people" die by police than Black people. When asked in an interview with CBS News regarding the frequency police have murdered African Americans, Trump states, *"So are white people! So are white people! What a terrible question to ask."* (Montanaro, 2020).

**FIRST STEP Act** On December 20, 2018, President Trump signed S 756—the First Step Act of 2018—by a vote of 358—36 into law. Formally known as the Formerly Incarcerated Reenter Society Transformed Safely Transitioning Every Person Act (FIRST STEP), this bipartisan criminal justice bill passed by the 115th Congress reforms lifetime mandatory minimum sentencing by giving a judge more discretion when sentencing nonviolent repeat drug offenders, making the Fair Sentencing Act retroactive. It also provided prisoners with drug treatment programs, vocational and educational training and instruction, the ability to earn credit for early release, and made it possible for inmates to be closer to family and friends, thus allowing easier and more frequent visitations (Grawert, 2020).

There are three reasons why the FIRST STEP Act is particularly beneficial for African Americans. First, from the 1980s until now, most African Americans are in prison for nonviolent, drug offenses, and many of these individuals are Black women (Bush-Baskette, 1998; Leslie, 2022). This act could simultaneously decrease the number of African Americans incarcerated for such offenses and increase the number of African Americans that receive credit for early releases. Second, drug treatment programs and vocational and education training and instruction can help integrate formerly incarcerated African Americans into society (Liu & Visher, 2021; Riggs, 2022). Thus, because they are drug free and attain valuable education and skill sets, they are in a better position to establish and maintain healthy relationships with individuals within and outside of their families. Finally, being in closer proximity to family and friends can enhance the parent–child bond between incarcerated African Americans and their children (Carretero-Trigo et al., 2021). Essentially, the FIRST STEP Act gives African Americans and other minoritized communities the opportunity to monitor their behavior, increase their self-efficacy, and strengthen Black families and communities by making it possible for formerly incarcerated African Americans to become valuable members of their communities.

## Conclusion

This chapter examined five of Trump’s policies, specifically those related to healthcare, immigration, education, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender (LGBT) issues, and crime and justice. These policies were highly controversial (Simmons-Duffin, 2020; Vazquez, 2021) because they highlighted inherent pressures within and between political parties as well as tensions between protecting the rights of individuals and society, in general. Trump was unsuccessful in his attempt to repeal and replace the Affordable Care Act (ACA), and during early 2022, approximately 35 million people have enrolled in ACA-supported healthcare coverage. These record numbers are only part of the large impact the ACA continues to have on healthcare insurance, Medicaid, and Medicare coverage (Davalon, 2022). Due to the record number of Americans that have ACA-supported healthcare, many individuals that have SUDs will receive the treatment that is necessary to overcome their addictions.

For almost 20 years, the United States has heightened policies to criminalize immigrants seeking citizenship in the United States (Bolter et al., 2022; Cowger et al., 2017; Pierce, 2019; Pierce et al., 2018; Pierce & Selee, 2017). Trump is unique in this respect because he is the only president that built his presidential campaign primarily on immigration (Bolter et al., 2022). His promise of “building a wall” infused nationalism within those that perceive individuals who are not American as a

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<sup>8</sup>The assault must have happened on school property, there must be extensive evidence, it must be “objectively offensive,” and all parties must receive information about the report (Bedera, 2020).

threat. His strict policy on immigration substantially reduced the number of refugees entering the country as well as those with temporary visas (Bolter et al., 2022; Pierce, 2019; Pierce et al., 2018). Trump's policies in the educational arena saw mixed results: (1) African Americans still overwhelmingly make up special-education classes; (2) sexual assault victims on college campuses have to go through additional barriers to receive justice<sup>8</sup>; and (3) protecting the second amendment takes precedence over restricting guns in schools (115<sup>th</sup> Congress, 2018; Zhang, 2022). In addition, while Trump sought to appeal to the LGBTQ community during his presidential campaign (Moreau, 2018; Trombetta, 2020), upon securing office, he denounced transgender military troops' rights to serve (Engel Bromwich, 2017) and reversed LGBT anti-discrimination, which left the transgender population vulnerable to discrimination and harassment within and outside of the workplace (Oppenheim, 2017). Finally, in light of the many Blacks that have lost their lives to police violence (Chaney & Robertson, 2015; Hawkins, 2022; Singletary, 2022), the Trump administration was unable to pass legislation that could have helped rebuild the decades of mistrust that most Blacks historically and contemporaneously have for law enforcement (Robertson & Chaney, 2019). As previously mentioned, the George Floyd Justice in Policing Act could have created and fostered systemic change within law enforcement agencies. In addition, the FIRST STEP Act had the potential to increase the self-efficacy, economic viability, and social connectedness of formerly incarcerated African Americans to their families and communities. For many, the foundation of the United States government is that all humans have the inalienable right to pursue "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" (Klingner, 2021). However, since these are abstract concepts, Trump's supporters and detractors will have different opinions regarding whether Trump helped Americans move closer to these ideals or farther away from them.

Taken together, Donald Trump questioned the authority of democratic institutions during his presidency, including the free press, the federal court, and the electoral system itself. Republicans and Democrats under Trump's presidency could only agree on a few things, one of which was that they didn't agree on the same set of facts. On the other hand, many scientists and policy experts, believed reversing Trump administration policy will also be challenging due to the fact that the administration utilized its remaining time in office to establish more procedural water-tight barriers to protect its bad policies from being overturned. Moreover, Trump has filled the courts with ardent conservatives who perceive Biden administration with distrust and who are unlikely to take a favorable view of their new policies and perspectives.

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**Part IV**  
**Trump and World Order: Trends**  
**in Polarization and Resilience**

# Polarization, Trump, and Transatlantic Relations



Gabriella Bolstad and Marianne Riddervold

**Abstract** The 2016 victory of Donald J. Trump as the president of the United States caused a scholarly debate about the future of transatlantic relations. This chapter adds to this debate by exploring the tie between US domestic and foreign policy under the Trump administration. We also discuss the long-term implications of US domestic political changes for transatlantic relations. We argue that the long-term trend is that the US and Europe indeed might be drifting further apart—despite the recent strong cooperation witnessed in response to Russia’s war in Ukraine. Three arguments underlie this claim. First, domestic changes in the US imply that the Trump presidency was the culmination of a trend rather than its cause. Second, Trump’s presidency also had a long-term impact on relations across the Atlantic by reducing Europeans’ trust in the US’ commitment to Europe. And third, structural factors serve to further strengthen this trend, with the US in the longer term being more concerned with balancing a growing China than securing the European continent. In the chapter, we explore recent years’ polarization of US domestic politics, as well as the link between increasing domestic fragmentation and US foreign policies.

**Keywords** Transatlantic relations · China · United States · Donald Trump · Domestic Politics · Populism · EU-US Relations/Cooperation · World Trade Organization · NATO · Polarization · EU · European Union · USA

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## Introduction

The transatlantic relationship has been one of the most enduring of all international alliances grounded in shared interests, values, and interdependence through a web of institutions (Alcaro et al., 2016; Ikenberry, 2018; Smith, 2018). It is not surprising, therefore, that the 2016 victory of Donald J. Trump as the president of the United States (US) led to a scholarly debate about whether the transatlantic relationship is changing, and in particular whether there is a long-term weakening of this relationship (see among others Abelson & Brooks, 2022; Peterson, 2018; Riddervold & Newsome, 2018, 2022; Smith, 2018). While some authors argue that the relationship remains strong, not least due to a high level of interdependencies between the Atlantic partners (Abelson & Brooks, 2022; Ikenberry, 2018), others have argued that the Trump presidency—being an expression of already existing anti-globalization and polarization trends rather than the cause of it—has waned transatlantic relations.

In this chapter, we add to this debate by exploring the tie between US domestic and foreign policy under the Trump administration and discussing the long-term implications of US domestic political changes for transatlantic relations. We argue that the long-term trend is that the US and Europe indeed might be drifting further apart—despite the recent strong cooperation witnessed in response to Russia’s war in Ukraine.

Three arguments underlie this claim. First, and most importantly for the argument made in this chapter, domestic changes in the US imply that the Trump presidency was the culmination of a trend where “political actors in the United States are no longer as committed to maintaining US global leadership in foreign affairs” (Newsome & Riddervold, 2022). Thus, although the Biden administration has been a stronger supporter of the transatlantic relationship, US domestic polarization suggests that we will see a US that continues to be less engaged in Europe than during the Cold War and the first two decades that followed. Second, Trump’s presidency also had a long-term impact on relations across the Atlantic by reducing Europeans’ trust in this commitment. In fact, Anderson (2021) has referred to the Trump presidency as a transatlantic crisis for Europeans given the shock it caused for a continent who until then had taken a close relationship to the US as a given. The Trump presidency was particularly challenging as it questioned the very foundation of the liberal international order on which both the transatlantic relationship and the European integration project itself were built (see Zakaria, 2017). After Trump, the Europeans painstakingly know that this support cannot be taken as a given anymore and that in a polarized domestic context, US support can change again following a presidential, or even parliamentary, election (Anderson, 2021). And third, structural factors serve to further strengthen this trend, with the US in the longer term being more concerned with balancing a growing China than securing the European continent.

To make the argument that US domestic dynamics serve to weaken transatlantic relations this chapter is organized as follows. First, we briefly define some of our key

concepts and present our framework, which is based on Risse's (2016) understanding of the transatlantic security community. The framework distinguishes four largely overlapping factors that according to Risse (2016) determine the state of transatlantic relations, namely interests, interdependence, institutions, and identities (referred to as "the four Is"). Our analysis is then conducted in three steps. We first look at the broader picture, briefly describing the historical relevance of the transatlantic relationship, how it has withstood previous setbacks and why scholars argue that the "Trump-crisis" nonetheless pose a more serious challenge to the Atlantic partnership than previous challenges. Here we explore the existing literature to systematically tease out the factors that serve to uphold a stable, or in the words of Abelson and Brooks (2022) "resilient" transatlantic relationship on the one hand, and the factors that researchers argue serve to weaken transatlantic relations on the other. We then move on to in more detail discussing one of these weakening factors in depth, namely recent years' polarization of US domestic politics, as well as the link between increasing domestic fragmentation, US foreign policies, and the four factors that determine the state of the transatlantic relationship. As we will show in our analysis, polarization affects all these factors—Interests, Interdependence, Institutions and Identities — suggesting that we indeed see a longer term impact of this trend on transatlantic relations. We end by discussing what our findings imply in the longer term, also discussing other structural factors "and how they interlink with domestic factors.

## Background

### *Strength of Transatlantic Relations: Definitions and Analytical Framework*

Although *transatlantic relations* involve all relations between North America (Canada and the US) and Europe, by transatlantic relations we here refer to the overall set of relations between European states and the US, "within the broader framework of the institutional and other connections maintained via NATO and other institutions" (Smith, 2018, p. 539). After almost 80 years of cooperation, the transatlantic relationship today forms the core of a US-led system of security alliances, multilateral institutions, and an open economy, that is commonly referred to as the "liberal international order" or the "American order" (Ikenberry, 2018). With strong support from the US from the very beginning, the European side of the relationship has also increasingly become much more integrated and has eventually become synonymous with the EU. Because of this, most scholars of transatlantic relations either explore transatlantic security relations in NATO or they study EU-US cooperation in various formal and informal settings, both bilaterally and in other institutions such as the UN.

The concept of *polarization* is used in a variety of ways and can also be categorized into more specific types. Klein (2020) refers to ideologically differences and describes polarization as the divergence of attitudes around two poles and away from the center. Polarization often leads to partisanship meaning a strong adherence to a political party paralleled with a negative view of an opposing party. In this chapter, we use the terminology of *political polarization* to describe situations where policy and ideological differences between the Democratic and Republican parties have grown further apart over the years (McCarty, 2019). We also specifically separate *elite* and *mass* polarization which refers to polarization among office holders and the public. We are primarily focusing on elite polarization, but will also include examples of mass polarization, as they both influence US policymaking. Polarization among the political elite (for example, party leaders and other decision makers) also tends to further polarize the public and vice versa. Consequently, this depicts the US stuck in a downward spiral that might be difficult to reverse (Kertzer et al., 2020; Smeltz, 2022).

To systematically explore how polarization under Trump and beyond affects the transatlantic relationship we draw on Risse's (2016) security community framework, which distinguishes four largely overlapping categories by which the state of the transatlantic relationship can be assessed at any one time: interests, interdependence, institutions, and identities. This framework is particularly relevant for understanding if and how domestic trends in the US affect transatlantic relations since it starts from the constructivist idea that ideas and perceptions can affect foreign policies and relations, and hence allows for the exploration of factors beyond economic and strategic interests. As defined above, polarization is largely about perception—about increasingly diverging ideas about what constitute appropriate policies, including in the foreign policy domain. Rather than seeing interests as given, a constructivist security community approach starts from the assumption that interests are socially constructed and hence “closely related to collective identities and values held by a community or group or community” (Risse, 2016, p. 23). While a realist approach would argue that structural power relations determine the transatlantic relationship and hence that it is mainly a security alliance (Waltz, 2000), a neo-liberal perspective instead assume that overlapping interests and the level of economic interdependencies between Europe and the US determine the extent to which it remains strong (or not) (Ikenberry, 2018). By starting from a constructivist perspective, Risse, however, adds two other and at the outset equally, important factors, namely institutions and identities, and show how also interests and interdependencies are formed by actors' perceptions, values, and ideas. By applying this framework to study the impact of polarization on transatlantic relations, we are hence able to explore not only how US polarization is linked to the category of identity, as is often the case in the literature, but also how it in fact also affects US interests and policymakers' perceptions of the value of common institutions, interdependencies and community across the Atlantic. When we in this chapter study the link between US domestic polarization and the transatlantic relationship, we discuss how increasingly diverging elite and mass perceptions of US interests, threats, allies and not least

international cooperation and international institutions potentially affect US foreign policy and relations with Europe.

*Interests* are “expression of preferences held by political actors over states of the world (preferences over outcomes) or the means to achieve goals (preferences over strategies)” (Risse, 2016, p. 23). As argued also by Risse, there has always been disagreement over interests across the Atlantic. After all, the very idea of international organizations is to deal with disagreements. However, both the US and Europe have agreed on certain core interests, such as the value of international trade, a strong security cooperation in particular related to Russia during the Cold War, an interest in securing a multilateral world order to create economic and strategic stability, and not least the value of a strong transatlantic relationship as such. There has traditionally also been much agreement internally in the US on these key foreign policy issues. Polarization may affect this transatlantic interest overlap if we see more divergence over US foreign policy preferences and threat perceptions.

*Interdependencies* are interactive relationships that are “costly to break” (Keohane & Nye 1977). Due among other things to a number of overlapping, not least economic and strategic interests, Europe and the US have developed a high level of economic interdependence through long term exchanges and cooperation. A continued high level of interdependence is hence also likely to contribute to a strong relationship over time (Ikenberry, 2018). Interdependencies will also affect actors’ interests and their identities. However, as argued by Risse, interdependence without institutions is not a strong glue in transatlantic relations. Instead, a continued high level of interdependence “hinges on its institutional framework” as well as on a certain level of shared values and identities’ (Risse, 2016, p. 31).

*Institutions* are “persistent rule structures that prescribe appropriate behavior and enable or constrain behavior” (Risse, 2016, p. 24) and can be formal (such as NATO) or informal (such as established patterns of cooperation within multilateral institutions). Within such institutions, policymakers act on the basis of existing path-dependent habits and internalized norms of behavior. Thus, “institutions not only solve collective action problems but translate common interests and collective identities into stable normative expectations and patterned behavior” (Risse, 2016, p. 24). If polarization leads to less agreement in the US on the value of economic cooperation and common institutions and norms, it is hence also likely to affect the strength of the transatlantic relationship. Institutions are also important to keep political competition within bounds. Extensive political polarization may thus also harm institutions that are essential to uphold democracy.

*Identities* are “collective expressions of what is special about a particular group” (Risse, 2016, p. 26). Since security communities are, in Risse’s words, “imagined communities,” collective identities are usually constructed with references to common values, shared historical experiences, collective institutions, and the like. “While identities are constitutive for groups and communities, they can vary in terms of strength and contestation” (Risse, 2016, p. 26). A strong feeling of communality and a high level of shared values will hence contribute to a stronger transatlantic relationship. Increasingly, diverging values and a more isolationist

rhetoric expressed through more polarized debate would instead suggest that the common identities and shared value base may be weakening.

Importantly, our focus on US domestic polarization does not imply that we argue that polarization in the US is *the* most important factor for understanding the transatlantic relationship at any one time. To the contrary, we have no way of concluding on the relative importance of various factors based on our analysis. If wanting to tease out what factors matter more than others, we would have to explore the relative importance of theoretically deduced hypotheses through in-depth empirical analysis, for example through interviews with a wide number of elites. It is also questionable whether one from an epistemological perspective really can quantify the relative impact of various factors for understanding particular IR developments (Hedström & Swedberg, 2007). What we want to do in this chapter, however, is to discuss how polarization plays into US foreign policy and hence the transatlantic relationship, and to do this, we discuss how it plays into the four Is identified by Risse.

## ***Transatlantic Relations***

In the following, we analyze the development of transatlantic relations and in particular the impact of polarization and the Trump presidency in three steps. We first draw on recent studies to illustrate how various scholars argue that the four Is underpinning transatlantic relations either remain strong or are weakening. We then move on to a more detailed discussion how domestic US polarization plays into all four of these categories, before discussing how polarization expressed by the Trump presidency in particular has played into US foreign policy and transatlantic relations.

### **The Transatlantic Relationship: Continuity and Change**

The transatlantic partnership has known a handful of moments that were believed to be fraught with the potential to seriously damage the relationship, like German rearmament, DeGaulle's presidency in France, the Balkan Wars, and the Iraq war. Trump's presidency thus was the latest in a long history punctuated by moments of doubt and serious questioning about the future of the transatlantic relationship. Historically, the transatlantic relationship has withstood these challenges due to the strong web of institutions, structural and economic interdependencies, and common interests and identities that have developed between the two since the Second World War (Anderson et al., 2008; Risse, 2016). No other regions are today as interconnected as North America and Europe—politically, economically, institutionally, and in terms of security relations. In recent years, an increasing number of studies now discuss whether this historically unique relationship is changing and in particular whether it is weakening (Abelson & Brooks, 2022; Alcaro



et al., 2016; Anderson, 2018; Fahey, 2023; Peterson, 2018; Riddervold & Newsome, 2018; Smith, 2018).

On the one hand, several studies find that the relationship remains strong and argue that it for various reasons will continue to remain so, also with a changing US administration. A strong and shared economic interest in the transatlantic relationship and the liberal order more broadly is, for example, why Ikenberry expects the relationship to remain strong also in the future (Ikenberry, 2018). Following Ikenberry, a high level of globalization, interdependence, and a common interest in open, well-functioning markets create a push for cooperation in search of efficient solutions to common challenges (Ikenberry, 2018; Riddervold & Newsome, 2022). Scholars have also underlined how the strong role of the dollar creates dependencies that serve to uphold a strong relationship. Due to strong interdependencies, the US central bank saved the Euro during the financial crises of 2008 and the one caused by the COVID-19 pandemic just more than a decade later (Hjertaker & Tranøy, 2022). Other scholars have instead pointed to the values and ideas (identities) that the two traditional partners continue to share and to the extensive formal and informal networks and institutions that still bind the US and Europe together at various levels. As Poli (2023) notes, only the Western states have human rights sanctions regimes integrated into their foreign policies, and the US and the EU continue to be the main promoters of such values externally. Others argue that there is little evidence to suggest that there is a wide value gap across the Atlantic or argue that there are bigger value gaps between some of the European countries, or even across different US states, than between the US and the EU (Abelson & Brooks, 2022). Studies that find that various informal institutions in the form of networks serve to uphold the relationship include studies of epistemic communities (Cross, 2022), parliamentary cooperation (Dunne, 2023), various forms of bilateral EU-US relations (Raube & Rubio, 2022), feelings of communality and empathy (Dunne, 2023; Terpan & Fahey, 2023), transatlantic NGOs, and informal interaction in different formal international organizations (Abelson & Brooks, 2022), to mention but a few. The very existence of already established institutions moreover enables the traditional partners to come together in a crisis, as we have seen after 24 February 2022, in NATO and in a close relationship between the EU and the US. In sum, without doubt, a number of factors still serve to uphold a stable transatlantic relationship, and these ties are not likely to disappear any time soon.

But although the jury is still out, an increasing number of scholars, however, seem to argue that the overall trend points to a weakening of the relationship if compared to what we have become used to since the US established the American order. It is, after all, not long ago that the Europe and the United States faced another global crisis, the COVID-19, without the two traditional partners finding together in a common response. The pandemic was the first time that the US did not take the lead in solving a global crisis together in common institutions with its European partners. Which crisis is more telling of future relations thus remains to be seen (Riddervold & Newsome, 2022). Scholars arguing that the relationship already is weakening explore many of the traditional factors explored when studying such relations, i.e., interdependencies, interests, institutions, and values and ideas, but in

particular discuss how structural geopolitical changes and domestic forces both seem to affect and change the strength of EU-US relations. Changing global power structures with the growth of China mean that the two allies do not necessarily share the same strategic interests. And not least—that Europe has become less important to US’ interests. Balancing China is the US main priority, and this will continue to be the case in the years to come. The US security strategy from 2022 is a clear expression of this priority. In fact, in its press release following the publication of the US National Security Strategy from October 2022—ten months into the Ukraine war—the US defense department explicitly states that the US defense priorities are defending the US and “deterring aggression, while being prepared to prevail in conflict when necessary, prioritizing the PRC challenge in the Indo-Pacific, then the Russia challenge in Europe” (US department of Defense, 2022).

The US wants its European partners to join this fight, but the Europeans strong economic interests in China continues to make this a difficult choice for the Europeans. The US also very clearly chooses the policies it sees best on the basis of US interests, also without involving or even informing its allies in Europe. While there are many differences between Trump’s America First policy and Biden’s “foreign policy for the middle class,” they both explicitly put US interests first. Biden did not return to the Iran deal. The US’ unilateral withdrawal from Afghanistan without even informing its allies, and the AUKUS deal, where the US signed a submarine deal with the UK and Australia at the expense of a French already negotiated contract, are among the most used examples of how the US pursues its own strategic interests also without involving its European allies (but see Olsen, 2022). Diverging interests are also evident in transatlantic trade relations, with the EU and the US for example having very diverging views on the dispute settlement mechanism of the World Trade Organization (Kerremans, 2022). Since the EU and the US does not have a trade deal, the US Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) was initially seen by the EU as an attempt to hinder global trade competition by subsidizing US firms over European ones. In sum, the transatlantic relationship plays a less central role for US preferences and interests than previously. As underlined by Smith (2018, 2022), the challenges facing the transatlantic relationship must also be understood within what he refers to as the crisis of multilateralism. Assertive powers China and Russia are increasingly challenging the liberal world order. The Russian war in Ukraine is in breach of the very core principle of this order—the non-intervention principle, but also China challenges core norms, arguing that the order reflects Western and not universal values. The growth of China and the parallel weakening of the liberal world order thus create challenges for all aspects of transatlantic relations.

### **Domestic US Polarization and the Transatlantic Relationship**

Domestic polarization plays into and affects all aspects of transatlantic relations. Anti-establishment sentiments have profoundly changed both domestic and foreign politics, evident not least in Trump’s election as US president in 2016, and hence

also affect the transatlantic relationship. As we will discuss below, support for international cooperation in common institutions is an issue that is becoming increasingly polarized, with parts of the US political elites for example presenting the World Trade Organization as a symbol of eroding national sovereignty and what they see as harmful globalization (Kerremans, 2022). By posing challenges to the legitimacy of transatlantic order and globalization more broadly, new political cleavages in the US also provide structural constraints on political choices and behavior on both sides of aisle, even among traditionally more internationalist policymakers (Newsome & Riddervold, 2022). Moreover, as Elsuwege and Szep (2023) note, many institutionalized networks, for example, in epistemic communities, NGOs, and in international organizations are essentially informal and political rather than based on formal legal or institutional structures. This makes them more vulnerable to changes in different administrations' policy decisions. Trust is another issue that is sometimes underlined in the literature. After all, even if the transatlantic relationship has withstood severe challenges since the beginning, the US has never questioned the value of the relationship as such, which is where the policies of Trump perhaps differed the most from previous administration. Hence, as argued by Anderson (2018) and Riddervold and Newsome (2018), even if much of Trump's actions remain rhetorical, if trust in the US' commitment to common institutions and the very transatlantic relationship withers, a transatlantic partnership gets more difficult to uphold over time. Domestic political contexts in the EU and the US may thus be key to determining the future scope for transatlantic cooperation (Peterson, 2018). In the remainder of the chapter, we zoom in on the link between domestic polarization in the US and the transatlantic relationship: First, we substantiate our claim that US domestic policies are becoming more polarized, before explaining how this affects US foreign policy, including the interests, interdependencies, institutions and identities that traditionally have underpinned the transatlantic relationship. We then discuss the Trump presidency and its more long-term implications for transatlantic relations.

### ***Political Polarization and US Domestic Politics***

Disagreements within and between US political parties are nothing new. It is in fact a vital component in a democracy, and this is particularly evident through the US two-party system that facilitates division of society. In the US political system, there is no centrist party, but Conservative Democrats and Liberal Republicans exists within both parties. These "centrist" political figures are, however, in decline (Friedrichs & Tama, 2022). According to a recently published Chicago Council on Global Affairs survey, 42% of the Democrats described themselves as moderates, opposite 58% considered themselves as liberals. The gap is wider in the Republican party where 77% identified themselves as conservative, whereas only 23% considered to be moderates (Smeltz & Berry, 2022). Scholars of American politics widely agree that polarization between the Democratic and Republican parties has grown

significantly sharper in the past recent years (Hare & Poole, 2014) and that both parties are further apart ideologically today than at any time in the past 50 years (Pew Research Center, 2022a). The data for the 117th Congress shows two distinct poles with almost no moderate politicians. This sharp party division is the outcome of a longstanding drift toward ideologically polarized parties with Democrats becoming more liberal and Republicans becoming more conservative (McCarty, 2019).

So, what are the consequences of this polarizing development? Much research describes polarization as a source of political gridlock that reduces the capacity of Congress to act (see Johnston, 2021; McCarty, 2019; Schultz, 2017). US policymaking is strongly dependent on compromise. President Joe R. Biden emphasized this during his campaign trail by saying “our Constitution is built in a way that literally it cannot function unless we are able to arrive at consensus” (Barrow, 2020). Strong elite polarization and cross-party disputes, however, make it more difficult for the parties to compromise across the aisle and embrace proposals from the opposition. The inability to make compromise leads to an intensified party competition for institutional control of the House and the Senate. Most scholars agree that one of the most worrisome aspects of political polarization is that it reduces the productivity of policymaking (see for example Binder, 2015; Lee, 2015; Pearson, 2022). This is exemplified by the 113th Congress, elected in 2021, that only passed 15 bills, the lowest number since the 1940s (Pfiffner, 2018). Lee (2015) highlights additional consequences of political polarization and points out that if the parties are moving further apart ideologically it would be reasonable to think that they will push through more extreme policies. Overall, political polarization translates into more dysfunctional politics and that this imbalance has the potential to destabilizing American democracy (Marshall & Haney, 2022) Another challenging consequence of increased polarization is the decline of trust in political institutions and how supporters of each party see the opposition not as political opponents but as foes. McCoy et al. (2018) argues that supporters of both parties are becoming more willing to accept violence in the interest of keeping their party in power.

### ***So How Does a Fragmented Domestic Affairs Impact Transatlantic Relation?***

Studies on political polarization have predominantly centered on domestic politics, paying less attention to how it interlinks with US foreign policy (Kertzer et al., 2020; McCarty, 2019). However, in recent years, scholars are conducting more research on how the domestic political climate influences US foreign policymaking and the US role in international affairs. Since the 1950s, liberal internationalism has been the mainstream US foreign policy embraced by both Democrats and Republicans and has been key to understand a long-standing strong transatlantic relationship. This was supported by the idea that politics stops at the water’s edge meaning that politicians should always present a united front to other countries despite political

disagreements (Walt, 2019). As a consequence of polarization, this may, however, be changing.

While there is some disagreement in the literature on how polarization spills over to foreign policy, many scholars agree that one of the potentially most destabilizing factors on the foundations of the transatlantic partnership is the rise of strong domestic polarization in the US. Three developments are particularly important for understanding how polarization spills over to foreign policy and the transatlantic relationship.

First, polarization in the US may affect the level of convergence between EU and US *interests*. The strategic partnership between (western-) Europe and the US was developed during the Cold War competition between the US and the Soviet Union. While Europe's strategic interests continue to be focused on Russia to the east, as well as on terrorist threats from the south (Rieker & Riddervold, 2021), US security concerns are as mentioned above now first and foremost linked to China. China's global expansionism is one of the few things in which the political elite on both sides of the aisle agree poses the largest long-term threat to the US. This is emphasized by leading political figures such as Republican Senator John Barrasso who stated that China is an "enduring strategic threat to the US and it is important to speak with a unified voice" (Barrasso cited in Desiderio & Levine, 2021). American voters also view China as one of the main threats facing the US (Smeltz, 2022).

Beyond China, US threat perceptions preferences and hence security interests are however becoming more polarized both in Congress and in the American public. The 2014 and 2015 Chicago Council on Global Affairs polls show that foreign policy leaders and the American public at the time generally agreed on the most critical foreign policy threats such as cyberattacks, terrorism, and nuclear proliferation (Smeltz et al., 2014, 2015). This has radically changed with the 2020 Chicago Council on Global Affairs polls, which suggest that Democrats and Republicans differ strongly on what constitute the US' biggest threats and what should be US top foreign-policy priorities. In the literature this is described with the symbolic connotation of "Republicans being hawks and Democrats being doves" (Kertzer et al., 2020, p. 1). Democrats perceive global and societal issues such as the COVID-19 pandemic, climate change, and racial and economic inequality to be the most critical threats, while Republicans focus on so-called hard security threats affecting the US such as China and terrorism (Smeltz, 2022). At the same time, public polls show that American voters (81%) in general are more worried about domestic challenges such as political polarization, domestic violent extremism, and COVID-19 than external threats (19%) (Smeltz et al., 2021), which over time may affect the level of interest-convergence across the Atlantic.

Second, several studies suggest that domestic polarization is increasingly likely to extend into foreign policy and affect the US role in *international institutions*. On the one hand, some scholars argue that Congress is less polarized on foreign policy than on domestic policy. The central argument is that despite an ideological distance between both parties, Congress remains capable of addressing international affairs such as US engagement internationally, with security alliances and international trade obligations. Although the majority of Republicans prefer an isolationist

approach, they still see the advantage of international cooperation due to economic growth and US national security interests (Smeltz et al., 2020). In terms of transatlantic relations, this position entails a continued strong commitment to NATO and European allies (Borg, 2021). The 2001 attack on the World Trade Center exemplifies this. The attack prompted bipartisan support in Congress and among the American public that the US must respond to the attack and led to George W. Bush and the Republican's decision to invade Iraq on March 19, 2003. A more recent example is the strong US response to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

On the other hand, a number of studies suggest that Democrats and Republicans are further apart ideologically today on how to promote US interests internationally and in particular on the role that international cooperation and institutions should play in US foreign policy (see for example, Schultz, 2017; Trubowitz & Harris, 2019; Friedrichs & Tama, 2022). This is a pattern that has developed over time but seems to have escalated in recent years. Although Democrats and Republicans have not seen eye to eye on some foreign policy issues also in the past, what has changed is how stark these disagreements cut along party lines as well as scope of the issues they disagree on. Some Americans have lost faith in the idea that US role in international affairs translates to greater economic prosperity and a strengthened national security. Smeltz finds that although Americans largely continue to support US engagement internationally, security alliances and international trade, they now differ in on the importance of multilateral institutions and US military superiority (Smeltz et al., 2020, 2021). Suggesting a clearer distinction among the public, a Pew Research Center survey reveals that around 46% of Americans vote that the US should pay less attention to problems overseas and rather focus on domestic problems, while 53% vote that US should remain engaged internationally (Pew Research Center, 2019). Congress is split between the parties also regarding transatlantic relations, with Democrats being in favor of continuing to support Europe and the Republicans being more skeptical by wanting the US to keep a low international profile (Alcaro et al., 2016).

The third aspect, which is largely a consequence of the two developments discussed above (increased polarization over the US' global role, interests and threat perceptions), is how political polarization also makes it more difficult to reach bipartisan ratification in Congress on foreign policy.

Schultz (2017: 19) argues

as the parties become more ideologically distinct, there is a danger of greater swings from one administration to the next if the party in power changes. And as Congress loses its bipartisan center it becomes less of a stabilizing force to keep swings in check.

This has big implications for the transatlantic partnership. For one, it affects US commitment to international institutions and agreements directly, since polarization over foreign policy and other issues fuels political gridlocks and further hampers Congress' ability in ratifying law proposals and international treaties (Borg, 2021; Schultz, 2017). It also affects the transatlantic value community (which Risse refers to as identity) since it impacts Europe's perception of the US and leads to a reduced trust in US long-term commitments to the transatlantic

community. As Thao Vy (2022, p. 30) points out, “a country fractured by internal contradictions not only misses the strength to live up to its words, but also loses the credibility in the interaction with others.” In recent years, scholars have observed a decline in the credibility of US leaders and institutions in the eyes of the American public but also by allies and partners (Drezner, 2017, 2019; Trubowitz & Harris, 2019). Only two out of ten Americans trust the government to “do the right thing” and 19% believe the government to be the most important problem facing the country (Gallup, 2022). Across the Atlantic, European public opinion toward the US varies. A recent German poll shows that 58% of Germans believe the US to be a good partner for Germany (Internationale Politik, 2022). This stands in sharp contrast to Rachel Myrick’s research on how polarization affects British perceptions of US security commitments. She suggests that US domestic polarization weakens US credibility abroad and reduces the willingness of allies to cooperate with America (Myrick, 2022). This is in line with survey conducted by Pew Research (2021b) which reveals that across Western countries only 17% think the US democracy is a model to follow. The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic is a telling example of how domestic politics can spill over the realm of foreign policy and vice versa. In response to the pandemic, the Trump administration downplayed public health recommendations from the scientific community and refused participation in efforts to internationally coordinate research on a vaccine. (Burnett & Slodysko, 2020; Büthe, 2021). A poll conducted by the European Council on Foreign Relations found that the majority of European have a negative view of the US as a direct result of the pandemic with just 2% expressing that the US was a supportive ally in handling the COVID-19 crisis (Dennison & Zerka, 2020).

### ***Trump’s Foreign Policy and the Transatlantic Relationship***

The discussion above reveals that there indeed seems to be a link between US domestic polarization and the transatlantic relationship, since this polarization plays into the interests, interdependencies, and institutions as well as identities that underpin this relationship. In this section of the chapter, we discuss how this played out in some core aspects of Trump’s foreign policies. The rise of Donald Trump as a populist Republican figure immediately raised questions at home and abroad about the durability of the longstanding liberal-oriented US foreign policy. Trump entered the Oval Office as the 45th President with the pledge to “Make America Great Again” and “shake the rust off US foreign policy” by discarding the more multilateral approach of the Obama administration to international affairs (Trump cited in CBS News, 2016; Sperling & Webber, 2019). As Jervis (2013, p. 158) argues “most newly elected presidents want to differentiate themselves from their successors.” But at a difference to his predecessors, Trump changed the domestic political landscape, and he was willing to challenge US foreign policy after almost 70 years of continuity.



The transatlantic relationship has formed an integral part of the broader liberal institutional order that was developed by the US largely in cooperation with its European partners since the Second World War. As Smith points out (2018), EU-US relationship can only be understood within this broader context. Trump, however, changed the US' commitment to this order. In practice, the Trump administration decided to withdraw the US from several longstanding multilateral agreements including the multilateral Paris Agreement, the Trans-Pacific Partnership agreement (TPP), the World Health Organization (WHO), and the Iran nuclear deal (the Joint Comprehensive Plan for Action). Trump's skepticism about multilateral trade agreements, US alliance relationship, and the United Nations is also reflected in the 2017 National Security Strategy (NSS), which downplayed the importance of multilateral institutions (National Security Strategy, 2017). Additionally, Trump decided to launch a trade dispute with China proclaiming that "trade wars are good and easy to win" (Trump, 2018). He reduced US military presence in Germany and was also the first US President to meet the North Korean leader Kim Jong-Un and make a personal connection with President Putin (Herbert et al., 2019). And what is more—overall, the shift in US attitude toward Europe stands out as one of the most striking elements of rupture in Donald Trump's foreign policy. In particular, he challenged the institutions underpinning this relationship and the value of the transatlantic community as such to the US (Anderson, 2018; Riddervold & Newsome, 2018).

### *Trump's NATO Policy*

Earlier presidents have expressed strong US commitments to NATO. For example, George W. Bush described NATO as "the most effective multilateral organization in the world, and the most important military alliance in history" (Bush cited in Benitez, 2019, p. 181) and Barack Obama stated that "NATO is the lynchpin, the cornerstone of US collective defense and security policy" (Obama cited in France-Presse, 2016). Trump, however, is considered as "one of the harshest critics of NATO ever to sit in the White House" (Benitez, 2019, p. 179). Yet, he is not the first US President to criticize European allies over burden sharing and the lack of operational readiness. Over the years, US presidents have become increasingly impatient with European allies' inability to meet the target of spending a minimum of 2% of their gross domestic product (GDP) on defense. It is also worth noting that after being sworn in as President, Trump's rhetoric on NATO changed from highly offensive to reaffirming the strategic importance of NATO and confirming US commitment to the mutual defense clause in Article 5 (Olsen, 2022). US commitment to NATO's Article 5 clause was reaffirmed in the 2018 US National Defense Strategy. In addition, Trump placed leaders with years of experience and understanding of NATO in top positions (Benitez, 2019). What distinguishes Trump from his predecessors however is that he accelerated the underpinning disputes by openly accusing European allies of failing to meet their obligation under Article 3, and by deliberately creating uncertainty about the US security guarantees. Trump's sharp



rhetoric towards NATO and European allies were particularly evident during his electoral campaign by calling NATO “a relic of the Cold War” and “obsolete” (Trump cited in Jonhson; 2017; Pfiffner, 2018). He also sent critical letters to NATO-leaders, including the then-German Chancellor Angela Merkel, expressing the “growing frustration in the US that some allies have not stepped up as promise” (Trump cited in Herbert et al., 2019, p. 201). Trump depicted the US as a victim of European free riding and the unfair pressure on the US to fill the gaps. Furthermore, he openly questioned the value of NATO itself, US defense commitments to European allies and even threatened to terminate US membership of the Alliance (Sperling & Webber, 2019). Trump himself acknowledged that his views on NATO were breaking with his predecessors proclaiming, “a major departure from the past, but a fair and necessary one” (White House, 2017).

### *Trump and the EU*

The importance of the transatlantic economic relationship can hardly be overstated, but trade disputes have often been a major source of conflict in transatlantic relations. Trump’s trade policy toward the EU and what he considered to be unfair trade practices with allies in a way that caused harm to US markets was another source of friction in the transatlantic partnership. Trump expressed his view by stating that the US “have enriched foreign industry at the expense of American industry” and that “the European Union treat us, I would say, worse than China” (Trump cited in Politico, 2017; Reuters, 2019). Trump further described the EU as an exploiter and “commercial foe” and decided to impose US tariffs on imports of steel and aluminum from Europe to protect the recovery of the US steel industry (CBS News, 2018; Lynch et al., 2018; Tang, 2022). The EU tariffs divided the American public sharply along party lines. In 2018, Pew Research Center found that 70% of Republicans believed that tariffs would improve US economy and 79% of Democrats thought it was bad for the US (Pew Research Center, 2018). The EU responded to Trump’s tariff actions by imposing retaliatory tariffs on selected US products.

During his presidency, Trump’s “America first” approach and bullying behavior led to a growing rift between Europe and the US. Acknowledging the difficulty of “keeping the unity of the West” the then-president of the European Council Donald Tusk accused Trump of putting into question 70 years of US foreign policy (European Council, 2017). Merkel supported this view and stated that “the times in which we can fully count on others are somewhat over” (Merkel cited in Rachman, 2017). She also commented that “it is not the case that the United States of America will simply protect us. Instead, Europe must take its destiny in its own hands. That is our job for the future” (Merkel cited in Aggestam & Hyde-Price, 2019, p. 122). A former German ambassador to NATO stated that “the American umbrella over Europe is gone forever” (cited in Sperling & Webber, 2019). More broadly, many EU leaders felt uneasy about this shift in direction of US foreign policy. Some experts specifically highlight European trust toward the US as the main

causality of Trump's presidency. This is exemplified by the former US NATO ambassador to NATO, Ivo Daalder who said, "Trump's assault on allies and questioning of the core commitment of collective defense enshrined in Article 5 have done grave damage to an alliance that, at bottom, is founded on trust" (Daalder cited in Nielsen & Dimitrova, 2021, p. 700). Daalder also compared US-EU relations with "a marriage in which trust is broken" (Daalder cited in Schier, 2022). Daalder's view is widely shared among other experts such as Nicholas Burns who claimed that "Trump has created one of the most serious crises of trust with Europe in seven decades" (Burns cited in Nielsen & Dimitrova, 2021, p. 700). Of particular importance, Trump also affected EU-US trade relations and level of economic interdependence by shutting down discussions on TTIP, the trade agreement between the EU and the US that was being negotiated under the Obama presidency. As argued by Risse and referred to above, interdependencies are only strong if they are embedded in institutional frameworks, and TTIP was by many seen as a "much-needed institutional framework for transatlantic economic relations" that would help reduce both conflict and various barriers to trade (Risse, 2016, p. 31). Largely due to the continued polarization of US policies, TTIP has not been put back on the agenda by Biden (Duina, 2022; Friedrichs & Tama, 2022).

### ***What Are the Long-Term Implications for the Transatlantic Partnership?***

Although some level of political polarization is considered beneficial to democracies, the level of political polarization and the growing distance between the Democrats and Republicans may have longer term implications for US politics as it threatens governability (McCoy et al., 2018). The compromising failures resulting from political polarization and partisanship lead to a dysfunctional system through gridlocks. McCoy and Press (2022) claim that strong political polarization "correlates with serious democratic decline." In this chapter, we have argued that US domestic politics are likely also to impact the course of transatlantic relations.

The US is not the only country to experience strong political polarization, but it is the only democracy that has experienced a strong level of polarization for a prolonged period (McCoy & Press, 2022). Boxell et al. (2021) also argues that the "US is polarizing faster than other transatlantic democracies." Although we have predominantly focused on political polarization in this chapter, it is worth mentioning that populism with the "us vs. them" stance is also a contributing toward democratic backsliding in the US. Populism and polarization are strongly interconnected, and they both affect political systems.

As we have discussed, the conflicting nature of the US political system influences how the US approaches Europe and thus poses a risk to the transatlantic relationship and. A number of studies suggest that transatlantic relations are weakening due to domestic forces, on both sides of the Atlantic (Alcaro et al., 2016; Riddervold &

Newsome, 2018; Newsome & Riddervold, 2022). Some observers argue that the US is moving away from international obligations and toward a higher degree of national self-reliance. Europe is still highly dependent on America to continue its role as global leader and to maintain the liberal international order, deter military aggressors and to be the leading example of democratic governance. Although it is indefinite exactly how US domestic polarization will spill out in the transatlantic partnership over time it is likely that the strong level of US polarization will continue to shape the direction of US domestic and foreign policy, and as a consequence the transatlantic relationship. As the European Council President Donald Tusk stated, “the international order is being challenged by its main architect and guarantor, the US” (Tusk cited in Aggestam & Hyde-Price, 2019, p. 114).

The overall evidence outlined in this chapter suggests that US foreign policy has not been immune from the rising levels of polarization that has characterized US domestic politics for decades. Although the US has overcome periods of strong political polarization in the past, contemporary challenges are seen as more severe by most observers. Failing to address them could thus lead to further polarization, stronger democratic backsliding and a weakened transatlantic relationship. So far, the Biden administration has recognized the importance of addressing both domestic and foreign issues simultaneously. Biden articulated this view by stating that “the US’s ability to be a force for progress in the world and to mobilize collective actions starts at home” (Biden cited in Borg, 2021). The message of coupling US domestic and foreign policy is emphasized in the Biden administration’s so-called “Foreign Policy for the Middle Class” and in the 2021 Interim National Security Strategy Guidance that argues “a broader understanding of national security, one that recognizes that our role in the world depends upon our strength and vitality here at home” (White House, 2021, p. 6). Secretary of State Anthony Blinken also highlights the importance of both domestic and foreign issues and proclaims that “foreign policy is domestic policy, and because our strength at home determines our strength internationally, domestic politics is foreign policy too” (Blinken cited in Borg, 2021: 320).

Time of crisis creates opportunities for any persuading and strong individual to enter the political sphere. The high level of domestic polarization in the US domestic realm was a core reason why Trump won the election in 2016. American politics was unquestionably polarized before Donald Trump entered the Oval Office but under Trump political institutions became even further infused with polarization especially due to his criticism of the legitimacy of US political institutions by, among other things, alleging voter fraud, spreading rumors of a deep state inside the bureaucracy, giving hostile comments about political opponents, and calling the electoral process fraudulent. Trump appealed to people’s emotions, and he managed to read the political situation in the US exploiting economic, cultural, and racial grievances that have underpinned American society for decades such as race relations, economic inequality, loss of jobs and de-industrialization (Büthe, 2021). While most of these issues are domestically oriented, some of them are tied to foreign policy, not least US trade policy.

The populist figure of Trump as America’s president was a significant stress test of the transatlantic relationship. His isolationist “America First” foreign policy was

predominantly directed at a domestic audience, without paying much attention to how he was perceived by US allies and partners. This was illustrated in his speech at the 2018 UN General Assembly in where he commented that “America will not be held hostage to old dogmas, discredited ideologies and so-called experts who have been proven wrong over the years” (Trump cited in Johnston, 2021; p. 13). More broadly, Trumps isolationist approach is considered a blending of domestic and foreign policy with the claim that US foreign policy must serve domestic ends (Rolf, 2021: 13).

Although the four Trump years is characterized by multiple scandals, inappropriate public statements, and performances, scholars continue to debate whether Trump’s foreign policy should be considered as a sharp contrast to the US foreign policy that has dominated since the Second World War. Some studies (see for example, Drezner, 2017, 2019; Ikenberry, 2018; James, 2022) suggest that the Trump administration radically changed US foreign policy largely due to Trump’s unwillingness to work through longstanding transatlantic framework of treaties, recognize the value of US alliance relationships and being less critical of authoritarian leaders. Other evidence cited includes Trump’s decision to withdraw the US from several multilateral agreements, his bullying behavior toward allies, and his continued embrace of authoritarian leaders like the Hungarian President Viktor Orban, Saudi Arabia’s Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, Chinese President Xi Jinping, and Vladimir Putin (BBC, 2017; Cillizza, 2022) Other scholars (see for example Porter, 2018; Hill & Hurst, 2019, 2020) disagree with this perspective and argue that Trump’s foreign policy was more in line with traditional Republican foreign policy is characterized by less change and more continuity than the first assumed. They cite the way in which Trump increased US military commitment to Afghanistan and increased US troops abroad and that the US maintained sanctions on Russia and that Trump’s reaffirmed support for NATO (also see Rolf, 2021; Olsen, 2022).

Some degree of policy change is to be expected when one party replaces another in the White House but the replacement of Trump to Biden in the White House brought about something of a turn in US foreign policy. In 2021, Joseph R. Biden entered the Oval Office set on following US post-war foreign policy by reaffirming US commitments toward allies and rebuilding the transatlantic partnership under the slogan “America is back.” This change of US administrations was welcomed by most European allies hoping that Biden would deliver on issues important to Europe (Nielsen & Dimitrova, 2021; Kearn, 2022). Others remained more hesitant. At an event hosted by The Carnegie Endowment of International Peace, the then French Ambassador to the US Gerard Araud stated

if we have a crisis in transatlantic relations, it is because of one person, the president, and at the end of his mandate, everything will come back to a happy normalcy. It is something I do not believe to be true (CSPAN, 2018).

In line with Araud’s comment, Drezner (2019) argues that “US foreign policy was the last preserve of bipartisanship, but political polarization has irradiated that marketplace of ideas. Although future presidents will try to restore the classical version of US foreign policy, in all likelihood, it cannot be revived.” In addition,

surveys of global attitudes illustrate that significant damage has been done to US reputation after 4 years with Trump. A survey conducted by the European Council on Foreign Relations indicate that Europeans think the US political system is broken and that European states should look to Berlin rather than Washington as the most important partner (Krastev & Leonard, 2021). Yarhi-Milo (2018) takes a different stance and argues that Europeans may not have trusted Trump and his foreign policy, but they still have some degree of confidence in US political institutions. A CNN article wrote “Trump has trashed America’s most important alliance. The rift with Europe could take decades to repair” (McGee, 2021). Drezner (2019) presents a rather pessimistic point of view and claims that “the lack of trust in US willingness to respect longstanding agreements and allies indicate that US foreign policies will not fully recover from actions by Trump.”

## Conclusion

The US and Europe continue to cooperate closely in many areas. Following the 2022 Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine and the US reaction to the situation marked a significant level of unity. In response to the war on Ukraine, NATO has reinforced its military presence in Central Europe, and the US has supplied Ukrainian defense forces with financial and military support. The financial support for Ukraine has for the most part received bipartisan support (Smeltz & Sullivan, 2022). During the first year, the only sustained Republican opposition has come from the extreme right of the party (Gramer, 2022; Pew Research Center, 2022b). When asked about US assistance to Ukraine, Republican Senator Jim Risch said that “this is probably one of the most bipartisan issues that I have seen since I have been in Congress. We are bound to do this on a bipartisan basis. We are, arm in arm on this” (Risch cited in Gramer, 2022). But Europe should not take US financial support to Kyiv for granted. Some House Republicans have signaled their opposition to any further financial support. This is exemplified by the recently appointed speaker of the House of Representatives Kevin McCarthy who stated in November 2022 that a Republican-controlled House will “not write a blank check to Ukraine” (McCarthy cited in Amiri & Freking, 2022). Trump and Ron DeSantis both argued that the money could be better spent elsewhere, and that Ukraine must be willing to negotiate to find a solution that could end the war (Lemire & Ward, 2023).

In spite of this recent development and strong cooperation between the US and Europe in response to Russia, we argue that the long-term trends toward a weakening relationship will probably continue for three reasons. First, the bipartisan challenges characterizing the US political system are also important sources of friction within the transatlantic relationship. This is largely due to sharp party polarization and the rise of populist figures such as Donald Trump. Although it is tempting to attribute the deterioration in transatlantic relations to the occupant of the Oval Office, polarization had already started before the 2016 presidential election. In this chapter, we have outlined some of the consequences the diverging gap between Democrats and

Republicans has on the political system and how that is linked to US foreign policy and the transatlantic relationship. The role of populist political leaders should thus not be underestimated as they play a key role in shaping both US domestic and foreign policy. Second, as a consequence, Europeans' trust in the strength of the transatlantic relationship is weakening. And third, structural, geopolitical developments also suggest that we see a longer term weakening of the relationship. China's ambition to claim its place in world affairs and the strong US response mean that Europe is no longer at the center of US foreign policy. There are also structural challenges that create tensions on both sides of the Atlantic and complicate efforts to develop a coherent transatlantic strategy on China. The US considers China as the most important threat facing the US and advocates for a strong transatlantic front with Europe (Amaro, 2022; Smith, 2021). Europe's views on China appear to mirror more closely to American concerns but there are also divergences. This is often driven by internal policy disputes between the US and Europe (see Pew Research Center, 2021a for global views on China). China is also an important economic partner to the EU, and trade is one of the main factors motivating EUvChina relations with commercial partnership and mutual investment. Both US domestic polarization and the US–China rivalry will in other words continue to pose challenges to transatlantic unity in the years to come.

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# Latinos for Trump: 2020 US Election Results: Why Did So Many Latinos Back Trump?



Arthur D. Soto-Vásquez and Andrew J. Hazelton

**Abstract** The surprising results of the 2020 election showed swings toward the Republican party among U.S. Latinos. Specifically, there were unexpected vote shifts in South Texas and South Florida. In addition to heavy media coverage of this voting shift, there is a slowly forming academic approach to studying the phenomenon of Latinos for Trump. In this chapter, three predominant schools of thought that explain this shift are reviewed and weighed. First, we address the historical literature that explains this shift should not be surprising given efforts to mobilize Latino Republicans by the party and allied groups. This sets the stage for Trump to appeal to specific groups within the larger umbrella of the pan-ethnic label. The second approach places the blame on a targeted and mostly unopposed disinformation campaign. Here the focus is on culturally relevant Spanish language disinformation shared and spread on WhatsApp. Finally, the last school of thought gives credit to the unique candidacy, persona, and populist approach of Trump in appealing to segments of the Latino voting base, showing where and how his appeal derives from. We also relate this schools of thought against each other and to narratives that have shaped Latino voting since the twenty-first century.

**Keywords** U.S. Latinos · Latinos for Trump · Donald Trump · WhatsApp · Populism · USA · U.S. Elections · GOP

## Introduction

Driving around town in the weeks leading up to an election, there is a usual assortment of politicking. Yard signs placed right on the edge of the lawn and politicians waving to commuters during rush hour on busy intersections are expected sights. However, in the leadup to the 2020 election there was another, more curious sight we encountered. Along Del Mar Boulevard, a main throughfare in Laredo,

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Texas—a city in South Texas, trucks adorned with Trump and Make American Great Again flags paraded up and down the road. They did not seem to be going anywhere in particular. Rather, the trucks cruised in an almost endless circuit, perhaps meant to be a form of free campaign advertising with a secondary goal to annoy, irritate, and even, intimidate.

You might be thinking, this is Texas—why should we be surprised? After all this is a state where the Republican candidate has won the popular vote for president since 1980. In fact, Trump supporters, in their trucks also adorned with MAGA flags, intercepted a Biden campaign bus as it was driving through Central Texas and tried to run it off the road in October of 2020 (Peiser, 2021). Yet what makes our experience driving up and down Del Mar Boulevard perplexing is that Laredo is a city where more than 90% of residents are Latino. The counties along the U.S./Mexico border are all predominantly Latino (Mexican or Mexican American) and have reliably voted for national Democratic politicians since the New Deal era. Yet a remarkable political shift seems to have happened. Zapata County, a rural and predominantly Latino county, flipped for the first time in close to 100 years and voted for the GOP. While other U.S./Mexico border counties in South Texas still voted for Democrats, the margins were slimmer than ever before. This trend also manifested in South Florida, another area with a large Latino population. Here, Donald Trump won the entire state of Florida with a much larger margin than in 2016, owing to increased support among Latino voters in Miami-Dade County, which Biden carried by just a 7.4-point margin. Biden’s margin of the vote was much lower than Clinton’s 29.4-point margin in 2016 (Nagourney et al., 2020).

The immediate aftermath of the election and an apparent shift by Latino voters to Donald Trump prompted a torrent of media coverage and hand wringing in the mainstream media (Soto-Vásquez & Gonzalez, 2022). There were op-eds trying to explain “what Liberals don’t understand about pro-Trump Latinos” and why Trump did better than expected among the crucial group (Paz, 2020). Two weeks of television and other media coverage argued the election results proved Latino voters were “not a monolith” and the new swing vote. As Soto-Vásquez and Gonzalez write:

The 2020 election scrambled many of the preexisting narratives about the Latina/o/x vote. These included the “sleeping giant” metaphor and the idea that the vote would act uniformly to benefit Democrats and build a permanent majority. In their place are new narratives, like the decisive regional Latina/o/x vote, an entire host of rationales about aspects of culture and history that explain voting behavior, the notion that Democrats do not own the Latina/o/x vote, and the assertion that Latina/o/xs are not a monolith. Again, we see these new narratives fomenting the new mediated landscape, where contests over disciplining and capturing Latina/o/x voters will occur over future election cycles (2022, p. 15).

So, while the topic of a Latino shift toward Trump is partly a media fascination, it is also gaining appreciation as a verifiable trend in political science and among the party apparatus. A report from Equis Labs, a Democratic leaning research organization, found that “conservative Latinas and those with a relatively low level of political engagement... proved increasingly willing to embrace Mr. Trump” (Russonello & Mazzei, 2021, para. 2). Others, like scholar Geraldo Cadava, have

long pointed out that a significant minority of Latino voters have always supported Republicans, and it should not be a surprise that some have embraced the populist brand of Donald Trump.

It remains a potent curiosity for scholars, journalists, and political leaders. Trump opened his presidential campaign in 2015 in his first speech with derogatory remarks about immigrants from Mexico. And the inflammatory rhetoric persisted with promises to Build the Wall and a 2018 campaign oriented around the threat of a migrant caravan. Canizales & Vallejo (2021) note that Trump tapped into a long history of racism toward Latinos and his administration exploited fears of immigration and demographic change by his base. So, what can be made of Latinos voting for Trump? This chapter aims to distill and categorize some of the explanations.

There are three dominant schools of thought, which are represented here in this chapter. First, there is the school of thought that this shift should not be surprising given historical efforts to mobilize Latino Republicans. The second approach places the blame on a targeted and mostly unopposed disinformation campaign. Finally, the last school of thought gives credit to the unique candidacy, persona, and populist approach of Trump in appealing to segments of the Latino voting base—taking his words and strategies seriously. Before addressing each strain of thinking in more detail, a quick overview of Latino electoral trends, projections, and perhaps, wishful thinking, will be covered.

### *The Latino Vote*

The term “Latino Vote” can be a bit of a misnomer, on one hand it is an umbrella term that labels a wide range of groups, that do not always agree, into a political entity (Beltran, 2010). At the same time, at least since the 1960s, there has been a concerted effort to unite and develop a nationwide pan-ethnic Latino identity to pursue greater political weight as compared to different national groups (Francis-Fallon, 2019; Mora, 2014). Before delving into voting patterns from 2016 onward, it is worth discussing the recent history of attempting to organize and win over Latino voters. Soto-Vásquez (2020) writes:

Both major political parties in the United States, Democrats and Republicans, have devoted significant time and energy to capturing and engaging Latinxs in their coalitions. Following the 2012 elections, party documents from the GOP highlighted the need to pursue certain policy reforms, such as immigration reform and reducing the volume of nativist rhetoric among the party’s most conservative members to appeal to Latinxs. Following the 2014 elections, party documents from the Democrats revealed a similar strategy of further appealing to Latinxs, especially Latinas, to expand their multiethnic coalition. The 2016 and 2018 elections showed continued outreach toward Latinx communities by multiple campaigns (p. 1-2)

Democrats’ fundamental operational theory at the time was that if more Latino people went to the polls and cast their votes, they would have a permanent majority for decades to come as the country diversified and became less white. This is due to

the fact that, despite recent media coverage, Latino voters often back Democratic politicians in local, state and federal elections. Building on this development, Judis and Teixeira (2004) claimed that as the demographics of the country changed, the overall increase in non-white votes would result in the emergence of a Democratic majority. Based on projections from Pew (Taylor et al., 2012), the Latino electorate was expected to double in size by 2030. The 2008 election may have been the first in which it became apparent that the two major parties were appealing to a new arrangement of ethnic constituencies, which paved the way for the strong polarization that has been present ever since (Abramowitz, 2010).

The 2016 presidential election showed the first cracks in the belief of a browning majority, as “Democratic party officials hoped the inciting rhetoric of Donald Trump would drive Latinxs to the polls in 2016” but Clinton received slightly less of the Latino vote than Obama did in 2012 (Soto-Vásquez, 2020, p. 1). This disconnect between Trump’s strong anti-immigrant rhetoric in 2016 and relative lack of electoral punishment by Latinos was perplexing to many at the time. Delving into the specifics among the larger label of Latino can begin to make sense of this question. Gutierrez et al. (2019) found that for those who perceive Latinos as a distinct and racialized group while also feeling a sense of connection to other immigrants were the voters most likely to hold negative views toward the Republican candidate. This perhaps explains Trump’s lower than normal share of the Latino vote in 2016. However, not all Latinos are immigrants or have positive attitudes toward immigration issues, which could explain the less than resounding impact of Trump’s anti-immigrant rhetoric in 2016. Corral and Leal (2020) find that other specific subpopulations of the Latino electorate were more favorable to Trump in 2016, including protestant, low-income, and third-generation Latinos. Finally, beyond demographics, Petty et al. (2022) find that a concern about personal safety among Latino college students could also predict support for Trump. In other words, the larger label of Latino can be inadequate in explaining why some vote for Trump. Scholars of Latino studies have also long argued that the overarching label itself is the result of a political project to unify a diverse set of peoples for marketing and political purposes (Beltran, 2010; Mora, 2014; Soto-Vásquez, 2020). As we discuss later, there are other key aspects that can explain this voting behavior and depart from treating Latinos as a monolith.

Moving forward to 2020, The Equis Labs post-mortem of the election also reveals some key insights. First, they note that while “Trump gains were indeed more pronounced in Miami and the Rio Grande Valley,” (2021, para. 15) there was an across-the-board movement toward Trump among Latinos in a variety of locations. This meant that regional differences are not the sole explanation of the change. The post-mortem concludes that the Latino voters who swung toward Trump tended to be less likely voters—those without a college degree and under 50. This was surprising to a lot of political observers because of the long running “assumption that non-voting Latinos are automatically more Democratic-voting than their regular-voting peers” (para. 26). The Equis Labs report is also corroborated by the findings of Galbraith and Callister (2020). They found that Latino Trump voters were much more conservative than Latinos as a whole and prioritized immigration as



an issue much less. Equis argues many of these voters were irregular or new voters, inspired by Trump to come out and vote. They also were likely missed, as irregular voters, by Democratic party efforts to persuade and get them out to vote. Pollsters may also have missed them. Nevertheless, in 2020, Joe Biden still did win the Latino vote but the growth in support for Trump captured media attention, provoking a rethinking of the narratives traditionally ascribed to the group (Soto-Vásquez & Gonzalez, 2022). However, there is a strain of scholarship that argues this shift should not be surprising, which is covered next.

### ***An Unsurprising Shift***

Understanding the phenomenon of Latinos who vote for Trump requires an appreciation for the fact that Latino Republicans exist, have always existed, and are and have remained a stable part of the U.S. voting electorate. As Cadava (2021) writes:

Ever since Nixon's reelection in 1972, Hispanic Republicans have helped Republican presidential candidates win about a third of the Hispanic vote. The exact number has been a little less or a little more, depending on a range of factors including the brand of the Democratic or Republican Party at a particular moment, the excitement or distaste Hispanic voters have for a particular candidate, the Hispanic rate of participation in a given election, and local, national, and world events (p. x-xi)

That approximately one-third of Latino votes have gone to Republican candidates is reflective of the fact that the concept of the “Latino vote” was the product of two mutually reinforcing trends. As Francis-Fallon shows, activists from the Mexican American, Puerto Rican, and Cuban émigré communities sought connections and common ground to press claims on political parties in the civil rights era. At the same time, however, political party operatives and government officials reciprocated and cultivated a pan-Hispanic identity or *Latinidad* to forge a voting block that could be contested by the two-party system (Francis-Fallon, 2019). The effort to unify such a diversity of voices and interests often downplayed important differences as coalition-builders and their counterparts in the federal government sought to present a common face for the bloc, one that has sometimes obscured persistent political divisions among Latino voters (Beltrán, 2010; Mora, 2014; Oboler, 1995).

### **From *Viva Kennedy* to the Regan Revolution**

The Nixon administration aggressively courted what was then called the “Spanish-speaking” vote and policy agenda following the fragmentation of the Democratic Party’s coalition at its disastrous 1968 convention. Kennedy had engaged in voter outreach through the *Viva Kennedy* campaign in 1960, which set the precedent of prioritizing Latino mobilization around presidential campaigns. However, some Mexican American and Puerto Rican activists grew disaffected with the sluggishness of the Democratic Party and the Kennedy and Johnson administrations (Cadava,



2021). Leaders felt that both administrations had failed to target Latino populations with social and economic programs compared to the perceived attention devoted to the African American community by the War on Poverty and antidiscrimination efforts in public-sector employment. Most of these activists and elected officials—like California’s Ed Roybal and New York’s Herman Badillo—formalized these demands and hewed close to the Democratic Party via creation of its Latino Caucus, which further cemented the idea of Latino vote (Francis-Fallon, 2019).

Yet it was Richard Nixon who sought to capitalize on this disaffection as his “Brown Mafia” campaign team offered messaging that turned away from the national liberation movements of the 1960s and 1970s and toward a middle-class Mexican Americans politics that also maintained the anti-communist affinities of the Cuban American community (Francis-Fallon, 2019, p. 11). The activists and Republican Party functionaries who led these outreach efforts emphasized economic improvement through individual work ethic, the importance of small businesses and entrepreneurship, and the supposed family values of Latino voters as one aspect of their inclusion into Nixon’s larger Silent Majority. These appeals allowed Nixon to claim approximately 40% of the Latino vote (Ortiz Morales, 2014).

Mirroring developments in the Democratic Party, largely middle class Mexican American party activists created a new Republican National Hispanic Assembly, which helped institutionalize Latino claims in the GOP. Members of this new group advocated for a strong ethnic identity that nevertheless privileged individual work ethics, the vitality of small business, and general inclusion in Nixon’s Silent Majority fatigued by government activism and interest-group politics. Wielding the power of federal patronage, the Nixon administration appointed more Latinos to government posts than any president until the 1990s (Ortiz Morales, 2014; Francis-Fallon, 2019), including Ramona Bañuelos, the first Latinx treasurer (not treasury secretary) of the United States (Cadava, 2020). Nixon also transformed the Johnson-era Inter-Agency Committee on Mexican American Affairs, created in 1967, into the Cabinet Committee on Opportunities for Spanish-Speaking People, furthering the pan-Latino category. And it was also Richard Nixon who pressured the Census Bureau to capture and embed the new demographic block by adding a “Spanish Origin” classification for 1970. This new category broke down the regionalized and racialized classifications of prior censuses that tended to treat the constituent groups as functionally separate (Mora, 2014; Francis-Fallon, 2019).

Watergate and the ensuing Ford and Carter years witnessed the acceleration of national political realignments underway since the fragmentation of the Democrats’ New Deal coalition in the late 1960s and into the 1970s. As an ascendant conservative movement laid the groundwork for the Reagan Revolution, Latino activists and elected officials in both parties navigated these shifts. For Democrats, this meant fighting against Carter’s colorblind liberalism and forging coalitions with black officeholders to expand Voting Rights Act coverage to the Southwest on arguments about linguistic and more overt forms of discrimination in voting rights (Francis-Fallon, 2019; Krochmal, 2016). They also advocated for adoption of a “Hispanic” demographic category by the federal government, all while navigating the Democrats’ retreat from economic liberalism.

Meanwhile, in the Republican Party, Latino leaders scrapped with each other over the future direction of Hispanic Republicanism. Financial consultant and GOP fundraiser Benjamin Fernandez became the first Latino candidate to contend for a major party's presidential nomination in 1980, winning 30 delegates at the Republican convention (Cadava, 2020). The child of illiterate immigrant workers who always refused government assistance, Fernandez represented the sort of appeal the Republican National Hispanic Assembly had put forward for years—hard work, business success, and a proud refusal of handouts. Yet, Fernandez and other moderate or liberal Republicans who had lobbied for greater Latino inclusion in the party lost out to the Reagan wave over time. Conservative Cuban Americans sought to take over from the more moderate and largely Mexican American voices within the party. While Reagan secured about 25% of Latino votes in 1980, he carried 60% of Latino Florida, and over 84% in one Cuban American Miami precinct (Francis-Fallon, 2019, p. 365).

As Reaganomics and the generally anti-statist agenda of the president undermined the efforts of older, more moderate Latino activists to court support for the Republican party, they simultaneously empowered conservative activists and recast Republican outreach to Latino voters along pro-business lines. Reagan appointed two Latino officials to the Small Business Administration and Minority Business Development Agency, which increased the Latino business presence in a presidential administration over what Carter's administration had achieved (Cadava, 2020). Perhaps nothing better represented the conservative coup in GOP politics more than the "Cuban takeover" of the Republican National Hispanic Assembly, which displaced the more moderate Mexican Americans who had spearheaded inclusion efforts along group identity lines previously. The new up-and-comers denied such group-based politics entirely. By 1984, Dr. Tirso del Junco, Republican Party chair for California, could endorse Reagan's renomination with an assertion that "Hispanic Americans" were not "a people who would trade equality of opportunity for the empty promise of affirmative action" or "confuse educational excellence with racial quotas" (Francis-Fallon, 2019, p. 378).

## Latinos since 2016

Recent Republican candidates for President have enjoyed varying levels of support from Latinos as Cadava (2020) shows. George W. Bush was particularly popular, receiving over 40% support, while Mitt Romney was a low point for the GOP. Even so, as Soto-Vásquez (2020) discusses, there was a not totally off base assumption that the rhetoric and style of Trump's campaign, particularly his comments at the beginning of his first run in 2016 about Mexican immigrants, would completely turn off Latino voters. Nevertheless, Trump was able to get about 28% of the Latino vote in 2016, providing another small surprise in the media coverage after that election, even though it was overshadowed by the much larger shock of Trump winning.

In between 2016 and 2020, the Trump administration and campaign began to focus more intensely on cultivating a base of Republican Latino support. Two groups were especially targeted: business owners and evangelicals (Cadava, 2021). As Medina (2020) reported, the “Trump campaign has taken a particularly aggressive approach to reach those voters, choosing a large Hispanic church in Miami to announce an evangelical coalition” (para. 20). While the stereotypical temptation might be to see most Latinos as Catholic, “Hispanic evangelicals are one of the fastest growing religious groups in the country” (para. 18). Other sources also note that half of all Latinos are projected to be Protestant by 2030, with Evangelical Protestants driving that growth (Mulder et al., 2017). Trump’s campaign focus on Latino Evangelicals seemed to pay off, especially in the state of Florida (Jenkins, 2020).

Another key constituency for Trump among Latino voters was small business owners. Cadava (2020) notes that small business owners were impacted by pandemic restrictions and thus were especially susceptible to calls to reopen and lift restrictions. Latinos in the United States have been especially entrepreneurial, with a report noting “Latino-owned businesses have started at a faster rate than other groups—a 44% growth rate—compared to only 4% for non-Latino-owned firms” (Forbes, 2022, para. 3). The campaign made sure to directly speak to and cultivate this business owning base, partly through key appointments in the administration and rhetoric on the campaign trail. This cultivating of key bases within the larger Latino label helps explain the general nationwide shift of Latinos in 2020, not just in certain regions. As we discuss in a later section, these two groups may have been especially open to Trump’s populist rhetoric as well.

The lesson that this school of thought demonstrates here is that this part of the Latino electorate exists and is a floor rather than ceiling of future votes. As Cadava in 2020 writes:

To think about the Latino shift toward Trump, though, is to talk about the future of Latino politics. It means considering what lessons all Americans need to learn about Latinos, so that they aren’t surprised by the demographic’s diverse political views. It means taking part in the ongoing conversation about whether Latinos should think of themselves more as a group or as individual Americans, and how political parties should see them. And it means reckoning with what millions of Latinos found appealing about a President whose immigration policies included separating families at the Mexican border, and whether their support was to be expected, or a fluke, or a sign of a red wave to come (para. 3)

At a minimum, the lesson of 2020 is that Latinos are “not a monolith” and the diversity of views, backgrounds, and ideologies should be appreciated. In addition, this unique personality of Trump, often understood as an atypical Republican leader, does not turn off Latino Republicans to the extent previously thought. This is since “once party identification has been solidified, it is difficult to dislodge” (Soto-Vásquez & Sánchez-Santos, 2022, p. 457). In other words, it should not be surprising that party identification is just as important as other matters of identification. While some Latino Republicans might not be enthusiastic fans of Trump, they still will stick to the party they have been a part of their entire lives. As Cadava (2021) writes, “Hispanics don’t vote for Republicans because they’re Catholic or Cuban;

they vote for Republicans because they've developed considerable loyalty to the Republican party" (p. xxiii). To conclude, this school of thought understands the 2020 election not as an aberration but within a long continuity of a portion of the Latino voting for Republicans. While Trump may have attracted less likely Latino voters with his unique rhetorical approach, there is still a significant floor of voters Republicans can count on in elections to come.

## Misinformation and Disinformation

While the previously discussed school of thought argues the shift of some Latino voters to Trump should not be surprising, another explanation focuses on the mostly unopposed and unmoderated campaign of disinformation targeting Latino voters in Spanish on social media like WhatsApp and in Spanish radio (Mazzei & Medina, 2020; Soto-Vásquez & Sánchez-Santos, 2022). For example, during the leadup to Election Day in 2020, "in private messaging apps and social media, Spanish-speaking residents in South Florida have been exposed to a barrage of deceptive claims" (Ceballos & Padró Ocasio, 2020). Most journalistic coverage of did focus on South Florida, but other post-mortem reports show the phenomenon of Spanish language disinformation was widespread throughout the county (Mochkosfky, 2022). This makes sense given the nature and reach of the internet, along with the dispersion of Latinos throughout the country.

The breadth and depth of different falsehoods leading up to the election are striking. Examples include WhatsApp messages promoting fake COVID-19 remedies (Davies, 2020), rumors that vaccinating children would lead to them being sterilized (Mochkosfky, 2022) claims of Joe Biden being a secret socialist (Mazzei & Medina, 2020), and the reproduction of QAnon conspiracies roughly translated into Spanish (Soto-Vásquez & Sánchez-Santos, 2022; Ulloa, 2020). Social media, and in particular WhatsApp, are cited as the primary platforms in which the disinformation occurred, but there are important cultural and political contexts when it comes to disinformation targeting Latinos in 2020 (Soto-Vásquez & Sánchez-Santos, 2022). These contexts will be discussed first before delving into the platform specifics of social media.

It should be stated upfront that the 2020 election occurred in a very disruptive and unusual year. There was a global pandemic, a summer filled with protests over the murder of George Floyd by police and battles over COVID restrictions. While not directly about the election, the spread of disinformation about the pandemic and vaccines contributed to an overall sense of distrust and unease. As Douglas (2021) writes:

Conspiracy theories flourish in times of crisis when people feel threatened, uncertain, and insecure. The COVID-19 pandemic has created the perfect circumstances for conspiracy theories, and research suggests that they are having negative consequences for people's compliance with preventive behaviours. Most of these conspiracy theories stem from

existing tensions between groups, and as the pandemic continues, conspiracy theories are likely to further fuel these tensions (p. 274)

Other studies have argued that pandemic conspiracies were a gateway to other genres of misinformation targeting Latinos, especially focused on the election and its aftermath (Soto-Vásquez & Sánchez-Santos, 2022). Disinformation about COVID-19 and the vaccine especially can prey on legitimate reasons of mistrust as Martinez Gonzalez et al., (2022) find. Illustrating this, they note that unvaccinated Latinos in Virginia listed “fear of vaccine side effects (58.6%), distrust in the vaccine (41.4%), distrust in the government (34.5%), and distrust of vaccines in general (22.4%)” as reasons not to get the vaccine (p. 4). These fears are well founded, given years of medical exploitation and governmental inaction. Martinez Gonzalez et al., (2022) also find that unvaccinated Latinos also place more confidence and trust in information that comes from personal contacts and WhatsApp than the vaccinated, reiterating the multimedia and cultural context for misinformation spread.

Regarding the political context of election disinformation, there were also some noteworthy messages and shifts. While the 2016 election featured inflammatory rhetoric from Trump against immigrants, in the 2020 election, “Trump turned toward COVID lockdowns, mail-in ballots, and Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests” (Soto-Vásquez & Sánchez-Santos, 2022, p. 457). This shift in ire from the then President to COVID restrictions and racial unrest also appeared in Spanish language disinformation. In South Florida, Mazzei & Medina (2020) reported on a prominent falsehood which “claimed that a co-founder of Black Lives Matter practiced ‘brujería’” (para. 2), attempting to pit Black and Latino voters against each other.

Another prominent strain of disinformation focused on tying the Democratic nominee for President, Joe Biden, to socialism. For example, groups affiliated with the Trump campaign “have claimed that Latin American socialists are promoting Biden and connected protests to actions in Latin American socialist countries, and that Democrats in the United States are responsible for them” (Mazzei & Medina, 2020, para. 41). Another official campaign message, in this case a Spanish-language ad aired in Florida, featured Biden’s speech superimposed over images of Latin American socialists like Hugo Chávez, Fidel Castro, and Nicolás Maduro (Rizzo, 2020). In their cultural study of Spanish language disinformation leading up to the 2020 election, Soto-Vásquez & Sánchez-Santos (2022) found that “a prominent pattern of anti-communism in the data, which implicates articulations of right-wing Latina/o/x political identity” (p. 460). These messages, while mostly false, do find a receptive audience among some exilic Latino groups who strong negative feelings to any labeled socialist, extending their reach and impact.

Finally, the medium in which these messages are being spread must be discussed. WhatsApp is a secure messaging and social media platform. It is particularly popular among Latinos in the United States because it enables connection with others in Latin America. At the same time, it is also a platform where disinformation spread is difficult to track, moderate, and study (Riedl et al., 2022). Mazzei & Medina (2020) note that much of the disinformation spread on WhatsApp comes from “exclusively from conservatives...including from a crop of right-wing Spanish-language

websites that are designed to look like nonpartisan news outlets” (para. 14). For example, the strong strain of antisocialist messaging in Spanish language disinformation can also be traced to the re-use and translation of content from the Epoch Times, a strongly anti-Chinese Communist Party online website (Soto-Vásquez & Sánchez-Santos, 2022). Reporting also notes that in the South Florida media ecosystem, fake stories that originated on WhatsApp or in official campaign messaging would eventually find their way onto South Florida Spanish-language talk radio, broadening their reach by trusted news sources in the community (Sesin, 2021).

Researchers, journalists, and lawmakers warn that social media companies like Meta, the owner of WhatsApp, are unprepared to effectively moderate Spanish language disinformation. These concerns have been formalized into a 2022 letter addressed to the chief executives of WhatsApp and Meta at the time by Senator Bob Menendez. The letter alleges that “critical gaps still remain in addressing this problem. WhatsApp reportedly outsources its Spanish-language moderation for user-provided reports to Accenture, a third-party company that often employs moderators in Austin, Texas; Dublin, Ireland; and Singapore” and that “the company has repeatedly failed to produce data and evidence on the effectiveness of these actions” (Menendez, 2022).

It is unknown the extent to which disinformation affected Latinos decision to vote and who to vote for. The nature of the platform presents problems to study the effect of Spanish language disinformation on voters, since WhatsApp is more private than almost any other popular online media platform. And blaming misinformation for electoral shifts also takes away agency and credit from Latinos, presenting them as either naïve or gullible, unable to make political decision for themselves.

## A Genuine Appeal

The last school of thought covered by the chapter focuses on the unique candidacy, persona, and rhetoric of Donald Trump. It argues that while Trump may turn off many Latino voters, there remain unique ways in which his campaign messaging appeals to certain segments of the Latino electorate. Since there is not a lot of literature specifically focused the rhetorical appeal of Trump to Latino Republicans, this section first begins with a broader overview of his style with specific elements that will be discussed in relation to Latino voters.

As this volume discusses, Trump differentiated himself against other more traditional Republicans by utilizing a populist but also highly idiosyncratic rhetorical style. The content of which has been described as “a species of patriotic, anti-establishment, law-and-order, anti-democratic, anti-diversity, authoritarian populism” which mixes “xenophobia (immigration controls, repatriation), patriotic fervor (make America great again), conspiracy of the elites (the media, Wall Street, Washington, the political establishment) (Montgomery, 2017, p. 5). At the same time, Trump also does not speak like a typical politician which is arguably a big part of his appeal. Montgomery (2017) notes that his speaking style includes a heavy

dose of boastfulness, repetitiveness, and a folksiness. Trump's rhetoric of folksiness included constant appeals to the audience, who are positioned as "wise, good, and knowledgeable" (Mercieca, 2020, p. 11). Of note, in 2016, Trump more often used language that was collective (us, we, everyone) instead of individualistic (I) as compared to Clinton (Aswad, 2019). Finally, Trump's unique delivery also includes a heavy dose of comedy, especially in the form of insults to competing politicians and ongoing personal grievances (Appel, 2018; Hall et al., 2016). These stylistic approaches derive from the years of media exposure and celebrity Trump honed before entering politics, enabling him to capture a large share of media coverage and exposure to a wide range of U.S. Americans.

The content of Trump's rhetoric, especially the xenophobia and patriotic fervor, has been analyzed as a racial appeal that is undergirded by themes of resentment and dislocation. As Schaefer (2020) discusses, Trump's rhetoric in response to the racial justice protests seen in the National Football League particularly illuminate this trend. Schaefer writes:

This rhetorical mechanism is the epitome of Trump's method. Taking the side of whites who have been confronted with their complicity in a system of racial disparity, he assures them that rather than feeling ashamed, they should take revenge on those who have sought to challenge their sense of ease. A racialized dynamic is skillfully converted into an affective battlefield, mobilizing political power (p. 10)

Trump also, especially as President, used his public addresses as a forum to both boast about victories and wallow in being treated unfairly. As Kelly (2020) writes, "although he regularly observes the suffering of his forgotten electorate, according to Trump no one suffers more than he. Even when responding to national tragedies or crises, Trump is quick to remind his supporters of his martyrdom" (p. 9). As the literature notes, Trump was able to simultaneously present a sense of accomplishment (winning the election, enraging opponents) and aggrievement (inability to pass legislation, continued marginalization by the media elite).

The focus of this appeal has primarily been on white voters, especially those who compose a mythologized white, male, working class (Holland & Fermor, 2021). Here the argument is that Trump's rhetoric has an appeal to those who feel left behind by changes in the economy and culture and offered a chance to return to a former glory (Make American Great Again). This taps into what Hochschild (2018) terms the *deep story*, where there is a silent group of "real" Americans, idealized as religious and hardworking, who have lost their status. Through a multiyear ethnography of voters in rural Louisiana, Hochschild found that these voters believe their hard work is not rewarded as it used to. However, the important shift comes in attribution—the struggles are because of deindustrialization or deregulation but rather welfare (tax dollars) being given away as freebies to the undeserving poor and/or minorities along with an unsympathetic mass media. While this originally manifested in the tea party movement in the early 2010s, it shifted to embrace the figure of Trump.

Regarding Latinos who vote for Trump, it might be difficult to see how a rhetoric based in xenophobia or inspired by racial resentment could resonate, even with a



minority of the group. However, as Soto-Vásquez and Sanchez-Santos (2022) argue, the mythological elements of the deep story can be flexible and appeal to non-white audiences, especially if they too feel left behind or stagnant. One explanatory datapoint is the higher-than-average belief in the mythology of the American Dream by Latinos, finding they are “are significantly more likely than the general U.S. public to believe in core parts of the American dream—that hard work will pay off and that each successive generation is better off than the one before it” (Lopez et al., 2020, para. 1). When confronted by economic reality could lead to resentment and openness to a populist political program. Interestingly, Trump always left room in his rhetoric for non-whites, using a language of multicultural inclusion, tokens, and pitting immigrants against other groups (Sugino, 2020). For example, in a 2016 campaign speech, Trump made a rhetorical move that “weds multicultural incorporation of African American citizens and Hispanic citizens in such a way that he can justify his exclusionary policies on the border as being conducted in the name of America’s marginalized communities” (Sugino, 2020, p. 199). This meant that a racialized subject could agree with Trumps policies or statements while also not feeling like the target of the rhetoric.

This trend is best articulated by Zambrano (2018), who studied how Latina Trump supporters in South Texas and Florida justified their support of Donald Trump. According to Zambrano, there is a process where they “construct their identities by positioning themselves among existing narratives and reconstructing them” (2018, p. 212). The reconstruction occurs by rejecting the negative messages about Latinos that have been articulated by Trump, such as criminality, *through* support of him. In other words, by supporting him, they become good Latinas and by extension—good Americans, not the bad “hombres” constructed by Trump. This can be further observed in the way in which the Facebook page Latinas for Trump promotes being American and Latina but national identity “can be considered as the most privileged position, e. g. being American, [with] Hispanic heritage to a second position” (p. 204). As discussed earlier, there is a long history of immigrant identity distancing in South Texas, which reiterates the comment from Herrera (2020) who says that:

By pursuing the coveted “Latino vote” nationally, the Biden campaign created a massive blind spot for itself in South Texas, where criticizing Trump’s immigration regime and championing diversity just does not play well among a Hispanic population where many neither see themselves as immigrant or diverse (para. 15)

In fact, for a region that relies heavily on employment in the Border Patrol and other state apparatus oriented around immigrant processing and detention, rhetoric and political promises from Trump to support law enforcement further opened up the possibility for more support of Trump in 2020. It also points to Latinos in South Texas not necessarily identifying with recent migrants and refugees. Gutierrez et al. (2019) showed that for Latinos with a strong sense of being a racialized group, along with a sense of connection to other immigrants, were the voters most likely to hold negative views toward the Republican candidate. Absent these feelings, it could be that voting for Trump as a Latino is a way to distinguish oneself from others like



Zambrano (2018) found, especially in a heavily Latino area alongside the other factors identified here.

Finally, Zambrano also noted that the politics of abortion did play a significant role in the support of Trump and the Republican party, similar to the reporting of Medina (2020). As she writes, after speaking with “Hispanic evangelicals around the country over the course of the year make clear that religious identity is often a more fundamental part of their political affiliation than ethnic identity” (para. 8). Now it may be tempting to read the previous two issues of religion and immigration as part of an attempt by Latinos who voted for Trump to get closer to white identity. For example, a National Public Radio segment of Code Switch argued that since “whiteness so thoroughly informs voting behavior, we should probably be asking better questions about Latino voters, like whether they identify as white or not.” Yet this is also complicated by a recent decrease of Latinos selecting their race as white on the U.S. Census (Pastor & Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2021). However, it could also be true that while Latinos don’t identify as white they are also slowly starting to disassociate from identifying as a racialized minority. So, while Canizales & Vallejo (2021) might argue that the Trump administration exploited racism against Latinos during the 2016 campaign and his administration, this perspective argues that a not all Latinos might view Trump’s actions *as actions against them*. For now, it seems Latinos who vote for Trump can hold a nuanced balance of their ethnic, national, and political identity.

## Conclusion

Like many social, historical, and communication phenomena, there are a variety of factors that led to an outcome. We have distilled three predominant ways of understanding Latinos for Trump in the academic literature in this chapter, but there will undoubtedly be different interpretations of their relative salience and weight. Perhaps decades of cultivating a Latino Republican base did pay off for the GOP. Or maybe disinformation did discourage some from voting and others to vote with enthusiasm. Or maybe Trump is such a unique figure that he is going to pick up and inspire irregular voters, some of whom might happen to be Latino. More than likely, it is all three intermixed together that explain this recent trend.

At the very least, the 2020 election should finally put to bed the twin narratives of demographics as destiny and the monolithic Latino vote. The recent elections have shown that there is a stable base of a quarter to a third of Latino voters who will vote for Republicans, depending on the candidate and main issues of the day. It remains to be seen whether a Republican not named Donald Trump can mobilize the same level of enthusiasm. The 2022 midterm elections perhaps give the most weight to the school of thought that it is Trump’s unique persona and figure that can mobilize certain sectors of the electorate. In South Texas, among three Republican Latina candidates, only one won her election in a heavily gerrymandered district. Democratic Senate candidates in Nevada, Arizona, and even Pennsylvania did better than

expected, partly due to Latino voters. Without Trump directly on the ballot, the surprising results seen in 2020 did not appear as much as expected. At the same time, Miami-Dade County in South Florida voted even more in favor of Republicans, extending trends from 2020.

The flip side of this topic is the general consensus that Democrats in 2020 ran a very lackluster campaign targeting Latino voters. When the Biden campaign did, they spoke to generalities and broad labels, rather than the specific bases Trump's campaign. A key test in 2024 and beyond for Democrats will be to revise their strategies of appeal. It should also be noted that one of strongest bases of support for Senator Bernie Sanders in the 2020 Democratic Primary was Latino voters as well, demonstrating that Latinos can be mobilizing with a more populist message.

One pressing issue in the near future will be to generate empirical findings that accurately represent the motivations and voting behaviors of Latino voters. Polling Spanish speaking and Latino voters has notoriously been challenging, with less than representative samples and low response rates. It is challenging to analyze large scale shifts with incomplete or small-scale studies. These empirical findings are crucial for scholars to assess the future of Latino voting behavior, communication strategies, and long-term historical trends.

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# The US-Iran Showdown: Was it Smart for President Trump to Authorize the Assassination of Iranian General Qassem Soleimani?



Max Abrahms

**Abstract** Qassem Soleimani was killed by a U.S. drone strike on January 3, 2020, at the Baghdad International Airport. The leader of the Quds Force, a branch of Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps designated by the State Department as a Foreign Terrorist Organization, was killed en route to his meeting with Iraqi Prime Minister Adil Abdul-Mahdi in Baghdad. The Quds Force is responsible for military operations outside of Iran and backs terrorist groups such as Hezbollah, Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, the Houthis in Yemen, and Shia militias in Iraq and Syria. President Donald Trump took great pride in the high-profile targeted killing. The following day, he claimed credit for killing the “Number 1 terrorist anywhere in the world” who “made the death of innocent people his sick passion.” According to the Trump administration, taking out Soleimani was the right strategic decision because “the world is a safer place without these monsters” (Trump Says Iran Strike Has Made The World ‘A Safer Place’, Jan 3, 2020). But what is the empirical basis for this claim? This chapter examines the effects of removing leaders from militant groups in so-called decapitation strikes. Empirical research demonstrates that militant leaders are often more averse than their subordinates to engaging in terrorist attacks against civilians, so taking out militant leaders generally promotes indiscriminate violence.

**Keywords** Targeted killing · leadership decapitation · Donald Trump · General Soleimani · Iran strike · U.S. drone strike · Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps

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Many thanks to the anonymous reviewers for their comments and to Dr. Adebawale Akande for his professorial editorial assistance. This chapter draws upon the author’s book on the role of leaders in militant groups, Abrahms, M. (2018). *Rules for rebels: The science of victory in militant history*. Oxford University Press.

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## Introduction

Qassem Soleimani was killed by a U.S. drone strike on January 3, 2020, at the Baghdad International Airport. The leader of the Quds Force, a branch of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps designated by the State Department as a Foreign Terrorist Organization, was killed en route to his meeting with Iraqi Prime Minister [Adil Abdul-Mahdi](#) in Baghdad. Unlike the other branches, the Quds Force is responsible for military operations outside of Iran and backs terrorist groups such as Hezbollah, Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, the Houthis in Yemen, and Shia militias in Iraq and Syria. President Donald Trump took great pride in the high-profile targeted killing. The following day, he claimed credit for killing the "Number 1 terrorist anywhere in the world" who "made the death of innocent people his sick passion." According to the Trump administration, taking out Soleimani was the right strategic decision because "the world is a safer place without these monsters" (Trump Says Iran Strike Has Made The World 'A Safer Place', Jan 3, 2020). But what is the empirical basis for this claim?

## Background

This chapter examines the effects of removing leaders from militant groups in so-called decapitation strikes. To assess Trump's claim that killing Soleimani made the world safer, I draw upon my previous research (Abrahms & Mierau, [2017](#); Abrahms & Potter, [2015](#)), especially my book (Abrahms, [2018](#)) entitled *Rules for Rebels: The Science of Victory in Militant History*, which proposes and tests a theory about the effects of leadership decapitation. My basic contention is that militant leaders are often more averse than their subordinates to engaging in terrorist attacks against civilians, so taking out militant leaders generally promotes indiscriminate violence. This is because militant leaders are more likely than subordinates to recognize the politically counterproductive effects of harming civilians (Abrahms, [2006a](#), [2006b](#), [2011](#), [2012](#), [2013](#); Abrahms & Gottfried, [2016](#)) because leaders tend to be older, wiser, better read, and have more combat experience. Taking out the leaders of a militant group tends to make it more extreme in situations where they exercised some tactical restraint, unlike groups like Islamic State where the leadership is maximally extreme and replacements can therefore be no less moderate.

Decapitation has been a tactic used for centuries. For instance, in Jerusalem in 60 A.D., the Sicarii were known to employ assassinations. Targeted killings became a norm in Israel after the 1972 Munich Games attack, where Palestinian terrorists killed eleven members of the Israeli Olympic team (Byman, [2011](#)). The United States adopted this strategy following the 1998 East Africa embassy bombings when President Clinton issued top-secret Memoranda of Understanding to kill Osama bin Laden and his associates (Zenko, [2012](#), pp. 62–63). The U.S. used targeted killings sparingly until the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, when George W. Bush

employed drones to execute nine targeted killings between 2001 and 2007, which increased to thirty-six in his final year in office. Under the Obama administration, drone strikes against militants intensified in Pakistan, Iraq, Libya, Somalia, Syria, and Yemen (Kaag & Kreps, 2014). During Trump's presidency, drone strikes reached an unprecedented level, with monthly U.S. drone strikes quadrupling ("Monthly US Drone Strikes Quadrupled Under Trump: Report.", 2017).

Most research on leadership decapitation assesses whether it "works" in reducing the lifespan of militant groups or their ability to produce violence (see, for example, Johnston, 2012; Jordan, 2009; Price, 2012). But my analysis reaches a more nuanced finding about the effect of decapitation strikes on the tactical decision-making of militant groups. My research suggests that militant leaders often restrain the rank-and-file, so taking them out can make their groups even more extreme in their targeting choices. Without the leader communicating which targets to avoid, punishing transgressors, and vetting out rogue operatives they are freer to act on their own initiative to attack civilians.

## **Anecdotal Evidence that Removing Leaders can Make Groups more Extreme**

Numerous militant leaders have recognized that carrying out terrorist attacks against civilians can harm their political goals, as repeatedly confirmed in empirical studies (Abrahms, 2004, 2008, 2019, 2020; Abrahms & Conrad, 2017; Abrahms & Lula, 2012). Even as far back as the turn of the twentieth century in Ottoman Macedonia, Greek guerrilla leader Alexandros Xanthopoulos concluded that indiscriminate killing could do more harm than good and create more enemies (Livanios, 1999, p. 206). Similarly, during the Tan War, Michael Collins considered the idea of truck bombing non-combatants, but ultimately decided it would be counterproductive (Boot, 2013, p. 258). Chairman Mao, the Chinese communist revolutionary, famously asserted that political success requires the support of the population, and guerrilla warfare cannot thrive if it separates itself from the people's sympathies and cooperation. Che Guevara, the Argentine Marxist revolutionary, also emphasized the danger of indiscriminate bloodshed and urged a clear distinction between revolutionary sabotage and terrorism, which victimizes innocent people and backfires (Guevara, 2002, p. 22). General Vo Nguyen Giap, the Vietnamese military leader, similarly stressed the political risks of harming the population and the importance of building strong relationships with them. These revolutionaries stand in stark contrast to figures such as Zouabri, Zarqawi, Baghdadi, and other short-sighted leaders who failed to recognize that success through violence necessitates a selective approach.

Throughout history, numerous militant leaders have expressed remorse over the harm inflicted upon civilians in the aftermath of their actions. For example, during the Mau Mau insurrection in Kenya, one leader lamented the lack of effective



fighting tactics that resulted in the deaths of innocent women, children, and elderly people in village battles (Barnett & Njama, 1966, p. 184). When the ANC's attack on the Wimpy bar damaged the organization's reputation, one of its leaders recognized the need to "end this type of operation" to avoid sabotaging their cause (O'Malley, 2007, p. 237). Similarly, Michael "Bommi" Baumann, a founder of Germany's Movement 2 June, denounced the 1977 hijacking of a Lufthansa passenger plane as "counterproductive" (Hoffman, 1998, p. 158). The IRA leadership openly acknowledged the negative impact of attacks on civilians on political support and international sympathy for their campaign, following the 1987 bombing of a memorial service in Enniskillen that killed 11 innocent bystanders (Raines, 1987). Eamon Collins, writing from inside the Provisional Irish Republican Army, conceded that accidental killings of innocent people undermined the movement's credibility (Collins & McGovern, 1997, p. 191). Even Mitchell McLaughlin, a Sinn Fein spokesman, acknowledged that the killing of civilians did not help the Republican cause, as demonstrated by the Warrington attack of March 1993 (Bishop & Mallie, 1987, p. 285).

Expressions of regret from militant leaders cannot be dismissed as propaganda. Witness accounts reveal that Menachem Begin, leader of the Irgun, was visibly shaken upon learning about civilian deaths in the King David Hotel attack (Hoffman, 2016, p. 299). Similarly, reports suggest that ANC leaders were visibly upset by the indiscriminate bombing of civilians in the Wimpy bar attack (O'Malley, 2007, p. 237). These physical displays of emotion serve as "indices" of intention, conveying credibility due to their involuntary nature (Hall & Yarhi-Milo, 2012). Psychologist Margaret Ann Wilson has developed an index of "Apparent Intended Lethality" to gauge militant leaders' attitudes toward civilian harm. Contrary to the belief that all leaders seek to maximize civilian casualties, some IRA and ETA leaders score low on her index due to their authorization of attacks during non-peak hours and issuing warnings to minimize harm to civilians (Wilson & Lemanski, 2013, p. 7). These behaviors demonstrate a genuine desire to limit civilian harm. Political scientist Joseph M. Brown further argues that pre-attack warnings are a useful measure of militants' "casualty aversion" that "transforms an otherwise indiscriminate weapon...into a sophisticated strategic instrument". Even internal militant group documents sometimes reveal casualty aversion, as demonstrated by Naxalite insurgent leaders' dismay over unintentional killings of innocent bystanders that allowed political parties and media to label them as terrorists (Ghatwai, 2015). These examples demonstrate that, unlike groups like the Armed Islamic Group of Algeria, Al Qaeda in Iraq, and ISIS, some militant leaders recognize that civilian attacks are counterproductive.

The removal of leaders from a group often results in the group engaging in more indiscriminate violence against civilians. This phenomenon has been observed anecdotally in gang contexts. For example, after Joaquín "El Chapo" Guzmán, the longtime head of the Sinaloa cartel, was captured by Mexican marines in January 2016, the amount of violence expanded and innocent bystanders were targeted. Gang members themselves noted that violence that would have previously been avoided due to the presence of a leader was now carried out without hesitation (Agren, 2017).

Criminologists have also found evidence of a spike in community violence following the removal of gang leaders, such as when the 22 Boys leader, Rudy Cantu, was imprisoned and his gang members went on a shooting spree throughout Chicago (Vargas, 2014, p. 143). The targeting of high-ranking gang members through the “kingpin strategy” in Mexico between 2001 and 2010 also resulted in an 80% increase in homicides in the municipalities where the leaders had operated (Lindo & Padilla-Romo, 2015). The arrest of nonviolent protest leaders has also led to escalations in violence, as seen in the case of a Congress of Racial Equality rally in 1964 that turned into an uncontrollable mob throwing bricks and bottles after the peaceful sit-in organizers were arrested (Sharp & Finkelstein, 1973, p. 617).

Throughout history, numerous militant groups have exhibited a tendency to become more unrestrained following the loss of their leaders. For instance, in 1954, the British launched “Operation Anvil” to quell the Mau-Mau uprising, which led to a period of unorganized and aimless violence after capturing the group’s leaders around Nairobi. Similarly, when the leadership of the African National Congress (ANC) was sidelined, the tactics of its armed wing, Umkhonto we Sizwe, became less disciplined. The leadership had initially emphasized the use of “properly controlled violence” to minimize civilian casualties (Johns, 1973, p. 272), but after the sentencing of Nelson Mandela to life imprisonment in 1964, restraint among ANC members decreased, and violence against civilians increased (Price, 1991, p. 203). The removal of respected and experienced leaders created a void in leadership that emboldened more aggressive and vengeful elements, as observed in the case of the Provisional Irish Republican Army (PIRA) (Drake, 1998, p. 165). Similarly, when the founder of the Abu Sayyaf group was assassinated in 1998, the group deteriorated into a banditry movement that preyed on civilians (Aventajado & Montelibano, 2004). Likewise, when the founder of Boko Haram was executed in 2009, the group became more ruthless toward civilians, as noted by Nance (2016, p. 124). Finally, the Salafist rebel group Ahrar al-Sham also turned more extreme after an attack on its headquarters in Syria in 2014, which took out the group’s leadership (“Syria conflict,” 10 September 2014).

We see that removing leaders in gangs, civil resistance movements, and militant groups has eroded tactical restraint by empowering lower level members. My research suggests that leadership deficits in militant groups should increase terrorist attacks against civilians in particular. This is because lower level members with weaker civilian restraint gain tactical autonomy without the leader communicating to them which targets to engage, punishing violators, and vetting terrorism-prone operatives from joining. Let’s inspect a couple qualitative case studies more carefully to unpack the internal dynamics of militant groups when their leaders are taken out. Then, we’ll quantify the effects of targeted killings on militant group tactics.

## The Case of the al-Aqsa Martyrs' Brigade

During the Second Intifada, targeted killings created leadership gaps in the al-Aqsa Martyrs' Brigade, leading to increased terrorist attacks against Israelis. According to historical records, the Brigade's leadership sought to avoid civilian targets in order to establish a Palestinian state. However, as the Intifada progressed, Brigade members began to target Israeli civilians. This shift in targeting was due to the loss of leadership control resulting from Israeli decapitation strikes. While the Brigade leadership recognized that attacking civilians would be politically counterproductive, lower level members carried out such attacks for personal reasons based on their position within the organization's hierarchy. The Brigade, which was established in September 2000 as the military wing of Yasser Arafat's secular Fatah Party, aimed to pressure Israel into withdrawing from the territories captured in the 1967 war, including Jerusalem, the West Bank, and the Gaza Strip. Brigade chief Marwan Barghouti called for selective attacks against the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) and settlement outposts but urged his followers to spare Israeli civilians within the pre-1967 borders or the so-called Green Line. Barghouti emphasized that Fatah's policy was to restrict its actions to the territories and that he and the Fatah movement strongly opposed attacks on civilians inside Israel (Barghouti, 2002; Levy, 2001; Sayigh, 2001). Fatah leader Hussam Khader stressed the strategic benefit of selective violence against Israelis, stating that "When they realize that there are no civilian casualties and only soldiers dying in a foreign land, it will spark a change we need on the Israeli street to bring an end to the occupation" (Machlis, 2002). Even Arafat expressed his opposition to actions targeting civilians (Marcus & Crook, 2004). This position was largely unchallenged among lower-level Brigade leaders. The head of the Bethlehem unit during the Second Intifada declared that harming Israeli civilians was completely unacceptable, and their strategy was to fight settlements and settlers by attacking Israeli military posts (Tanner, 2002). A Ramallah-based Brigade leader reiterated that he was against harming civilians but strongly supported hitting the IDF (Stork, 2002, p. 84).

In the beginning, the Brigade members followed the targeting guidelines but as time went on, their actions deviated from their initial targeting approach. Toward the end of 2001, the operatives carried out attacks against the IDF in different Israeli cities. However, in early 2002, the Brigade engaged in mass casualty attacks at several locations including a bat mitzvah in Hadera, a kibbutz in Menashe, and the Tel Aviv Central Bus Station. This did not go unnoticed that the Brigade's targeting selectivity had reduced significantly. The National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism highlighted that although the Brigade initially aimed to target Israeli settlers and security forces, it soon expanded its targets to include citizens in Israeli cities. Similarly, the Council on Foreign Relations pointed out that although the group initially pledged to only target Israeli soldiers and settlers in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, in early 2002, it joined other organizations in carrying out a string of terrorist attacks against civilians. This unprecedented wave of indiscriminate bloodshed led to the U.S. State Department listing the Brigade as a terrorist organization.

The loss of leadership control was the root cause of the problem. As the Israeli Defense Forces eliminated dozens of Brigade commanders, culminating with the capture of Barghouti in the spring of 2002 (Zelkowitz, 2008), the decision-making locus became disjointed. The Economist noted that “Fatah’s resistance went from guerrilla warfare to freelance martyrdom operations inside Israel” due to “the increasing autonomy of the militias” and “widening gulf between political and military wings” (Usher, 2003, pp. 28, 31, 43). Wendy Pearlman, a political scientist, explained that Palestinian leaders were not only taken out, but also forced into hiding, which severed “communication and coordination” with subordinates, resulting in leadership deficits (Pearlman, 2011, p. 168). As a result of the decapitation strikes, the International Crisis Group reported that “The network is diffuse, fragmented, localized, and does not take orders from leaders of the organization” (International Crisis Group, 2004, p. 26). Human Rights Watch also observed that “The military elements responsible for the [terrorist] attacks are not under the control of the political leadership” because “there is no infrastructure, just small groups making their own small decisions” with “a [large] degree of autonomy and improvisation”. This has led to different factions and fractions within factions pursuing different strategies, according to a Palestinian Authority minister (Usher, 2004). The growing disconnect between principal preferences and agent actions was underscored by an Arab-Israeli journalist who noted that “Most of the military operations are being carried out by gunmen who don’t report to their political leaders. Even if the factions had reached an agreement, this wouldn’t have meant a complete end to the [terrorist] violence” (Pearlman, 2011, p. 177). A Palestinian intellectual affirmed the newfound independence of operatives, stating, “The decision to resist was taken independently in the [Jenin] camp, in violation of the leadership’s orders” (Bishara, 2003, p. 48). Even the militants acknowledged that “not all military acts by al-Aqsa were done with the agreement of the political wing” as “professed identity with Fatah did not necessarily translate into compliance with Fatah decisions” (Stork, 2002, p. 84). The Brigade’s target selection was, therefore, not always in line with the political leadership’s preferences. The Palestinians often lamented that “There is no leadership” to explain the spasm of violence (Hammami & Hilal, 2001, p. 41). In the absence of Brigade leadership, the young men ran amok.

Despite the knowledge among Brigade leaders that attacking Israeli civilians was counterproductive to their political goals, the organization’s operatives had other incentives that drove their behavior. Barghouti, for instance, had observed that such attacks harmed Palestinian interests by damaging their image and public support (Barnea, 2001). Even Arafat, the leader of Fatah, recognized the strategic risks of targeting civilians and warned against it in a Palestinian newspaper because the terrorism hurts the Palestinian people’s image (Marcus & Crook, 2004). Khader and al-Sheikh were similarly aware of the costs of these attacks, with the former lamenting that they unite the world against us (Usher, 2003) and the latter worrying that they reduce the level of international support for the Palestinian people (McGreal, 2002). Despite these concerns, the Brigade continued to target Israeli civilians, and even though the senior leadership condemned these actions, other members of the organization did not share their views. For example, in May 2002,

the Fatah Revolutionary Council issued a statement criticizing military operations inside Israel because they could harm the national resistance movement (“Revolutionary Council and DFLP Call for an End to Attacks inside Israel”, 2002). Dozens of Palestinian leaders released an even stronger statement the following month, urging those responsible for attacks on civilians to reconsider their policies, as such bombings “do not contribute towards achieving our national project” and “strengthen the enemies of peace on the Israeli side” (Allen, 2022). Nevertheless, the operatives’ alternative incentives drove them to continue the attacks.

Younger and less experienced individuals tended to fill the void left by the leadership, often driven by personal reasons rather than political motivations (Pearlman, 2011, p. 169). These operatives sought to gain power and prestige within the organization by outdoing their more restrained rivals, with some committing acts of terrorism in the hopes that their local community would admire them. The International Crisis Group (2004) noted that struggles for power and position were the primary motivators for lower level members of the Brigade. Additionally, foot soldiers on the front lines were driven by a desire for revenge, with many operatives committing terrorist acts as retaliation for Israeli killings of loved ones (Margalit, 2003, p. 37). This was also noted in a piece in the *New York Review of Books*, which stated that many bombers claimed to be seeking revenge for the deaths of close family members or friends. A demographic study on Palestinian operatives during the Second Intifada found that revenge was the primary motive for these operatives, in contrast to the leadership’s more strategic considerations (Moghadam, 2003, p. 73). Another report indicated that the rank-and-file were often less politically motivated and more focused on their own personal gains, engaging in terrorism as a power grab to advance their position within the organization and outbid their rivals.

In conclusion, the al-Aqsa Martyrs’ Brigade offers valuable insights into how a militant group makes decisions when its lower level members are left in charge. Yezid Sayigh of the Carnegie Middle East Center explains that “internal dynamics” can help explain why Palestinian military activity during the Second Intifada was often “chaotic and counterproductive” (Sayigh, 2001, p. 53). This was clearly evident as Brigade violence became less targeted due to the loss of leadership control. While the leadership recognized the political costs of targeting Israeli civilians, the decapitation campaign gave rise to lower level members who sought to gain respect in their community, rise through the ranks of the organization, and exact revenge for Palestinian suffering, even if it was detrimental to the cause.

## **The Case of the Afghan Taliban**

The use of targeted killings by the U.S. against the Taliban has resulted in a leadership vacuum that has led to more indiscriminate violence. This is because lower-level members of the Taliban, who tend to be younger and less experienced, took charge, who were more likely to be motivated by personal gain and revenge

rather than political strategy. The erosion of control from the top has given these fighters free rein to attack civilians, despite the leadership's prohibition against doing so. The Taliban's internal documents confirm that its leaders viewed such attacks as harmful to the group's political goals (Prudori, 2010). The Taliban leadership has emphasized the importance of protecting civilians, with Mullah Omar, the group's founder and chief strategist, stating that "the mujahedeen have to take every step to protect the lives and wealth of ordinary people" ("Taliban Calls on Fighters to Spare Civilians.", 2011). However, since the American-led invasion following 9/11, the Taliban has killed thousands of Afghan civilians through suicide attacks, improvised explosive devices, and assassinations, in direct defiance of the leadership's directives. This led to a clash between the Taliban and the civilian population (Rassler et al., 2012).

The Taliban's leadership has maintained a strict code of conduct regarding the protection of civilians since the first Layha of 2006. The code includes rules such as avoiding civilian casualties during fighting and avoiding mutilation of people's body parts. The code also emphasizes the importance of building a good relationship with the local community and protecting their lives and property. The only permissible targets, according to the Taliban Leadership Council, are foreign invaders, their advisors and contractors, and high-ranking officials of the Kabul regime (Kleponis, 2010, p. 47; DuPee et al., 2009). These targeting guidelines are reiterated in the 2010 code of conduct, which directs operatives to target high-ranking government officials and high-value targets (Kleponis, 2010). The Taliban leadership has consistently warned its operatives about the political risks of harming civilians (Clark & Osman, 2015). Despite this, the Taliban has been responsible for thousands of civilian deaths through suicide attacks, improvised explosive devices, and assassinations since the post-9/11 American-led invasion. The younger, less experienced, and strategic subordinates of the Taliban, who have been empowered due to the erosion of control from the top, are believed to be responsible for such indiscriminate violence.

In addition to providing instructions on targeting, the Taliban leadership has attempted to encourage its fighters to refrain from attacking civilians, utilizing a variety of enforcement mechanisms. The Code of Conduct, which includes strict prohibitions against harming non-combatants, is enforced through a system of checks and balances to ensure compliance. To gain local support, the Taliban leadership established independent commissions throughout Afghanistan (Council on Foreign Relations, 2015), which served as neutral observers and judges to hear formal complaints about targeting violations. Anonymous phone numbers have also been distributed for complaints, leading to numerous cases in which offending members were punished, including expulsion from the Taliban, loss of rank, imprisonment, or public reprimand. When found guilty of civilian targeting, commanders have been sent to the highest levels of leadership for punishment under Sharia law (Johnson & DuPee, 2012). Taliban leaders not only educate foot-soldiers on best practices to spare civilians and steer them away from crossfire but also promote members for engaging military targets. Despite these efforts, Taliban fighters have killed thousands of Afghan civilians. A United Nations report concludes that Taliban

leaders reduce civilian casualties by implementing guidance in the Layha to target military objects more carefully” (United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan and United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2014, p.32). Nonetheless, Taliban foot-soldiers have slayed many thousands of Afghan noncombatants.

To a surprising extent, attacks against civilians by the Taliban were due to a principal-agent, as pointed out by Afghanistan-based journalist Kate Clark. The International Crisis Group also notes that the Taliban leadership struggles to exert authority over its field commanders and allied networks, resulting in little control over everyday military operations (International Crisis Group, 2008, pp. 29, 33). Despite efforts by the Taliban leadership to minimize civilian harm, such as establishing independent commissions for complaints and implementing punishment for targeting violations, they lack total control over low-level members who often act on their own initiative (Magnowski, 2011; see also Ahmed & Rosenberg, 2013; Magnowski, 2011). The New York Times further underscored that low-level members are responsible for most attacks against civilians, acting independently from the senior leadership (Ahmed & Rosenberg, 2013). Gen. John R. Allen, who formerly commanded the American-led coalition, confirms that the low-level members who plan roadside bombs and intentionally target civilians have been isolated from the more senior Taliban leadership (Ibid).

Starting from 2008, the United States’ aggressive targeted killing campaign contributed to the principal-agent problem in Afghanistan. However, the drone campaign has had only a modest impact on the Taliban’s ability to conduct operations, with an abundant supply of lower-level members to fill the ranks. As Afghanistan specialist Anand Gopal notes, the removal of over a thousand high-value Taliban members resulted in significant demographic and operational changes within the insurgency, but has not reduced their capability to attack (Gopal, 2013, p. 58). A report from the Center on International Cooperation at New York University states that the military campaign targeting insurgent leaders has weakened the overall command structure and the central leadership’s ability to enforce decisions. The targeting of leaders has resulted in the rise of a younger and more radical generation of commanders, which has reshuffled the leadership at all levels of the organization (Strick Van Linschoten & Kuehn, 2011). Given the Taliban’s internal dynamics, the targeted killings have eroded organizational restraint toward civilians by granting subordinates additional operational autonomy. The Human Terrain System estimates that targeted killings have reduced the average age of Taliban leaders from 34 to 26 years old, which has shifted the balance of power within the organization toward a younger and more radical group. This trend has not gone unnoticed by Al Qaeda, with Atiyah Abd al-Rahman lamenting before being killed by a drone in Pakistan in 2011 that drones have resulted in the ascendance of lower leaders who are not as experienced and skilled as the previous leaders (Byman, 2013). Consequently, the new guard was less experienced, less competent, and prone to operational and strategic mistakes. They were also less likely to exercise restraint toward civilians, more brutal toward the population, and more radical in their



treatment of the population (Miglani, 2009; Shahzad & Dozier, 2010; Byman, 2009, 19; Schmitt, 2012; Russell, 2011; Michaels, 2012).

Just as the case study of the Al-Aqsa Martyrs' Brigade demonstrated, the case study of the Taliban highlights the critical role played by leaders in preventing lower level members from engaging in violence against civilians. When the Taliban's leadership was weakened due to targeted killings and went into hiding, less disciplined members were emboldened and carried out attacks against the civilian population. These qualitative examples illustrate how a lack of leadership can result in increased terrorism by giving subordinates in militant organizations greater operational autonomy with weaker restraint toward civilians. The following quantitative tests further support this hypothesis.

## Testing the Impact of Decapitation Strikes on Militant Group Tactics

The Drone Database, maintained by the New America Foundation, offers detailed information on the ongoing drone campaign in the Afghanistan-Pakistan tribal region. This dataset includes information on the timing of drone strikes, as well as their operational outcomes, both of which can affect the level of control that leaders have over their subordinates. When a drone strike eliminates a leader, their subordinates are empowered to take on more responsibility and autonomy in conducting operations. Even when drone strikes miss their target, leaders are often forced into hiding, thereby diminishing their authority and enabling lower level members to gain more power within the organization. In a previous study in *International Organization*, Phil Potter and I analyzed these drone strike data from the New America Foundation in conjunction with information on militant groups' target selection from the Global Terrorism Database (Abrahms & Potter, 2015). Through this analysis, we were able to determine whether militant groups are more likely to target civilians after a drone strike that has reduced the influence of their leaders, either by killing or forcing them into hiding.

The statistical analysis provides further support for my thesis that targeted killings and resulting leadership deficits tend to result in more indiscriminate violence. The data indicates that when a drone strike takes out a leader, the group increases attacks on civilians while reducing attacks on military targets. The predicted targeting of civilians rises by approximately 40% after just one leader is killed, regardless of the target's outcome. Additionally, the frequency of drone strikes can promote indiscriminate violence as leaders are forced to take cover. The number of militant attacks on civilians per day nearly triples depending on the frequency of drone strikes. Furthermore, our analysis revealed a decrease in the rate of attacks against hard targets, such as non-civilian targets, from one every five days to one every twenty days when two leaders have been neutralized within the previous week.



Those results suggest that militant groups in the Afghanistan-Pakistan tribal region are more inclined to target civilians when the leader's control recedes, either by being killed or forced into hiding due to drone strikes. While both drone killings and misses diminish leadership control, the former is expected to have a greater impact on militant group tactics, as leaders can still exert some influence while in hiding. For example, even when on the run, Bin Laden continued to give tactical instructions and reprimand wayward fighters remotely (Johnston & Sarbahi, 2016). If this interpretation of militant group tactics holds true, we would expect to see successful drone strikes have an even greater impact than misses on the militants' propensity to attack civilians. The findings may also apply to other conflict zones and lethal methods of neutralizing leaders, such as snipers and bombs. A dataset from Asaf Zussman and Noam Zussman on the Israeli targeted killing campaign against Palestinian groups during the Second Intifada includes information on decapitation methods beyond drones, providing additional insight into the impact of leadership deficits on militant group behavior (Zussman & Zussman, 2006).

As previously demonstrated with Jochen Mierau (Abrahms & Mierau, 2017), the impact of removing leaders on militant group tactics is remarkably consistent across different conflict zones. Both the Afghanistan-Pakistan and Israel-West Bank-Gaza theaters exhibit a marked decrease in attacks on military targets versus civilian ones in the two-week period immediately following an operationally successful strike, when tactical decision-making is presumably most affected. Specifically, the relative number of military attacks drops by 30% in the Afghanistan-Pakistan theater and by 50% in the Israel-West Bank-Gaza theater. These findings suggest that removing leaders of militant groups in these highly active theaters has a statistically significant and substantively important impact on their tactical decisions. Regardless of the conflict zone or decapitation method used, militant groups are apparently far more likely to perpetrate indiscriminate attacks in the immediate aftermath of a successful targeted killing against the leadership.

My theory anticipates that militant groups become more selective with their targets as time elapses after a targeted killing. To test this, Mierau and I extended the two-week window to three to four weeks and five to six weeks after the strike. Additionally, we considered seasonal effects, as weather conditions can affect drone strikes, and religious holidays such as Ramadan may impact the exposure of Muslim populations to militant attacks (Johnston & Sarbahi, 2016). The results from both the Afghanistan-Pakistan and Israel-West Bank-Gaza theaters suggest that these other factors do not drive the findings. The findings demonstrate that militant groups are more likely to target civilians in the immediate aftermath of a targeted killing. As leadership control recedes, the likelihood of indiscriminate violence increases. But over time, as militant groups become more disciplined and new leadership rises to the top, they become more selective with their targets. These findings are consistent across conflict zones and decapitation methods. Removing leaders of militant groups has a statistically significant impact on their tactical decisions, as evidenced by the decrease in military attacks immediately following a successful strike. Taken together, the results suggest that militant groups are significantly more likely to

engage in terrorism when they are suffering from leadership deficits, and lower-level members are in control.

## **Not all Militant Leaders Are the Same**

It is important to note that not all leaders have the same level of influence over militant group tactics. The effects of decapitation strikes can thus vary depending on the role of the leader within the organization. For example, the Zussman and Zussman dataset shows that there is no significant change in the target selection of militant groups when a political leader, who mainly provides ideological guidance, is killed. By contrast, as one would expect from my analysis, when military leaders who provide tactical guidance are targeted, the violence becomes even more indiscriminate, both statistically and substantively. This indicates that militant groups do not necessarily attack civilians simply to retaliate against the loss of a leader. Rather, a reduction in the quality of their violence is only observed when their military command is weakened.

If my hypothesis is correct, then the impact of decapitation should be more significant when the most senior militant leaders are targeted. To assess this, we can leverage the differences between the targeted killing datasets. The Zussman and Zussman dataset focuses on attempts against only the highest-level leaders, whereas the New America Foundation dataset includes attempts against mid-level leaders and lower-level militants. While my analysis only considers attempts against leaders, the variation in leader type allows us to evaluate the impact of targeting more senior leaders on civilian targeting. In the Israel-West Bank-Gaza theater, the relative number of military attacks decreased by 20% after a targeted killing, compared to a 30% decrease in the AfPak theater. This could be because the decapitated Palestinian leaders held more senior positions within their organizations. Additionally, when the targeted leader was geographically closer to operatives and therefore better positioned to influence their targeting choices, militant groups should experience even larger tactical shifts. As expected, the New America Foundation dataset shows that organizational violence became even less discriminate in Pakistan following a successful targeted killing, where most of the AfPak strikes have occurred.

## **Conclusion**

My research focuses on militant group dynamics, particularly the role of leaders on tactical decision-making. My research does not traditionally focus on President Trump. However, the former can inform judgment of the latter's foreign policy decision-making when it comes to targeted killing. This chapter demonstrated that militant leaders generally restrain members to varying degrees from harming civilians. That is why most militant groups become more indiscriminate in their target

selection after losing a leader. The effects are obviously greatest in groups whose leaders opposed terrorism or at least favored it only selectively because replacements cannot be expected to share their targeting preferences. Soleimani was a prime example. The Quds Force does not max out on its carnage against civilians. Soleimani was unlike the late ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in this regard, who instructed “soldiers of the Caliphate” to maximize civilian carnage throughout the world. Such leaders should be killed because their groups cannot become any more tactically extreme. The same, however, cannot be said about the Quds Force and IRGC-affiliates. Indeed, there are some signs that the Houthis became even more tactically extreme after Soleimani was killed, lobby attacks indiscriminately into Saudi Arabia. Trump’s claim that taking out Soleimani made the world safer is, at the very least, simplistic. Time will tell the extent to which it was dangerous. Of course, Soleimani was no ordinary militant group leader because the IRGC is an arm of the Iranian military. The standard principal-agent dynamics of taking out the leader may therefore differ. Still, the theoretical and empirical literature on targeting killing raises real questions about whether taking out the leader of the IRGC can backfire by empowering even more extreme successors, with even less reluctance to harm civilians.

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**Part V**  
**Power Without Persuasion and the Social**  
**Construction of Trump's Reality**



# A Critical Inquiry into US Media's Fact-Checking and Compendiums of Donald Trump's Falsehoods and "Lies"



Leon Barkho

**Abstract** This chapter linguistically and discursively examines how and why Trump's utterances, Tweets and sayings have become a source of a gaping chasm in American society despite his leaving the White House almost three years ago. It relates to the lessons we can learn from pragmatist thinkers and their rejection of binary divisions of cultures and societies in a world snared by clashes of mindsets and mentalities which analysis shows, can easily fall prey to one-sided, discriminatory discourse. It first provides a synopsis of pragmatism as a philosophy and the role of language in critical inquiry, laying down the conceptual framework for a critical analysis of US mainstream media's overabundant interest in and coverage of what they initially termed "claims," then "falsehoods" and finally outright "lies" of Donald Trump. Thereafter, it presents a short survey of data, which essentially comprises US mainstream media's compilation of compendiums of Trump's "lies" and the method they pursued in fact-checking them. This method has done little to change beliefs or perceptions, while it concludes that. Trump's concept has worked well to create confusion about what constitutes truth in this polarized and deeply divided country.

**Keywords** Zone-flooding · Critical inquiry · Fact-checking · Donald Trump · Steve Bannon · Big Lies · Misinformation · Fact-checking · Pragmatism · Pragmatist philosophical deliberations

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Many thanks to the anonymous reviewers for their comments and to Dr. Adebawale Akande for his professorial editorial assistance.

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## Introduction

This chapter, while focusing on pragmatist philosophical deliberations, is not overly theoretical and does not rigidly adhere to one particular philosophical school. The discussion that follows, though a bit detailed, is a foundational framework mostly based on US pragmatist thinkers whose writings mirror divisions on how to view truth and social reality in a divided and polarized society like the United States. Pragmatist deliberations have inspired many scholars to unravel the type of discourse that followed 9/11 attacks and the nature of the partisan, dualistic, and binary nature of language and politics in the United States. Readers might find the introduction a bit long, but it is necessary to delve into Trump's discourse, particularly the compendiums the US media have compiled about his "lies," to which the bulk of the research is devoted.

The plank of pragmatism as a philosophy is the rejection of dualism, or oppositional pairs of concepts like good/evil, God/devil, heaven/hell, etc. (Marion, 2018). This way of thinking, which divides the world into good and bad or evil, came to the fore in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks on the United States. The appellation "evil" entered into the linguistic sphere and political speeches with the phrase "axis of evil" coined for the first time by ex-president George W. Bush who used it to refer to countries said to be sponsors of terror against America and its allies (Tenorio, 2004). "The Clash of Civilizations" turned into a clash between good and evil a theory was expanded to cover language as one of the clearest indices of the distinctiveness of cultures and civilizations (Huntington & Dunn, 2004). A few paid attention to the fact that the dichotomy and binary categorization of good/evil could be exploited for ideological and political purposes and, consequently, can lead to the corruption of politics, religion and discourse (Bernstein, 2005).

The dualism in language and practice was further reinforced when Donald Trump assumed US presidency in 2017. The intensification of the dualistic discourse during Trump's era permeated politics and the media despite many philosophers' and scholars' warnings of the dangers of adopting what amounts to Cartesian dualisms due to their fluidity in understanding the world. Cartesian dualisms are risky in language and practice because they are based on prejudice, temperament, and prejudgment (Bernstein, 2005; 2010; Plowright, 2016).

Putnam (1994, p. 152) establishes four pillars for critical inquiry of "facts" and "values" and they constitute the blank of US pragmatism as philosophy. The first pillar is fallibilism which makes it clear that there is no "physical guarantee" that our language, viewpoints and practices "will never need revision." The second critically examines the oppositional pair of "facts and values," and reiterates that our values will certainly interfere with what we see as facts. The third, which is most important, pertains to "practice or praxis." This concept entails that while language matters, we are to be held accountable for our actions and consequences and not our beliefs. The fourth and last pillar is the foundation of critical inquiry under which it is legitimate to question, challenge and critique dichotomies that divide our social world into

good/evil. These four basic notions also feature prominently in the writings of Arendt (1958), Habermas (1973), and Bernstein (2005) (cf. Barkho, 2019).

It is “most pernicious” to make “single individuals absolute judges of truth,” writes Peirce (1868). American pragmatist philosophers are critical of subjectivism. They develop an intersubjective epistemology “for understanding of inquiry, knowing, communication, and logic” in line with Jurgen Habermas argument for “an intersubjective (social) communicative model of understanding human action and rationality” (Bernstein, 2010, p. 35).

William James, when writing about pluralism, rejects binary categorizations of us/them or good/evil because they shut the door in the face of dialogue and, at the same time, overlook the “evil” that we may have committed. James speaks of “blindness” that afflicts individuals and societies who become egocentric and insensitive to beliefs, values, and feelings of those who are different from us. It is

the blindness with which we are all afflicted in regard to the feelings of creatures and people different from ourselves . . . Hence the stupidity and injustice of our opinions, so far as they deal with the significance of alien lives. Hence the falsity of our judgments, so far as they presume to decide in an absolute way on the value of other persons' conditions or ideals (James, 2009, pp. 629–30).

James tries to make us comprehend “how soaked and shot-through life is with values and meanings which we fail to realize because of our external and insensible point of view. The meanings are there for others, but they are not there for us” (James, 2009, p. 645). Corporate and ideological polarization holds sway over language and conversation, particularly in a country like the United States, where racial resentment and negative partisanship play a vital role in politics (Abramowitz & McCoy, 2019). Dewey warns us against succumbing to moves by business and political elites in their bid to control the linguistic sphere and propel their discursive concepts to the fore to steer social reality:

The business mind, having its own conversation and language, its own interests, its own intimate groupings in which men of this mind, in their collective capacity, determine the tone of society at large, as well as the government of industrial society, and have more political influence. (Dewey, 1930, p. 41).

American philosopher Rorty's (1967) “Language Turn” is pragmatic as it emphasizes the importance of language for human experience and the making of meaning. Without reflection about the role of the experiences we have gained from the way in which different conflicts have been represented, even “linguistic pragmatism” would fail to explain how our world works if we merely restrict our interpretation to how a sentence, for instance, stands for the representation of our own view of a conflict. Bernstein (2010, p. 17) puts it succinctly: “There is no way of analyzing concepts and judgments without reference to language. And we cannot understand language and speech acts except in the context of social and communal practices . . . the critical power of reason is rooted in ordinary language.” Bernstein, 2010).

There is good reason to be skeptical if we are only left with one sentence and told it is the one which corresponds to the truth (Davidson, 1997). Rorty tells us the way we use language is an indicator of whether we can comprehend the issues we face.

This could be done in two different ways “either by reforming language or by understanding more about the language we presently use.” (Rorty, 1967, p. 3). A pluralist society is the one in which two statements representing two temperaments, or viewpoints are acceptable and tolerated. Individuals with authority in a pluralist society should not use language or commit to linguistic practices that condemn people with ways of life other than our own.

Another important pillar of pragmatist thinkers’ philosophical deliberations focuses on the role of language in reinforcing, or thwarting beliefs and values. Language for them is not merely a means of speaking and writing. It reflects who we are. We are shaped by our language and our language shapes us. Habermas (1973, p. 92) says language “objectifies” communicative actions. The meaning of “social norms,” he adds, “is objectified in ordinary language of communication,” which, along with our actions, shapes, and determines what we are. In other words, language is the memory that preserves our history and culture, traces of which may haunt and imprison us. “An understanding of language is thus essential for any understanding of the reality of everyday life,” write Berger and Luckmann (2016, pp. 51–52).

Arendt (1965) says rendering other groups linguistically “superfluous” means they have no rights, either human or judicial, since the aim of an “arbitrary system” is to destroy the civil rights of a whole group or population. Arendt’s thesis of how an “arbitrary system” can deny and destroy the human rights of “the whole population” can be extended to the denial of “the linguistic right” a group or a population is entitled to. She maintains that the denial of human rights of a group is normally accompanied by a denial of its discourses. The violation of human rights of a group goes hand in hand with the distortion and constraint of the group’s language and discourse, adds Arendt (1965, p. 451).

## **Fact-Checking Trump’s Compendiums of “Lies”**

There is no doubt that Trump’s official announcement on June 2016 that he would be competing in US presidential race has ushered in a period that has shaped the news ecology in American politics (Barkho, 2022). This period is marked by the prevalence of multitudes of falsehoods and “lies” and concerted efforts by the press on how to debunk them. However, the question that remains unanswered is whether Trump’s loss in 2020, presidential election and his leaving the White House has put an end, or at least reduced the flow of misinformation and mainstream media’s focus on fact-checking. In fact, the number of full-time fact-checkers or fact-checking outlets has grown exponentially since the emergence of Donald Trump on the US political scene. Currently, there are nearly 400 teams of reporters and investigators whose sole job is cataloging and verifying lies, falsehoods, hoaxes, and other forms of misinformation. For almost every single statement by Trump, of which the press is doubtful, there has been a storm of fact-checking in which the multifarious media outlets intervene, from mainstream traditional print news and broadcast, to partisan

and the various stripes of news media organizations. The spate of misinformation in the years from 2016 is on the rise so are media's fact-checking endeavors (Stencel & Ryan, 2022).

There is a plethora of academic research on fact-checking. For example, Uscinski and Butler (2013) investigate the epistemology of fact-checking. Nieminen and Rapeli (2019) study the misperceptions it can cause and the role it may play in undermining journalistic objectivity. Glasser (2018) examines how far fact-checking can decide what is true and what is false when verifying statements and speeches by political elites. Graves and Glaisyer (2012) look into the methods journalists employ in their bid to substantiate claims or determine their veracity and how effective they can be. Mena (2019) provides an overview of fact-checking principles and perceptions, and Graves (2013) maps its role in the new ecology of news and news practice, among others. However, the literature is scanty on how effective fact-checking can be on moderating or changing minds and hearts or countering the dissemination of disinformation in a tense atmosphere of political polarization or social orientation, such as the United States. Thus, the study attempts to answer three major questions: (1) Have compendiums and their fact-checking succeeded, for instance, in persuading Donald Trump to stop making "lies"? (2) Have the long inventories of tens of thousands of falsehoods and lies the mainstream US media have cataloged and fact-checked turned Trump into an honest person, or at least embarrassed or shamed him? (3) And more importantly, have the compendiums and their fact-checking changed public perceptions of what is the truth and how to find it?

The 2016 presidential race shaped not only the electoral contest, but also framed American political discourse, introducing an era that has come to be the most misinformed and most fact-checked in American history. For Trump and his information strategists, their misinformation campaign was not a battle to defeat their political nemesis, the democrats, but to flood the zone in which mainstream US press operated with misinformation. "Zone-flooding" is a communication concept through which Trump's White House circulated large quantities of misinformation to overwhelm unaligned mainstream news media (Jorden, 2018).

"Zone-flooding" as a concept was initially designed by Bannon, whose target is to "stay focused and stay on message" despite the "noise" of the press and its fact-checking methods. "This is not about persuasion: This is about disorientation." The statement by Bannon explicates Donald Trump's "zone-flooding" discursive strategy, of which reiteration and reproduction are the foundation of how to engage the press and get the message across. In a zone like this, "no one believes anything" anymore because people become "numb and disoriented, struggling to discern what is real in a sea of slant, fake, and fact" (Tavernise & Gardiner, 2019). It is important to distinguish between "zone-flooding and propaganda" as the latter, though relying on reinforcing the repetition of the same narrative, it essentially appeals to emotions "that everything is possible" (Reed & Dowling, 2018, p. 123). In "zone-flooding," people are inundated with conflicting narratives about the same event, creating the type of confusion in which truth is eventually lost.

Repeatability, as mentioned earlier, is a cornerstone of "zone-flooding" as an epistemology. I call it "epistemology" because, for Trump and his ideologists, it is

the theory of knowledge, pointing to the nature of relationships with social reality. Like epistemology, with “zone-flooding” this relation constitutes knowledge and shows how to know and do things and when to carry them out. Trump and his ideologists believed (and mostly have succeeded, as we shall see) that “flooding the zone” with misinformation will prompt America’s mainstream news media to intensify fact-checking efforts. They maintained that accelerating and diversifying fact-checking procedures would improve the accuracy what Trump says regardless of whether it is true or not. Long-term and repeated exposure to misinformation shapes the beliefs and statements released to “flood the zone” (Ulusoy et al., 2021, p. 856).

Research is sparse on examining how effective Trump’s communication strategy of “zone-flooding” has been. While research is insufficient on how practical and useful fact-checking efforts and cataloging of falsehoods and misinformation acts can be, some research has demonstrated that abundant exposure to inaccurate news may boost its credibility in public eyes (Nyhan & Reifler, 2015). Ulusoy, Carnahan, Bergan, Barry, Ahn, and McGraw (2021, p. 856) argue that scholarly attention has mostly focused on the effects of misinformation and attitudes, but “rarely have studies investigated potential downstream effects of misinformation exposure on belief judgments involving subsequent factual statements.” During times of elections, this exposure may wear out the voters to the extent that they start doubting almost everything (Guess et al., 2018). The concept bears resemblance to Lakoff’s (2014) “framing effect” and his now classical example of “don’t think of an elephant.” The overabundance of fact-checking is like telling the public not to think of Trump’s communication strategies of persistent lying and falsehoods. Pervasive fact-checking may also have the opposite impact of telling the public one cannot help but talking and thinking about Trump, and that is exactly what the “zone-flooding communication strategy” aspires for. I define “zone-flooding” in words that echo to a large extent how Donald Trump ideologists operationalized it:

It is an effort to propel one’s strategy, proponent, or discursive utterance to dominate the stage of information by feeding the press with an overabundance of news, even if misinformed, thereby dwindling and curtailing the influence of any other piece of information or news, no matter how big or important.

Political scientists Nyhan and Reifler (2015) examined what Americans think about fact-checking and what effects exposure to the newly emerged genre of news practice is having on their “political knowledge and attitudes.” The authors show that repeated and intensive fact-checking does not add to accuracy. On the contrary, they add, when the exposure becomes overabundant, there is the risk of people losing faith in the coverage. Fact-checkers provide what they think is incontrovertible evidence of a lie or misinformation in a statement or injustice of a deed. However, the evidence may not be sufficient in the minds of many to change the course of events, or it can simply be overlooked. No matter the mounting evidence the press has presented and no matter how clear the case has been, the Senate acquitted Donald Trump on the charge of inciting insurrection for his role in the January 6, 2021, Capitol riot (Newburger, 2021). It is always highly likely that for

many people, there is a single version of the truth, and they will stick to it no matter what fact-checkers say. Facts are facts when they are convenient to us, to our ideological placement and partisanship. If facts are inconvenient, we simply refuse to acknowledge them.

## Method

The chapter takes these visions and insights of language and pragmatism as philosophy into account in its analysis and discussion of US mainstream media's compendiums and fact-checking of Donald Trump. The analysis critically examines the headlines US news outlets use for their compendiums on Trump's "lies." Mainstream US news organizations have shown great interest in claims, falsehoods or "lies" committed by Trump from when he declared his candidacy in June 2015 until when he was permanently barred by Twitter on January 8, 2021, only days before leaving the White House. The "lies" committed by Trump during this period, according to US mainstream liberal press, are in tens of thousands prompting major national newspapers to create their own long lists under different categories. Three major lists are most prominent here: "The Complete List of Trump's Twitter Insults (2015-2021)" by *The New York Times* (Quealy, 2021), *CNN's* "The first 5,276 false things Donald Trump said as U.S. president" (Dale, 2019), and *The Washington Post's* "Trump's false or misleading claims total 30573 over 4 years" which is the largest (Kessler et al., 2021). The analysis will mainly focus on samples of the headlines accompanying these compendiums and their coverage by other news media. The primary target is to throw light on the effectiveness of these compendiums, offer an answer, if possible, to the study's research questions, and finally examine how language shapes issues that divided the United States and the world during Donald Trump's presidency and how these issues have been shaped by language (Boroditsky, 2011). The analysis is both linguistic and discursive. It first examines the role linguistic elements, like lexis, play in shaping the language of headlines. Second, it attempts to unravel the discursive concepts and practices the news media use in their reporting of Trump's "lies." The aim is to make a linguistic and discursive relation between two ideological and partisan flanks in US politics (liberals and conservatives) and how they are represented from a pragmatist critical inquiry viewpoint. We cannot approach objective reality if we restrict our analysis to one part of a conflict in isolation from the other. Thus, the analysis linguistically and discursively takes into account two attitudes about why and how so many "falsehoods" or "lies" have entered US political and media discourse. If we want to understand a conflict, we need to have a reasonable picture of the sides involved in it. Accounting only for one side of the conflict, will merely be a one-sided representation that falls short of the requirements of critical inquiry (Wellmer, 2009; Sajjadpour & Masoudi, 2013).

To properly operationalize the study's theoretical framework, the method of analysis triangulates pragmatist philosophers' concepts as outlined above with



critical linguistic analysis as advanced by Fowler (1985, 1991) and Fowler and Kress (1979). Pioneer linguistic, critical analysts draw on Halliday's (1971) systemic and functional linguistics as a guideline. Critical linguistics is not confined to the functions lexical and other linguistic structures may have in forming sentences. It attempts to disentangle the intricacies and complexities surrounding the social world of words, sentences, and other symbols. Critical linguistics has demonstrated that the lexis we choose and the grammar we employ to combine words into sentences may point to the exercise of power and ideology (c.f Kress, 1994; Kress & Hodge, 1979; Bell, 1991; Dijk, 1998). For critical linguists, language has a social function to play besides its ability to formulate rules that govern how we are to combine words, construct sentences, and other elements. Halliday's notions of the role of language in society have a bearing on the ideas of Foucault (1972, 1984) and his theoretical framework that texts mirror social reality and that a critical analysis can derive much meaning from the social world surrounding them. For Foucault, a meaning of a text is not what we attach to it or its surface structure. The true meaning of texts, Foucault maintains, hinges on their social associations and relations prevalent among those exercising control, authority, and power and those creating them. It is worthwhile to note that Foucault's ideas on how language functions in our modern world have an echo in the definition Fowler provides for discourse:

Discourse is speech or writing seen from the point of view of the beliefs, values, and categories which it embodies; these beliefs etc. constitute a way of looking at the world, an organization or representation of experience—"ideology" in the neutral non-pejorative sense. Different modes of discourse encode different representations of experience; and the source of these representations is the communicative context within which the discourse is embedded.

(cited in Mills, 1997, p. 6)

Building on Foucault and Fowler, Fairclough points to the social, cultural, and political assumptions influencing the creation of media texts, which discourse scholars are required to bear in mind in their critical analyses: "Discourse analysis can be understood as an attempt to show systematic links between texts, discourse practices and socio-cultural practices" (Fairclough, 1995: 16–17).

## Result/Analysis

The following is a critical inquiry into three major compendiums on Trump's "lies," their fact-checking, and their coverage. According to the fact-checkers of the three mainstream US media, *The New York Times*, *CNN*, but specifically *The Washington Post*, Trump's misleading claims are in tens of thousands. If we spread the huge number of false claims over the period tallied by *The Washington Post*, Trump would have made an average of 21 per day during his four-year presidency (Elfrink, 2020). There is discrepancy between the lists, but even at the average of about 5000 false claims tallied by *CNN*, and *The New York Times*, the scale is unprecedented in the history of American politics (McGranahan, 2017). Susan Glasser (2018) wrote a



damning article for *The New Yorker* titled "It's True: Trump Is Lying More, and He's Doing It on Purpose." She finds that telling "falsehoods" and "lies" has turned into a distinctive attribute characterizing Trump's presidency. Initially, US news media were reluctant to call Trump's unverified claims and falsehoods outright lies, but when *The New Yorker's* Glasser, (2018) provided evidence that he was "doing it on purpose," that is making false statements with the deliberate intent to deceive, many news organizations, particularly liberal-leaning newspapers, began compiling lists of what they called "Trump's lies." Of course, Trump adamantly denied lying or even making false statements (Qiu, 2016).

The compendiums and the impact they have had on US journalism practice are testimony to the indelible linguistic and discursive influence of the three moments of time in American modern history and consequently on the social and discursive sphere of American politics: (1) Trump's presidential campaign, (2) Trump's presidency, and (3) Trump's post-presidency. But despite the disparity in the three moments in terms of Trump's power, there is one discursive threat that spins them tightly together and coalesces them. Steve Bannon, the former head of *Breitbart News* and once Trump's chief ideologist, acknowledges that Trump's resort to "falsehoods" during his presidential campaign and his term as president was to instill "anger and fear" in people's hearts to get them "to the polls." Bannon was not shy of admitting that Trump's recourse to "lies" was to fight the media, which he described as "the real opposition . . . And the way to deal with them is to flood them with shit" (Remnick, 2018). This "zone-flooding" strategy, as we shall see, is epistemic and conceptual, as it ushered in a discursive campaign which seems to have paid off handsomely with no let-up on the part of mainstream news media of rehearsing Trump's narrative, and their compendiums and fact-checking are a good case in point.

Bannon's "zone-flooding" strategy has no room for telling the public the truth, but of steering the public's attention away from the stream of criticism directed at Trump's presidency by constructing a canopy of corruption claims and falsehoods about the opposition. The mainstream media, by picking up the misinformation and turning it into big and ongoing stories as well as compendiums that needed continuous fact-checking and updating, became part of Bannon's "zone-flooding"; instead of criticizing Trump, they were busy repeating and cataloging his misinformation (Illing, 2020). In addition to "zone-flooding," Bannon pursued the strategy of "repeatability" which is rooted in the concept of reiterating the same falsehood as often as possible and see the media's reaction. The concept of "repeatability" accompanied the three moments of Trump's career. A cursory examination of the compendiums which are still a major source of news nearly 3 years after Trump left the White House, demonstrates the success and not failure of Bannon's information strategies. Note how Trump's allegations of rigging the 2020 US presidential elections which is still a discursive plank of his strategy. Trump repeated his false election-fraud claims during a speech in Washington on July 26, 2022 (Colvin, 2022), and ignored pressure from fellow Republicans to shun repeating the same false claims 2 years after losing the election to President Joe Biden (Morgan &

Beech, 2022). The mainstream news media turned the repetition of the claim, though almost 3 years old, into major news stories (Dale, 2022; McGraw, 2022).

Let us critically examine a selection of headlines from the compendiums as they appear in *The New York Times*, *CNN*, and *The Washington Post*. The list is not exhaustive as each of the news media has more than one compendium with different headlines. The list also includes headlines of how the press in both North America and Europe have covered these compendiums.

- “*In four years, President Trump made 30,573 false or misleading claims*” (Fact Checker, 2021) *Washington Post*.
- “*Trump’s ‘most outrageous’ sayings*” (Claire, 2018).
- “*The 15 most notable lies of Donald Trump’s presidency*” (Dale, 2021) *CNN*.
- “*Trump’s most ‘outrageous’ sayings on Latinos*” (Moreno, 2016).
- “*Trump versus the truth: The most outrageous falsehoods of his presidency*” (Timm, 2020).
- “*Trump’s sayings about Muslims*” (Zurcher, 2017).
- “*Final tally of lies: Analysts say Trump told 30,000 mistruths—that’s 21 a day—during presidency*” (Spocchia, 2021).
- “*Trump’s craziest things*” (Glass, 2015).
- “*All the President’s Lies About the Coronavirus*” (Paz, 2020).
- “*Trump’s ‘dumbest’ sayings*” (Chang, 2017).
- “*A List of ‘big Lies’ That Donald Trump Told During His 2024 US Presidential Announcement*” (Sengupta, 2022).
- “*Trump’s offensive comments on women*” (Cohen, 2017).
- “*All of Donald Trump’s Dirty Words Collected in One New Anti-Trump Ad*” (Fisher, 2016).
- “*Trump’s most ‘scariest things’ he has ever said*” (Atkin, 2016).
- “*Here’s a Running List of President Trump’s Lies And Other Bullshit*” (Georgantopoulos, 2017).
- “*Trump made 30,573 false or misleading claims as president. Nearly half came in his final year*” (Kessler, 2021).
- “*Trump’s attacks on the media*” (Khazan, 2017).
- *Trump’s sayings that ‘would have doomed’ others* (Bump, 2016).
- “*President Trump’s Lies, the Definitive List*” (Leonhardt & Thompson, 2017).
- “*The Complete List of Trump’s Twitter Insults (2015–2021)*” (Quealy, 2021).

It is beyond the scope of this chapter to have a detailed discursive examination of the content of the inventories of Donald Trump’s falsehoods or “lies,” but a cursory analysis of the headlines above will show numerous discursive threads that have become a characteristic of news media coverage of phenomenon of Trump’s compendiums:

1. Figures: There is an interest in numbers and percentages. Notice the few headlines in which the news media highlight not only the total number falsehoods, but they give how many were committed on average on a single day over a certain

period of time. Note also how the periods covered differ, with some media bent on updating and revising content despite Trump's loss of power.

2. **Lexis:** The headlines include lexical items, particularly adjectives that are attitudinal, i.e., expressing a viewpoint, i.e., "dirty, false, doomed, outrageous, offensive, and misleading." But expressing attitude or viewpoint goes even further as it is reinforced by the prevalence of superlatives like "scariest, dumbest, craziest, most outrageous." The major discursive features include short sentences, nominalizations, quotes, strings of noun phrases as well as reliance on color and other orthographic features language provides like italics and bold types. The discourse itself is distinctive as it economizes on the use of words, producing the type of content that is more relevant and suitable to headline writing.
3. **Coverage:** The headlines can be discursively divided into two types: First, original headlines by the news organizations that have compiled the lists; second, headlines by news media covering the original compendiums. The former mostly have numbers in them, or words like *list*, *compendium*, *tally*, and their synonyms. The latter, seek to write separate headlines to whip up public interest. The compendiums become the source of numerous news stories in which news outlets select specimens in line with their thrust and ideological placement. For example, *ShortList* opts for the ones which are most entertaining to readers "The 75 most ridiculous Trump quotes: the best Donald Trump quotes revealed" (Fawbert, 2021); *cleveland.com* selects "50 outrageous Donald Trump quotes" (Pelzer, 2016); *The Irish Post* opts for "Donald Trump's craziest quotes as US President" (Brent, 2021); and *The Atlantic* provides: "An unfinished compendium of Trump's overwhelming dishonesty during a national emergency" (Paz, 2020).
4. **Saturation:** The prolificacy of compendiums and their sheer volume has added a new discursive feature to the numerous threads scholars have identified when analyzing Trump's discourse (Barkho, 2022). I call it "saturation discourse" because Trump's "zone-flooding" strategy has saturated the media ecosystem and the digitized news cycle with his way of looking at the world. The news media, instead of focusing on sifting fact from fiction so that the public will have the right information to take enlightened and right decision, inundated their pages with what Trump says and appointed full-time fact-checking teams to prove him wrong. The media, probably unintentionally, have been saturated with stories and feature reports about what is the truth, translating Trump's strategy of "zone-flooding" into action. "Zone-flooding," as Bannon explained in a 2017 Conservative Political Action Conference talk, is epistemic in the sense it has morphed into a concept that calls for the "deconstruction" not only of truth but of the "administrative state," its institutions, and relations with allies, the outside world and almost everything is not like us or with us (Rucker, 2017).
5. **Disorientation:** The compendiums are an outcome of "Zone-flooding," which has disoriented the public. Trump's "zone-flooding" is not to persuade people but to undermine their sense of truth. "Zone-flooding" is to disorient and not convince; it is to undermine people's sense of truth. The overabundance of coverage about Donald Trump, what he says, what he tweets, and what he does, and particularly the massive effort put forth by the mainstream media to compile the

compendiums and to fact check his misinformation, has resulted in a “liquid society” in which “a sense of uncertainty pervades everything.” Trump and his communication strategists have sought to shape our very reality by creating a “surreal atmosphere . . . to disorient us and under our sense of truth” (Pomerantsev, 2019, cited in Lazitski, 2020, p. 1167). “Zone-flooding” stipulates that conservative narratives should no longer be confined to conservative news outlets or be part of conservative news cycles. Conservative narratives, regardless of whether they are fiction or fact, should move to the liberal mainstream media (Green, 2017).

6. Compulsion: Zone-flooding, besides being a concept, it is the dynamic that nudged or energized liberal media like *CNN*, *MSNBC*, *The New York Times*, and *The Washington Post* to give ample platforms to Trump officials to reinforce their narrative, though they knew it was far from truth, and then draw up long lists of Trump “lies” which they are still updating and fact-checking.
7. Formatting: All items in the compendiums are numbered and then are divided into themes. For instance, *CNN* categorizes Trump’s “5,276 false things” into over 130 categories and filters them by 10 different sources (Dale, 2019). The news broadcaster gives numbers to each of the “false things” which are mainly quotations of Trump’s Tweets, or citations from speeches, interviews, or addresses. Fact-checking text accompanies every “false thing” and it is mostly detailed. But what attracts attention is the fact that “false things” are in bold with larger letters and conspicuous, while fact-checking is in smaller letters and usually too long in comparison.
8. New news style: The catalogs are usually introduced with an introduction written by the editor or the compiler themselves. The falsehoods are either presented via bullets, numbered lists, recurrent themes, or all three forms together. What is interesting to note is the extensive effort some mainstream media exert to update their lists despite the fact that Trump leaving the White House, albeit grudgingly, nearly 3 years ago. The other emerging aspect is the fact-checking language, which shows a discursive threat on the linguistic tools necessary to debunk claims. Mainstream organizations already add “how to fact check” to their own style guides. We may not wait long to see how to compile a compendium on “lies” becomes part of “The diversity of style guides” (Kanigel, 2019). *Politico Magazine* says media’s interest in Trump’s “falsehoods” and the attempt to have them cataloged does do not “come not singly but in constant stream.” (Konnikova, 2017).

## Discussion and Conclusion

The Trump phenomenon has witnessed the emergence of a new journalistic genre, that is the compiling of catalogs about lies and falsehoods on the one hand, and the writing of news stories about these catalogs. There is no exact count of the number of the long lists the mainstream media have produced, but those by the liberal news

outlets, particularly *CNN*, *The New York Times*, and *The Washington Post*, stand out as the most comprehensive and most quoted and covered. Besides, there are numerous specialized catalogs in which their authors, tackle the falsehoods in particular areas and topics ranging from countries, people, organizations, to voter fraud, and race relations. The mainstream media, probably unintentionally, are discursively and linguistically drowned in “zone-flooding.” New York times editor, in the introduction to the newspaper’s compendium writes, “The country should not allow itself to become numb to them (lies)” (Leonhardt & Thompson, 2017).

When linguistic and discursive practices pregnant with falsehoods and lies permeate journalism practice for the sake of cataloging and fact-checking, the media fall prey to the conceptual underpinnings of “zone-flooding.” Conditions are exacerbated because we stop short of undertaking a critical inquiry to test, compare and parallel our own language and practice when condemning or rejecting the language and practice of the life experiences of others. There is the risk of failing to grasp the epistemology of inter-subjectivity and critical inquiry that calls for dialogue and critical inquiry if we restrict our interpretation of social reality to language and practice reflecting our own temperament (Davidson, 1997; Rorty, 1967). The temperament behind the compendiums and their fact-checking is rather a sentimental and not a rational response. The compendiums have not done much to revise, correct, or change the perceptions of the public, hence the apparent failure of the compendiums and their fact-checking techniques of influencing public perceptions (Reed & Dowling, 2018; Tavernise & Gardiner, 2019).

As the mainstream media intensify coverage and reinforce repetition, “zone-flooding” gathers more momentum, and Trump and his ideologists become more confident of their beliefs and how suitable they are for the whole society (James, 1975). In a situation like this, three different life worlds emerge: (1) our way of life is “light,” and the way of life of those who are not like us is “darkness”; (2) we fail to fully understand or gain a good insight and vision of other people’s way of life; and (3) the compendiums and their fact-checking exclude others from the “light,” and condemn them to “darkness.” “Zone-flooding,” in the first place, aims to overwhelm or disorient the opposite public by inundating their media zone or sphere with linguistic and discursive practices that need intensive fact-checking to prove their provenance and authenticity (Remnick, 2018; Splichal, 2010). Does fact-checking “change what people think, believe, or do?” The answer generally is “sort of,” but the effect is modest or negligible in polarized societies where certain sections tenaciously adhere to their deeply held beliefs (Benkelman, 2019). In a tense atmosphere of political polarization or social orientation, such as the United States, partisans will “never [be] missing it when the data support their view. If [the data] doesn’t, they’re turning on the cognitive afterburners” to rationalize their beliefs and the way they think and do (cf. Habermas, 1973; James, 1975; Tompkins, 2020).

When a major news outlet like *The Washington Post* compiles an inventory of tens of thousands of “lies” by a then sitting US president (Trump), and attempts to fact-check them, for many, we are living or rather accepting to live in a bogus, and intentionally misleading world, in which any attempt to find out the truth will be frowned up. The inventories of Trump’s falsehoods are historically earth-shattering

but they have apparently done little to change mindsets or move public opinion. The number of narratives and counter-narratives is mindboggling, but the narratives that stay more in people's minds are the ones which dominate the news cycle or sphere (Clark, 2021) or are churned out as part of "zone-flooding." Dave Roberts (2020) warns against what he calls "epistemic crisis" or "tribal epistemology" characterizing politics and the media in the United States where the foundations for shared truth, or truth crossing the usual partisan lines, are shaky and insecure. Speaking or writing about a conflict has to be creative, Dewey (1981) tells us; otherwise, we will find ourselves in a dangerous position in which our minds may hibernate and accept business and corporate narratives with complacency. Our modern age has seen a "language turn" in which there is emphasis on linguistic practices and speech acts, but these acts and practices have reinstated dualism and fixed dichotomies plaguing social reality and public sphere, even in societies with a claim to democracy and freedom of speech (Rorty, 1967). Our discursive and social practices should be inferential if we are to be fair and honest and want to succeed in efforts to steer away from idealism and monism and making ourselves single judges of truth (Crick, 2003).

Emphasis on dualism in language and practice was further reinforced when Donald Trump assumed US presidency in 2017, and the compendiums have intensified it. The intensification of the dualistic discourse during Trump's era and the overabundant focus on these compendiums and their fact-checking permeated politics and the media despite many philosophers' warnings of the dangers of adopting what amounts to Cartesian dualisms due to their fluidity in understanding the world. Cartesian dualisms are risky in language and practice, because they are based on prejudice and prejudgment (Bernstein, 2005, 2010; Plowright, 2016). According to Popper (1963), a critical inquiry is necessary not only when criticizing, testing, or seeking to substantiate or refute a scientific claim. It is also vital to test the social reality of the discursive concepts and practices in today's world divided into opposing camps, alliances, and groups. Our world requires a shift in focus from ideals, ideas, or hypotheses to the consequences of what we say and do. It is not enough to maintain that what we say and do is "common sense." The problems besetting our world prove that the doctrine of "commonsensism" is not viable any more (Lemos, 2001). What is commonsense diverges because we have various ways of life and numerous beliefs and each one of us sees theirs as "the bedrock of truth." (Critical Common-Sensism, 2014). However, this "bedrock" of truth, Peirce tells us, is not impossible to doubt or question. Our different ways of life and numerous beliefs make it necessary for us to acknowledge "that what has been indubitable one day has often been proved on the morrow to be false" (Peirce, 1940, p. 297).

The compendiums' apparent aim is to render Trump linguistically "superfluous." But there is a danger here, despite his multitude of falsehoods and "lies." A system in which each party attempts to make the other "superfluous," according to Arendt (1958), is an "arbitrary system" in which the denial of "the linguistic right" is a harbinger for the denial of human rights of a whole group or population. Arendt (p. 451) says rendering other groups linguistically "superfluous" means they have no rights, since the aim of an "arbitrary system" is to destroy the civil rights of a whole

group or population. Arendt's thesis of how an "arbitrary system" can deny and destroy the human rights of "the whole population" can be extended to the denial of "the linguistic rights" of a group or a population is entitled to. She maintains that the denial of human rights of a group is normally accompanied by a denial of its discourse. The violation of human rights of a group goes hand in hand with the distortion and constraint of the group's language, adds Arendt (1965, p. 451).

The analysis shows that US media efforts to catalog Trump's misinformation, falsehoods, and "lies" and the journalistic endeavor to fact-check him have eroded public perception of truth. Despite these concerted efforts to show Trump at his reality, US journalism failed to clear up the confusion his discourse has caused and ironically have fed into his "zone-flooding" strategy.

One particular implication of the study is that while compilations as an emerging journalistic genre matter, they need to be treated cautiously. In the absence of solid academic research, and despite the analysis provided in this chapter, it is still early to determine how exactly compendiums of lies work. The other implication is that it is difficult to determine a plausible discursive alternative to document Trump at this stage.

In conclusion, this chapter may not have addressed the important issue of how effective compendiums of falsehoods and fact-checking can be to counter misinformation, particularly in a polarized and socially and politically disoriented society like the United States. Thus, I will repeat the questions I raised earlier, and leave it to the reader to assess or measure whether good light has been shed on them.

- Have fact-checkers succeeded, for instance, in persuading Donald Trump to stop making "lies"?
- Have the long inventories of tens of thousands of falsehoods and lies mainstream US media have cataloged and fact-checked turned Trump into an honest person, or at least embarrassed or shamed him?
- And more importantly, have the compendiums and fact-checking changed public perceptions of what constitutes truth?

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# The Trump Effect: A Journalistic Discourse Analysis of Islamophobic Rhetoric in Facebook Comments



Burton Speakman and Anisah Bagasra

**Abstract** This chapter takes a mixed methods approach to review the potential influence that Donald Trump's rhetoric may have on the Facebook comments posted on stories published by conservative media in the United States that mention Islam or Muslims. Both qualitative and quantitative content analysis was used to identify Islamophobic rhetoric and imagery. This study suggests that the rhetoric of Trump appears to contribute to a growing form of Islamophobic partisan hegemony on the political right. The results of this study showed that within right-wing media, more than 20% of Facebook comments on stories that relate to Islam or Muslims were Islamophobic. These results suggest an increasing pattern among the political right in the United States of social media commentary that dehumanize or otherize Muslims is part and parcel of this community's accepted rhetoric. Furthermore, it suggests that the influence of Trump has made the public willing to present material that would be unlikely to be accepted if posted about other minority groups. The study does suggest that not all conservative news sources or Trump's Facebook page itself receive Islamophobic comments equally. However, it intimates that networked gatekeeping (the removal of posts by the companies that manage the news source) likely has a larger influence on which news sources had little to no Islamophobic content as opposed to any real differences in opinion of those who commented.

**Keywords** Networked Gatekeeping · Partisan Hegemony · Islamophobia · Facebook · Conservative media · Donald Trump · Rhetoric · Muslims · American Presidency · Xenophobia · USA · Hate Crime

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Many thanks to the anonymous reviewers for their comments and to Dr. Adebawale Akande for his professorial editorial assistance.

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## Introduction

Starting with his bid for the presidency Donald Trump began to influence the framing of Muslims, especially as it relates to immigration, and particularly for those on the political right (Ogan et al., 2018). Trump was able to take advantage of the existing framing of Muslims among those on the far-right in the United States that primarily presented them as the “Other” as part of an “us versus them” dynamic (Gottschalk et al., 2008; Khan et al., 2021; Ogan et al., 2018; Said, 2008). In fact, the anti-Muslim rhetoric that had popularized on the right following 9/11 had a strong influence on the Trump presidency (Pertwee, 2020). Most of Trump’s statements about Muslims boil down to Muslims as a threat, Muslims as an immigration problem, or metaphors designed to portray Muslims in some negative fashion (Khan et al., 2021; Jalalian Daghigh & Rahim, 2020; Khan et al., 2019). Trump’s rhetoric is important because, overall, it is nearly impossible to underestimate Trump’s influence on conservatives in the United States (Lee, 2017; McHendry Jr., 2018; Speakman & Bagasra, 2022).

The goal of Trump’s rhetoric was to utilize media framing to tie into the fears of a portion of the population who feel left behind as the United States has become more pluralistic over several decades (Hampton, 2018). The rhetoric connects to the concept of the angry white male who feels that other cultures are taking over “their” country (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018; Munn, 2020; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2018). Trump has both taken advantage of and accelerated a move within the Republican Party from a mainstream conservative party to a far-right one that has been taken over by pitchfork politics (Hemmer, 2022; Mudde, 2017). The modern Republican Party relies upon these angry white men to get elected, which pushes these politicians to use rhetoric that appeals to racists, Xenophobes, and Islamophobes (Anderson, 2016). Trump is responsible through his rhetoric for helping to rejuvenate the far-right subculture within the United States. by lending his support or perceived support to their grievances (Hemmer, 2022; Mudde, 2017). His statements on Muslims prior to and after becoming president of the United States helped to galvanize a movement demonizing Muslim Americans, further eroding Muslim civil rights and public opinion of Muslims (Pertwee, 2020). The long-term and far-reaching consequences of this rhetoric on anti-Muslim attitudes in mainstream and social media will be explored in this chapter.

Donald Trump started to actively engage in clear anti-Muslim rhetoric in 2015 in the early stages of his political campaign (Johnson & Hauslohner, 2021). One of his earliest pledges (if he were to become president) was to kick all Syrian refugees out of the country because they might be a secret army. He followed this with comments on Fox Business and MSNBC about considering closing all mosques, then in November of 2015 said he was open to creating a database of all Muslims in the United States. Within the same year, he repeated misinformation about Arabs in New Jersey celebrating on 9/11, continued to insinuate that Barack Obama was Muslim, and stated that Islam hates “us.” By 2016, the term radical Islamic terrorism was a regular part of his rhetoric, and a “Muslim ban” of citizens from seven

Muslim-majority countries was enacted under his administration. Trump's anti-Muslim rhetoric was often tied to anti-immigration sentiment, repeating ideas that Muslims fail to assimilate, want sharia law, and that terrorist attacks in the United States committed by Muslims (such as the San Bernadino shootings and Pulse nightclub shootings) were a result of our ineffective immigration system (Johnson & Hauslohner, 2021).

After his election, Trump continued to engage in anti-Muslim and anti-Islam rhetoric laced with misinformation (Khan et al., 2021; Krieg, 2017; Patel & Levinson-Waldman, 2017). Trump often made comments to conservative news media following both domestic and international incidents involving Muslims in addition to tweets from his Twitter account. This combination of statements in partisan media and through social media reached a greater audience and further legitimized anti-Muslim sentiment during the Trump presidency. Studies have analyzed the impact of both the 2016 election and the Trump presidency on Muslim Americans and have found that perceived religious discrimination during the election impacted the physical and psychological well-being of Muslim Americans (Abelson et al., 2020; Abu-Ras et al., 2018).

Trump has encouraged some of the worst elements of right-wing racist communication (Peters & Allan, 2022). One of those elements is the promotion of "news" sources that are not just partisan, but at times counterfactual. For example, Trump referred to Infowars as one of his favorite news sources (McNair, 2018). Because of Trump's position of power, endorsement of these media sources provided a level of credibility and acceptance that previously kept these far-right media outlets on the fringes (McNair, 2018). However, by the time of Trump's enactment of the so-called Muslim ban, right-wing media were unabashedly framing Muslim immigrants as a threat to US national security who were unable to integrate into American culture (Jan & Shah, 2020). The mainstream press through attempts at objectivity struggled in their coverage of Trump, just as they had of other far-right candidates in the past (Pruden, 2020). Trump's rise was a sign of a broken media system in which reality was questioned by many powerful individuals (Happer et al., 2019).

This chapter demonstrates the extension of Trump's anti-Muslim rhetoric to other far-right media and specifically public displays of Islamophobia on Facebook. The information stems from a mixed-method research project that examined Facebook comments on posts from popular conservative news sources mentioning Islam and Muslims. The Facebook pages included Fox News, The Wall Street Journal, Ben Shapiro, Tomi Lahren, Breitbart, Rush Limbaugh, The Hill, The Daily Wire, and the Comical Conservative which each has between 17 million and 1.9 million likes, making them the highest among conservative media personalities or publications on Facebook. Additionally, the page of former President Donald J. Trump was added to the study because of his dominance over the rhetoric and media coverage within modern conservatism, and his page also had the largest number of likes at 24 million (McHendry Jr., 2018; Messing & Westwood, 2014; Sykes, 2017). The initial stage of the project was an explorative qualitative content analysis of liberal, mainstream, and conservative sources with the highest likes on Facebook. The results showed that significantly more Islamophobic commenting occurred on



conservative public news pages. The efforts then focused on those Facebook pages, with coders engaging in both qualitative and quantitative content analysis. The goal was to examine what occurs in the comment area of conservative sources in new stories relating to Islam or Muslims. The Ad Fontes Media chart that ranks media based on all content was used to determine how far ideologically right the source typically produces content (Muller, 2022). Data was collected in 2019 and 2020 and included posts going as far back as 2017. Data was collected using keyword searches on the identified pages including the words “Islam,” “Muslim,” “Arab,” and the names of specific Muslim politicians such as Ilhan Omar. Keyword searches on these public pages yielded posts, usually news articles that were shared. All comments on these posts were included in the content analysis to identify the frequency and common themes in the comments section. In this way, we were able to see how individuals engaged with and in Islamophobic rhetoric, and how this rhetoric relates to that perpetuated by Donald Trump.

## Media Coverage of Muslims

Before considering partisan media specifically, it is important to first understand the challenges that exist in general media coverage of Muslims. In the case of Muslim Americans, it can be suggested that fear and media coverage led to much of the formation of public opinion following the September 11, 2001 attacks and the start of the War on Terror (Esses et al., 2013; Gardner et al., 2008; Kabir et al., 2018; Nacos et al., 2007; Terman, 2017). The current efforts to dehumanize Muslims are reminiscent of the dehumanization of perceived enemies in wars of the past (Keen, 1991; Waller, 2007). For example, during World War II, there were significant examples within popular culture where the Japanese were presented as less than human (Keen, 1991; Sapre, 2004). Presenting a perceived enemy as less than human makes them easier to kill and any actions taken against them simpler to justify (Nacos et al., 2007). The use of propaganda, biased media coverage, and racist rhetoric in news stories have long contributed to dehumanization. It can be seen throughout history that colonists determined that Native Americans were savages as a form to justify actions or that it was fine to enslave Africans because they were lesser people (Waller, 2007).

Media coverage and popular culture examples of Muslims overwhelmingly frame them in a manner that is orientalist and a threat to Western society (Kabir et al., 2018; Nacos et al., 2007). These frames are significant as most people rely on forms of media for their knowledge and perception of Muslims (Nacos et al., 2007) as only around 38% of Americans report personally knowing a Muslim (Lipka, 2014). The perception created by this framing is that Muslims are destroying the culture of the West and are an enemy to those in Judeo-Christian cultures (Kabir et al., 2018). These media frames influence how people respond, which results in Western media coverage of Muslims that perpetrate overt and covert forms of Islamophobia throughout social media and other digital platforms (Kabir et al., 2018). These



frames are also supported by some prominent individuals such as Franklin Graham, who referred to “Islam as evil” and worships a different God than Christians (Nacos et al., 2007, p. 29). This creates the image of Muslims as the villain (Kabir et al., 2018; Nacos et al., 2007), which is then expanded on social media to dehumanize the villain to make them easier to hate. One example of media influence is that the burqa has become a symbol of jihadism (Kabir et al., 2018). The ignoring of Muslim views exists in mainstream media coverage, with less than half of those quoted about Islam in news coverage being Muslim themselves (Nacos et al., 2007). Furthermore, the Muslim community has felt unable to comment on various platforms to defend Islam or Muslims following the Sept. 11, 2001 attacks. This is not to say that within social media, Muslims have not found their own spaces to communicate. However, studies have concluded that negative media portrayals of Muslims continue to increase, and these negative portrayals occur significantly more often than negative framing of other religious or ethnic minority groups in the United States (Lajevardi, 2021). The lack of representation of Muslims in the media and positive framing of Muslims contribute to the general public’s anti-Muslim attitudes and, even more strikingly, as found in Lajevardi’s (Lajevardi, 2021) empirical study, support for anti-Muslim policies such as Muslim immigration and re-entry policies. Research has also found that negative news coverage influences Muslim Americans’ identity (Saleem et al., 2019).

## Visual Representations

Visuals in the media relating to Muslims deserve scrutiny as well since they help to trigger stronger reactions in people (Nacos et al., 2007). The most common visuals and mentions of Muslims in the media serve the purpose of dehumanization (Dreher, 2010). In fact, a study of images following September 11, 2001, suggests that as many as 70% of images of Muslims in the media can be perceived as negative (Nacos et al., 2007). Many media outlets only cover these groups on rare occasions and as a form of special interest which differentiates them from those considered typical (Dreher, 2010). The images of Muslims have and continue to portray what is essentially a caricature of the group as opposed to a true representation of its diversity (Nacos et al., 2007; Said, 2008). Muslim men are often portrayed as evil killers, while women are presented as powerless and passive victims (Nacos et al., 2007). Even if minority groups speak up, it does not ensure they are heard if the potential audience is unwilling to listen to the message (Dreher, 2010). When terrorism occurs Muslims, unlike other groups, are constantly asked to defend and explain themselves (Dreher, 2010). The following images are just a few examples of dozens of images posted in the comments sections of the Facebook posts analyzed by the researchers.

Such image connects to the concept of Muslims as invaders. The comments that went along with these posts stated things like “Two of the Domestic Terrorist in our Congress!!!!,” “The American people better wake up! The enemy is here!” and “Prosecute this (SIC) evil ones!” Further images from the collection would make statements such as Christians are beheaded in Muslim counties, while Muslims are welcomed in Western nations. There are also numerous complaints about Democrats supporting Muslims, insinuating Republicans do not. There were also many posts containing images of Muslim members of congress, particularly Ilhan Omar and often portraying her as nonhuman, most commonly as a snake. Anti-Muslim Memes found on Facebook frequently contained doctored images. One example features the newly elected congresswomen Ilhan Omar, Rashida Tlaib, Ayanna Pressley, and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez are sitting at a conference table with an ISIS flag and a portrait of Osama bin Laden in the background. The image has been doctored to alter the portrait in the background and add the ISIS flag. The creation of dehumanizing imagery using a combination of misinformation, doctored images, and fear tactics contributes to ongoing negative framing of Islam and Muslims on media platforms. Dehumanizing imagery in the form of memes on Facebook pages further perpetuates misinformation about Islam and Muslims, promotes conspiracy theories, and isolates Muslims by utilizing fear appeals to further embolden conservative followers of these pages to engage in hate speech against Muslims. Hate speech and dehumanizing imagery in memes typically go undetected by Facebook’s algorithms and, therefore, unchallenged. This leads to one of the technology challenges posited by Hawley (2017), where he stated that the new generation of far-right online messaging understands social media platforms and how to circumvent potential safeguards. Additionally, even when it is reported, it is protected under freedom of political speech and not seen as violating Facebook’s community standards.

## Conservative Media

Conservative media have a considerable influence in shaping how their audience thinks about Muslims and Islam. Conservative media typically run an overwhelming portion of content that is designed to support their partisan beliefs (Savage, 2012). The nativist portion of the Tea Party supported through conservative media is vocally anti-Muslim (Burack & Snyder-Hall, 2012). In one post on Tomi Lahren’s Facebook page, there is an article about a bombing in Somalia where Tomi Lahren asked why “they” hated America. These comments were made on a story about a Muslim country, yet Lahren does not specifically reference headlines in the post, simply generically referring rhetoric towards Muslims frequently stated by Trump. Some comments tried to address this and were quickly attacked. For example, in one case, commenters are simply responding to someone named Mohammed, who makes a negative comment against Trump, and in another, to someone who stated that Lahren was attempting to manufacture outrage among her followers.

Multiple posters went to a trope from right-wing media that Barack Obama started the hatred of America, and one claimed Obama was a Muslim as well. Another was responding to a poster that had been critical of Lahren and the conversation by referring to that poster as a “goat lover.” Other comments would respond with pictures stating things like “I wonder what’s under that scarf?” These comments demonstrate swift and vocal retaliation against any poster who tried to address misinformation or engage in criticism of media that encouraged anti-Muslim rhetoric.

An analysis of the public pages of these conservative media sites suggests a series of patterns and themes in posts and comments related to Islam and Muslims that includes comments and images that degrade and dehumanize Muslims. The analysis of conservative news organizations’ public Facebook pages revealed that commenters reflect present Islamophobic rhetoric and imagery that serves to delegitimize Islam and Muslims, while also engaging in overt and persistent actions that attempt to silence any support for Muslims. The findings suggest that there is still a considerable effort to perpetuate stereotypes of Muslim culture. Specific frames used state Muslims are dangerous and/or terrorists and compare Islam to a cult. This supports prior research (Ekman, 2015; Yusof et al., 2013) yet extends it by looking specifically at a location on social media where the public comes for unbiased journalistic information. “Islam is a cult” was one of the most common recurring themes made by commenters. Refusing to recognize Islam as a legitimate religion is used as justification for disrespecting their religious practices, such as wearing any type of headdress.

There were commenters that stated Islamophobic tropes such as “there is no such thing as a peaceful and moderate Muslim. Islam is a dangerous murdering supremacist cult.” They also promoted misinformation that is common on the right that states that the McCarran Walters Act of 1952 had banned Islam and Sharia Law in the United States. The poster then added, “Islam is NOT a religion, it’s an ideology and an ideology of Hate.” There is so much misinformation on the right surrounding the McCarran Walters Act that [FactCheck.org](#) felt the need to address the issue (Fichera, 2018), as did [PolitiFact](#) (O’Rourke, 2019).

Another common portrayal of Islam is the association with terrorism or violence. Associations were often made with terrorist organizations. Another pattern observed was the idea that anyone or anything with any relation to Islam or the Middle East could not be American or patriotic. For example, one poster stated, “ASSIMILATE this is the United States. Got to the middle east and see if any of us don’t ASSIMILATE we can die.”

These comments echo the ideas presented by Boulahnane (2018) that Muslims are a collective “other” that cannot be assimilated into Western culture. They solidify the idea that under no circumstance is sympathy or mercy for this group justified and is a prevalent belief among the public. Any attempts to refute the idea that there are Muslims who do not sympathize with terrorism are quickly squashed by commenters making statements like this “It’s people like you who are ignorant of the fact that these brainwashed women wanted to fight and kill in the name of Islam, it’s the

idiotic left that are trying to turn Christian countries into Islamic ones by stifling opposition and you are one of them.”

## **Trump’s Influence on Conservative Media**

Trump has often succeeded in manipulating the media, gaining considerable attention in conservative media, starting with promoting the Obama birther conspiracy; he also received mainstream coverage for the comments, but the coverage was mostly derisive (Hemmer, 2022; Marwick & Lewis, 2017). Hyperpartisan news sources on the right such as *The Daily Caller*, *The Gateway Pundit*, *The Washington Examiner* and *Infowars* were supportive of Trump and his agenda early in his campaign (Marwick & Lewis, 2017).

During Coronavirus the symbiotic relationship between conservative media and Trump was clear based on research that shows that in certain coverage of Coronavirus Trump would dictate coverage on Fox News, and in other cases, Fox News would create narratives that would then be followed by Trump (Yang & Bennett, 2021). Both Fox News and Trump would use pseudo-experts (sometimes the same ones) in an attempt to make the Coronavirus pandemic appear less serious (Yang & Bennett, 2021). This is part of Trump’s history as a politician of using conservative media to push conspiracy theories (Marwick & Lewis, 2017). There has been a certain segment of the US political right that has been willing for some time to believe conspiracy theories, and Trump was successful at tapping into and expanding that segment using partisan media (Hemmer, 2022). These actions by Trump and other conservative politicians helped aid the rise of conspiracy theories such as QAnon, which directly relates to Trump as a Messiah-like figure (Funk & Speakman, 2020). Trump was successful in making outlandish statements such as connecting Ted Cruz’s father to the Kennedy assassination, which went unchallenged in partisan media sources. These statements would then receive coverage in mainstream sources because they were made by a political candidate (Marwick & Lewis, 2017). This would expand the reach of the conspiracy beyond the edges of far-right media (Marwick & Lewis, 2017).

## **The Trump Role in the Process**

Trump’s rhetoric on social media helped to create a form of identity for conservatives to let them know who they are against (Khan et al., 2021). In this way, he creates a common enemy using Muslims and differentiates himself from his competition (Khan et al., 2021). Additionally, Trump was willing to connect to movements such as the “Patriot” movement and other hate speech in a way that encouraged those movements and made them believe they had Trump’s support (Eddington, 2018). When conservatives decided to support Trump in 2016, they may

have changed what it means to be conservative in the United States (Lee, 2017). His election and rhetoric helped aid a shift in political identity that included altered doctrine toward a more populist us versus them dynamic and moving the party further right (Dufour & Ducasse, 2020; Espinoza, 2021; Karkour, 2021; Lee, 2017). Populism focuses on rhetoric designed around people, in this case, true Americans, in a nationalist fashion, and that leaders have failed those people (Biegon, 2019). The populist movement is not unique to the United States and is occurring in various locations worldwide (Destradi & Plagemann, 2019; Petersmann, 2020). This populist movement often takes an authoritative role (Regilme Jr, 2019). In many countries, part of this populist movement was the increased vitriolic rhetoric toward Muslims, in particular refugees (Destradi & Plagemann, 2019; Espinoza, 2021). “Trump builds certain pillars of identity using his language, which is damaging and dehumanizing to Muslims and Muslim refugees trying to seek shelter in America. Tweets of Trump define Muslims more as animals and criminals than as people trying to seek refuge in the United States to secure their future” (Khan et al., 2021). This was part of the overarching rhetoric that minority groups are creating changes, and those changes are dangerous (Espinoza, 2021). It is important to note that this effect is not limited to Trump and has appeared in far-right movements throughout the Western world (Lien, 2021; Newth & Maccaferri, 2022). There have been those who have argued that Trump’s rise in the United States was part of a failure within the United States for either the political parties or the federal government’s system to combat extremism (Foley, 2022; Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018).

Trump is known for engaging in deceptive and combative rhetoric toward anyone who he perceives to be an enemy, or frankly, even those he does not believe appreciate him or his work enough (Elving, 2022). Overall Trump’s actions such as having dinner with Kanye West and known white supremacist Nick Fuentes represent an example of his unwillingness to distance himself Trump, and those in the GOP who enable these actions help to push the lines of acceptable behavior for the party (Bump, 2022). However, Trump often fails to criticize or rebuke those he believes support him at times, even to his potential detriment (Perry, 2018). His rhetoric following Charlottesville’s United the Right rally of white supremacists suggested he felt sympathy for the white supremacist cause (Perry, 2018). There were numerous incidents where he refused to condemn people who supported him such as David Duke, QAnon, and several other white supremacists (Cook, 2017; Domonoske, 2016; Green, 2020; Smith et al., 2020).

Despite this history, while Trump is referenced in many Islamophobic posts found on Facebook there are no Islamophobic posts on stories posted on Facebook pages analyzed by the authors where Trump comments about Muslims. There are two possible explanations for this; the first is that somehow Trump’s Islamophobic rhetoric does not create a similar social media response; however, perhaps the more reasonable response is simply that Trump has employees who manage his social media who remove the worst comments, so they are not associated with him. This connects to the idea of networked gatekeeping.

## Networked Gatekeeping

Within online networked environments such as social media, there are numerous gatekeeping roles, although the tools they use to limit material may be less obvious (Barzilai-Nahon, 2006; Coddington & Holton, 2014). These gatekeeping activities might include selection, addition, withholding, displaying, shaping, manipulation, repetition, promotion, and deletion of material (Barzilai-Nahon, 2005). The goal of network-based gatekeepers can be preventing undesired information, keeping certain information from getting outside the network, and finally controlling the information exchanged within the network (Barzilai-Nahon, 2005; Barzilai-Nahon, 2008).

The decentralized nature of the new gatekeeping process challenges past iterations of gatekeeping theory (Wallace, 2018). People choose to some degree how involved to be, with some being more active in spaces such as social media (Garimella et al., 2018). Social media creates a situation where the public has a quasi-gatekeeping function, and a quasi-gatewatching function (Achor & Nnabuko, 2019). Quasi-gatekeeping roles on Facebook include the public ability to report posts, despite not having ultimate authority to remove them. The public can post information on their feed that provides what they believe is important information, similar to journalists directing audiences on social media to reliable news (Bruns, 2005). The role of posting is to allow some material to flow through the gates to their friends with their endorsement while other material does not (Achor & Nnabuko, 2019).

However, despite the increased role of the public in gatekeeping on social media, one must consider that there are different layers of participants in the process (Chakraborty et al., 2019; T. Yang & Peng, 2020). The public must deal with the decisions of the algorithm, which serves as a formal gatekeeper providing a bias toward ideological and conflict-based material (Padgett et al., 2019). They must also deal with the decisions of the original poster in cases where they comment such as the cases included in this study. Those outside decisions could lead to some who form a resistant identity on social media when they believe the common logic excludes their beliefs (Chakraborty et al., 2019).

The results of this research suggest that networked gatekeeping activity is occurring with someone monitoring these conservative media Facebook accounts removing any Islamophobic comments as opposed to a lack of Islamophobic comments being posted. It appears likely that some of these Facebook pages chose to manage their comments as opposed to any real difference in attitude toward Muslims from the commentators. There is research that shows a hard shift to the right among all Republicans in the United States (Hemmer, 2022; Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018). It seems unlikely that other partisan news sources from this study do not engage in some networked gatekeeping as it relates to Facebook. The sites further on the conservative sphere appear less concerned with posting misinformation, and likely consider it less important to remove such material, or likely more on brand with their potential audience. It appears sources such as Breitbart and Ben Shapiro which

contained a number of Islamophobic comments on their stories, have made considerable money and notoriety by posting content designed to inflame passions against Muslims. Breitbart has a considerable history of negative framing of immigration, with a particular framing of Muslims as radicals (Benkler et al., 2018). Our research suggests that articles on Islam were not posted that often, but when they were, they received considerable reactions with multiple responses to each occurrence. This supports prior research that suggests anti-Muslim content from partisan news sources receives considerable engagement on social media (Benkler et al., 2018). A search of Muslim immigration on Breitbart shows headlines such as “‘You White Mother F\*\*\*\*\*!’—No Jail for Anti-White Racists Who Assaulted Council Worker,” “Immigration Judges Grant Lifelong Anonymity in 90% of Cases Involving Extremists: Report,” and “Girl in Sweden Threatened with Rape Because She Was Not ‘Muslim Enough’.” The goal overall seems to be to frighten White readers. Meanwhile, Ben Shapiro tends to focus on the superiority of “Western civilization” (Shapiro, 2019) and also states that the majority of Muslims are radical (Greenberg, 2014).

Of the eight conservative news sources examined as part of this study Breitbart and Ben Shapiro received the most Islamophobic responses to their posts. On Breitbart, there were 104 comments that presented Muslims as dangerous, 55 as less than human, 23 as incompatible with Western society, and 168 posts that used some combination of those three out of 562 total posts. Ben Shapiro posted articles that had 32 comments that presented Muslims as dangerous, 67 as different/and or less than human, 133 as having values incompatible with Western culture, and 97 that included some combination of the three out of 565 total comments. Meanwhile, Tomi Lahren and Fox News received the least number of comments coded as Islamophobic, with one each for Lahren and Fox News. The Daily Wire (32%), Comical Conservative (29%), The Hill (22%), and Donald Trump’s page (4%) were in the middle of the equation with the percentage of comments that were Islamophobic presented above. The differences between these sites do suggest that those posting believe some locations may be more accepting of Islamophobic content than others. For example, the Islamophobic comments on Lahren’s articles often had a forceful response, even if it was from a White liberal as opposed to someone who identified as Muslim. It appeared the responses to these derogatory posts were infrequent at best on the Ben Shapiro and Breitbart posts.

Another prevalent theme that follows from the frames of Islam as a cult or illegitimate religion and Muslims as antithetical to American norms and values is the “enemy within” narrative. This theme, as illustrated in previously mentioned comments and memes, is usually used to frame Muslim politicians and political candidates as the enemy of America. This serves to silence Muslims who consider running for public office, as they know that they will be equated with terrorism, sharia law, and the acts of 9/11 by far-right media. This was demonstrated in the virulent responses to the recent elections of Saffiya Khalid to the City Council in Lewiston, Maine (Farzan, 2019) and Ghazala Hashmi to the State Senate in Virginia (Eason & Gannavarapu, 2019). Both campaigns faced frequent online attacks using the enemy within the frame. One theme was that Muslims were attempting to take



over the world with and without references to Sept. 11, 2001, and that Muslims, even those who move to the United States want to kill US citizens, considering them infidels.

## Response from Liberals

There is also the issue of who might respond, if Islamophobic comments would be willing to stand in these networked environments, or if there were competing gatekeeping measures occurring. In terms of response, those who consider an issue to be personally relevant are more likely to be influenced by hostile reactions (Lu, 2019). People who come across negative material incidentally are unlikely to feel motivated to correct that information (Lu, 2019). However, those who felt anxious were slightly more likely to take corrective action, although this could be through a form other than commenting (Lu, 2019).

The sometimes argumentative nature of Facebook comments does support previous research suggesting that within political contexts, people may be willing to engage more online (Alkazemi, 2015; Lasorsa, 1991), yet it does not consider what happens if people look at the language or memes as an attack on their religion. The challenge for Muslims associated with these dehumanizing portrayals is the impact they have on them as members of a minority population. The messages promoted by the Far-Right, when unchallenged, as they typically are, based on our study's results suggest a silencing of those who defend them. Part of the reason for these messages' success is the changes within conservative communication. The far reaches of the right have shown success in moderating their messages in such a manner to make them more appealing to mainstream audiences (Swain, 2002; Swain & Nieli, 2003). Additionally, these messages are then picked up by commenters friendly to the far-right and amplify those words, phrases, and ideas to larger audiences (Hawley, 2017).

This process can be seen in Facebook comments where people seem to feel comfortable posting Islamophobic material and issues toward Muslims that would be unacceptable, or at a minimum less acceptable, toward any other groups. Previous research has suggested that there are numerous negative impacts from exposure to the dehumanizing rhetoric and imagery on Muslims themselves, including increased perceived discrimination, a decrease in self-esteem, and a decrease in religious identification (Schmuck et al., 2017). Similarly, Afshar (2013) argues that the otherizing process occurring through Islamophobic rhetoric, especially those that equate Islam with Islamism, silences internal debates among Muslims regarding religious teachings. Regardless of the mainstream media or social media format of the rhetoric, there appears to be a clear impact of such rhetoric on Muslims that includes silencing Muslims and their allies from refuting misinformation presented in these media forms. As illustrated in this study, the assertions that Islam is a cult or not a legitimate religion leaves very little room for Muslims and their allies to launch a defense, as the legitimacy of their status as a religion with all the freedoms that



come with such status, is completely dismissed (Uddin, 2019). Also, within the rather limited space of a comment box, it is difficult for Muslims to respond to hundreds of posts and comments contending that their religion is violent, that women are oppressed, and claims that there is a plot to take over America or implement Sharia law, as seen in the thousands of comments to the news story of Ghazala Hashmi's election in Virginia, with hundreds of the posts and memes being Islamophobic. The challenges to countering Islamophobia on social media are often overwhelming, requiring creative and highly organized campaigns by Muslims themselves (Khamis, 2021).

The amount of disagreeable online content would seem to suggest that previous research is correct, that those who come across disagreeable content become less likely to comment (Gearhart & Zhang, 2015). The overall response to the posts was supporting the Islamophobic posts and building upon them. Yet, this does not mean there were not others who responded and attempted to dispute the content. These individuals were often attacked with one or multiple posters, essentially shouting down their comments. Yet, it should be noted this does not mean that they fail to use more passive means of resistance such as reporting posts; however, the number of comments that exist suggest this method is relatively futile. In turn, this would suggest that those who seek to fight bullying comments but are intimidated to not comment themselves would quickly realize a lack of success in their efforts. At least one study (Eckert et al., 2021) did document frustration and emotional exhaustion from experiencing online anti-Muslim prejudice. Their responses to these posts include trying to educate, ignoring, removing friends, and even deleting their social media accounts. Reporting posts was not a documented approach by Muslim Americans in their study. Rather, attempting to respond and defend Islam and Muslims was one end of the spectrum of response, and silence in the form of avoidance was the other end of the spectrum.

## Hegemonic Framing

The idea of counter-jihad has become commonplace in the rhetoric of conservatism in the United States (Pertwee, 2020). It was an idea that Muslims were dangerous and sought through immigration to expand their culture, overtaking Western European and then US culture (Pertwee, 2020). The goal of this rhetoric is to frame Muslims as others who are unworthy of being in the United States and a threat to the United States way of life (Jalalian Daghig & Rahim, 2020; Khan et al., 2019). The goal seems to be to portray them as anti-woman and anti-American (Khan et al., 2019).

It is worth noting that the rhetoric of Trump had some prominence on the right before Trump. However, despite the popularity of nativist politicians on the right such as Pat Buchanan those tendencies were not represented at the top of the Republican Party until Trump (Hemmer, 2022). This transition was supported by conservative media and conservative think tanks that sought to cement the support of

“Angry White Males” for the Republican Party (Hemmer, 2022). The challenge is understanding the major figures on the right work in concert with media and politicians to create what they consider a partisan hegemonic message that seeks to overcome the hegemony they see in mainstream sources (Holt, 2019). The goal of many on the right is to use this form of media to seek legitimacy for their views, which stand outside the hegemonic rhetoric allowed by mainstream media sources (Holt, 2019).

The results of this research show a consistent hegemonic message among those on the right. The simple goal of the right-wing public who commented was to otherize Muslims and makes it seem like their religion brands them incompatible with living here. They also used invader rhetoric to create support for the language that Muslims are dangerous. This suggests that the rhetoric Trump used to talk about Muslims has been adopted by supporters. It seems as though this rhetoric of Muslims as dangerous and antithetical to conservative values has become pervasive within the US right.

Study findings connect the idea that social media provides a forum for those on the US political right to freely express hatred (Lim, 2017). The analysis of posts and comments, including memes, on the public pages of popular conservative media on Facebook, illustrate how Islam and Muslims are abused on these pages. Posts calling Muslims terrorists, linking Muslims to Democrats, and associating those most likely to lend support as terrorists as well is designed to delegitimize anyone who suggests that Islamophobic content is inappropriate, inaccurate, and wrong. To some degree, this was to be expected, and past research shows that even when news stories positively present Muslims corresponding Facebook comments were mostly negative (Lien, 2021). Therefore, one would expect negative comments from outlets that present Muslims far less favorably. This supports the idea that Islamophobia has become part of an increasing hegemonic framing on the right (Speakman & Bagasra, 2022; Speakman & Funk, 2020). Furthermore, it suggests that networked gatekeeping from both the public and social media companies is designed to support hegemony, not the attacked minority. These sites allow considerable bullying of the Muslim population by stating that it is “political speech.” These actions seem to further support the idea of mainstream far-right ideas in Western cultures (Mudde, 2017).

## **Republicans and the 2022 Mid-Term Elections**

There was fear among some that the outsize role of Trump would impact how people feel about the Republican Party by turning the election into a referendum on Trump, as opposed to the more typical referendum on the incumbent in 2022 (Jacobson, 2022). This is based on Trump’s continued promotion of “The Big Lie” and the Jan. 6 congressional committee keeping him prominent (Jacobson, 2022). Further, Jacobson stated that if Republicans did not win the Senate in 2022, Trump would be to blame. The loss of the Senate and smaller-than-expected gains in the United

States. House might explain that following the results of the 2022 mid-term elections, it appears there are more Republicans willing to challenge Trump (Marley et al., 2022; Siders, 2022). In fact, several Republicans did after Trump's dinner with frequent anti-Semitic commentator Kanye West and noted white supremacist Nick Fuentes (Wang et al., 2022).

This occurred because many Trump-backed candidates lost, and some in the party were willing to publicly blame Trump and the extreme candidates he supported (Colvin, 2022; Marley et al., 2022; Simon & Elving, 2022). There were some Republicans who stated the mid-terms represented a second rebuke of Trump, and voters were rejecting his message (Colvin, 2022). However, these general election defeats do not take into account how well Trump-backed candidates did in Republican primaries, with the noted exception of Georgia in the governor and secretary of state races (Martinez, 2022).

The influence of Trump in Georgia seems to have waned even in the primary, with Trump backing candidates to take on Brad Raffensperger for secretary of state and Brian Kemp for governor, but both won (Foley, 2022). Yet, general election results have some Republican's stating they cannot support another Trump Presidential campaign (Colvin, 2022; Simon & Elving, 2022). In fact, some news articles went as far as to call Trump the biggest loser in the 2022 mid-term elections (Wierson, 2022). While others focused on Trump backing candidates with poor resumes who supported election lies that most of the public has disavowed (Jacques, 2022). The power of Trump within the Republican Party may be better shown through the number of traditionally conservative Republicans in the US House of Representatives and Senate who were not considered Trump supporters that chose to resign instead of running in 2022 (Foley, 2022). This is despite the fact that many would have been popular with general election audiences, but the challenge was the primary process (Foley, 2022).

Of course, Trump has attempted to change that narrative by lashing out at other Republicans who are considered challengers for 2024 (Stein & Walters, 2022). However, it is hard to ignore the defection of even long-term supporters of Trump (Wren et al., 2022). But it should be noted there are still many within the party who maintain their support for Trump (Wren et al., 2022). It is unclear how these outcomes may shift Trump's influence on social media rhetoric going forward.

## Conclusion

Overall, these findings suggest that social media, though initially designed to give a greater unrestricted voice to the masses, can serve as a vehicle to silence and sideline already marginalized groups. Bias toward Muslims in mainstream media spills over into social media and is further amplified through repeated and seemingly unmitigated dehumanizing language and imagery in the comments sections of conservative media pages with heavy presence denoted by the number of likes, posts, and comments. These pages serve as a vehicle to strengthen public perceptions and

worldviews and normalize language targeting specific groups as has been demonstrated in this study. This serves to further alienate Muslims who wish to integrate into American society, creating a form of wish fulfillment as their full participation in American society, including free speech, is subtly denied. This Spiral of Silence continues to otherize Muslims and Islam, as they lack representation and mechanisms with which to counter misinformation and subversive narratives and are not seen and heard in these exclusionary spaces.

Donald Trump's role in both legitimizing anti-Muslim bias through his framing of Muslims during his presidential candidacy and presidency, and his increasing legitimization of far-right media sources that willfully spread misinformation has contributed to a wider acceptance of Islamophobic rhetoric within the political sphere. This in turn has led to an increased usage of Islamophobic rhetoric and imagery by nonpolitical figures in the media and everyday individuals who seek to emulate the language used by the former President. The Brennan Center for Justice identified several ways that Trump's anti-Muslim rhetoric has harmed Muslims in the United States. The most prominent example of such rhetoric leading to tangible negative outcomes was the ban on visitors from seven Muslim-majority countries, followed by the placement of Islamophobic staff members to key positions in the White House and reduced response to hate crimes experienced by Muslims and other minority groups (Patel & Levinson-Waldman, 2017). Wider acceptance of the usage of dehumanizing language and imagery targeting select minorities in the United States has significant implications.

The psychological impact of consistently being portrayed negatively within the media and how this exposure impacts usage of social media has yet to be fully studied in Muslim populations, but initial findings suggest that Muslim populations are reacting to and changing their behavior based on negative coverage of Muslims that they are exposed to through various forms of media (Eckert et al., 2021; Haque et al., 2019; Hargreaves, 2016). Data on hate crimes and discrimination against Muslim Americans demonstrate the impact of public perception. Awan and Zempi (2016, 2017) found that victims of online anti-Muslim hate crimes also experienced fear and anxiety around the possibility that cyber threats would lead to offline threats and danger. Hate crimes against Muslims rose after 9/11 and also showed a significant spike in 2016 and 2017 (Agrawal et al., 2019).

Additionally, these portrayals have had real consequences in shaping policy. Public perception of Muslims, and repeated framing of Muslims as violent, as an enemy within, and Islam as a cult contribute to the lack of any opposition to immigration policies such as the so-called Muslim Ban. They also impact public opinion of mosque building projects and Muslim political candidates (Uddin, 2019). As seen in the Facebook attacks against Muslim political candidates, social media is being used to spread misinformation and strengthen the dehumanizing frames to affect elections on the local and state level.

Little effort has been made by social media companies to counter misinformation or anti-Muslim rhetoric occurring on their sites. Hate speech laws and community standards lack stringent safeguards to protect targeted minority communities and often rely on reporting the behaviors of individuals. With support from major

political figures and far-right media personalities, the usage of anti-Muslim rhetoric and imagery on social media platforms such as Facebook is likely to go away without a major overhaul of these platforms.

This study helps further the understanding of the US political right and its rhetoric relating to Muslims and Islam. It suggests that Islamophobic rhetoric has become part and parcel of how conservatives talk about Muslims. Trump established a consistent narrative that Muslims in this country as an invading force who seek to change the United States as opposed to simply being immigrants seeking relief from danger and potentially a better life. The research also suggests that while rhetoric exists throughout the right there are two schools of thought about how to deal with it. The first is that some sources seek to be closer to the mainstream. This corresponds with past research that talks about some on the right moderating or coding their language to appear less openly antagonistic toward minority groups (Hemmer, 2016; Swain, 2002; Swain & Nieli, 2003). However, in this case, it appears that those who seek to moderate are engaging in gatekeeping practices to remove the worst comments they receive from public view as a way of hiding that type of rhetoric. Other sources noted as being further on the right are either less willing to do so for financial reasons (the cost of assigning someone to moderate comments) or because they feel no need to engage in such gatekeeping.

This conversation and rhetoric remain important to watch as the US political right continues to move further right based on the influence of media and key political figures (Benkler et al., 2018; Hemmer, 2022; McHenry Jr., 2018; Mudde, 2017). It is imperative that researchers must continue to watch communication as polarization persists in a mostly one-sided fashion. (Baum & Groeling, 2008; Harel et al., 2020). Additionally, this research attempts to provide insight into the audience of right-wing partisan media—something that is lacking in the research canon (Holt, 2019). The audience seems as though it is moving (or pushing) politicians to the right, and it remains unclear how far that audience and those who influence them will seek to go.

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# The Linguistic Construction of Trump's Social Reality



Leon Barkho

**Abstract** This chapter merges three previous studies in an attempt to arrive at how to construct the social reality of politically and economically powerful partisan elites like Donald Trump. The chapter expands and updates the discussions in the three studies, first by presenting empirical evidence of the influence partisan discourse may have on its adherents once they ascend the power ladder, second by listing the discursive hallmarks of both partisan language and Trump's discourse, and third by comparing and paralleling their linguistic traits. The study shows that the major discursive hallmarks of partisan language mirror Trump's discourse, albeit his use of disparate discursive tactics and threads.

**Keywords** Partisan · Trump · Zone-flooding · Mockery · Insult · Mercurial discourse · Invective discourse · Vitriolic discourse · Hatred · Linguistic construction · Social reality · USA

## Introduction

Trump is out of office, but his impact is still being felt. The brains behind his message and policies, particularly the conservative media and *Fox News* celebrities, are keen to see him entering the race for the forthcoming 2024 US presidential elections. The number of right-wing cable news has surged since 2016, and they vie in their diehard loyalty of Trump (Gift, 2022). America is in the throes of what Roberts (2020) calls “an epistemic crisis” in which it is extremely hard to share truth along the opposite ideological lines or “have a shared understanding of reality.” America is sorted into polarized camps, or rather two divergent social realities where differences are not only confined to values but to facts. As Wilkinson (2019) notes, the polarized factions employ different discourses and use different languages to have their own narratives, rendering communication between them rather difficult (cf. Barkho, 2021).

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More importantly, the United States is polarized when it comes to the reception of news. Politically, the United States is divided along two major partisan lines with their two conflicting and divergent ideological placements. This asymmetry is reflected not only on how the Democrats and conservatives receive news, but also on the type of language they use. The United States left (Democrats) gets information mainly from cable news like *CNN*, *MSNBC*, or newspapers like *The New York Times* or *The Washington Post*. The US right (conservatives) get their information mostly from cable news like *Fox News*, *Newsmax*, newspapers like *The New York Post*, *The American Conservative*, or websites like *Breitbart* (Gift, 2022; Mitchell et al., 2014). The asymmetry in news reception holds when examining news content. Liberal media, while not always free from bias, it still strives to pursue the basic principle of objectivity. But this just is not true of right-wing media, which work closely together and are not so concerned about journalistic ethics (Benkler et al., 2018).

In a previous work (Barkho, 2021), I drew on philosophical deliberations of language and how to operationalize them in the discussion of news discourse in a polarized society like the United States. I provided a method of research and a conceptual framework for the analysis of partisan language in news media. The findings revealed that that partisan language falls into distinct but salient discursive threads, defined in terms of language's communicative functions and conceptual frameworks of how language orders the way we make sense of events in our lives. In this chapter, I will attempt to examine some major discursive features that have characterized media coverage of Trump's speeches, Tweets, and statements as a sitting President of the United States of America. The threads, which I have identified in two other previous works (Barkho, 2018, 2022), were grouped under vitriolic, orthographic, vulgar, collusion, comparative, mocking, body language, and inventory discourses.

My present concern in this chapter is to see the impact of partisan discourse and its salient discursive threads on the discourse of Donald Trump during the three important moments in his career: (1) as a presidential candidate, (2) as a sitting president, and (3) as a former president. The three moments will not be discussed separately but under the same heading, with emphasis placed on the type of social and political transformations that have permeated Trump's discourse and its major discursive patterns as he migrated from the position and moment of a presidential candidate to the moment of the most powerful person on earth and finally to his new position and moment in which he is stripped of political power. I argue that the dialects of the three moments pose a challenge to journalism practice as Trump could defy aversion by mainstream media as well as the social media suspension of his accounts to restrict his presence on the political scene and curtail the spread of his word.

The analysis in this chapter is based on data which I used for the three pieces of previous research. The first paper, titled "Without fear or favor? The social reality of partisan language" (Barkho, 2021), draws on philosophical deliberations of language in its investigation of partisan media. It starts with an introduction of the major concepts philosophers have arrived at in their investigation of the relations of

language to the events and realities shaping our lives. The article finds that partisan language has some distinct but salient linguistic features, defined in terms of language's communicative functions and conceptual frameworks of how language orders our social reality.

The second, titled "Haktology, Trump, and news practices" (Barkho, 2018) seeks to identify some salient policies and practices the news media have adopted in their coverage of the rise of Trump to power. The article studies the impact of the phenomenon on the world of journalism and those practicing it. The study shows how Trump's tweets and their coverage with their emerging discursive patterns and practices have come to characterize journalistic practice in the United States.

The third, titled "Trump's News Practices and Discursive Patterns in his New Moment as former president" (Barkho, 2022), aims to critically examine the speeches and statements Donald Trump made following his departure of the White House in January 2021. The article specifically concentrates on the discursive threads prevalent in Trump's discourse as a "former president," comparing them with those characterizing his discourse during his four-year presidency. It looks at the main discursive features that have permeated Trump's discourse in his new moment as former president, shedding light on the speeches and statements he made in the period from June 15, 2021, to August 15, 2021. The study finds that Trump's discourse in his new moment is marked by competitive and contrastive discursive strategies which border on "actuality" to compare and parallel the different moments of the dialectics of his situation and the accompanying social and political transformation.

The data for the first article is gleaned from a variety of media news outlets with divergent ideological placements. The data of the other two articles are drawn from Trump's tweets, speeches, and interviews, as well as the news media coverage of Trump, spanning three crucial moments in his career, (1) as a presidential candidate, (2) as a sitting president and (3) as a former president.

### ***Trump and Mainstream Media***

When Donald Trump assails mainstream media, he certainly does not have in mind the conservative outlets, which spring to his defense in his frequent spats with the press. Trump's problems mainly have been with what a study from the Pew Research Center has called "mostly liberal" or "consistently liberal media" and not with "mostly conservative" or "consistently conservative media." (Pew Research Center, 2016).

The Pew study shows that US audiences draw their information from mainly partisan and/or ideological news outlets depending on their leaning on the right or the left. Most conservative Americans, Pew finds, get their news from *Fox News* and other conservative-leaning media like *Breitbart*, the *Blaze*, *Sean Hannity Show*, *Rush Limbaugh Show*, *Glenn Beck Program*, and *Drudge Report*. Most liberal

Americans, Pew says, get their news from *The Guardian*, *NRP*, *The New York Times*, *Colbert Report*, *Daily Show*, *New Yorker*, and *Slate*.

Pew's research sheds new light on average ideological placement on a 10-point scale of ideological consistency of major news sources and their audiences. It shows that most mainstream media sources, whether more liberal or more conservative, attract a slightly left-of-center audience. The Pew places 17 of the 32 mainstream media outlets in this category. Among them are *CNN*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *MSNBC*, *Bloomberg*, *USA Today*, *BuzzFeed*, *Huffington Post*, *The Washington Post*, *Yahoo News*, and *NBC News*.

However, Pew provides a few surprises. For instance, of the 32 mainstream media, there are only seven with an average conservative ideological placement and eight with a slightly liberal ideological placement, and the rest middle-of-the-road placement. Trump's right-leaning attracts the middle of a ground audience. When Trump goes on attack against the media, his target may not be all the outlets which Pew finds as the most liberal in the eyes of audiences. Ideology is not pivotal across the board. For instance, Trump has heaped praise on the *BBC*, a liberal-leaning outlet, according to Pew's research. At a news conference in February 2017, the president introduced the broadcaster's North American editor, Jon Sopel, to a packed hall of reporters as: "Here's another beauty" (Sommers & Demianyk, 2017). However, most of Trump's rows with mainstream media have been with outlets that are more consistently liberal, that is, 25 of the 32 US mainstream news outlets included in Pew's research. This chapter's use of the term "mainstream media" mostly refers to 25 of the 32 outlets cited in Pew's research (2016).

## Method

This chapter first starts with an investigation of the social reality of partisan language in the United States. It lays down the ground for the Trump phenomenon as a divisive linguistic marker of the partisan division of US media. The polarization and difference in ideology and opinion have divided the US media into two opposing groups. It has created two separate and distinct groups of partisan media. Trump utilized the distinct but salient discursive threads of the partisan language the US media employ, first to reinforce his policies within his diehard partisan group, and second to engage the opposite group's media to provide ample coverage of his narrative regardless of the truth.

The author collected hundreds of partisan terminologies in currency with both liberals and conservatives as well as other groups with diverse cultural affiliations. Partisan media and discourse are omnipresent, and today we have open-access entries of specialized partisan lists and lexicons. Besides newspapers, many of the partisan terms cited in the analysis originate in the following sources, which include partisan lexical items in currency in the mainstream media:

### 1. Conservapedia

[https://www.conservapedia.com/index.php?title=Essay:Best\\_New\\_Conservative\\_Words](https://www.conservapedia.com/index.php?title=Essay:Best_New_Conservative_Words)

### 2. Oxford Dictionaries

<https://blog.oxforddictionaries.com/2014/11/04/political-insults/>

### 3. Partisan Thesaurus

<http://partisanthesaurus.com/>

The analytical model used as a basis to operationalize partisan discourse pursues a linguistic analytical framework. To shed light on partisan media, the analysis measures the discursive features of partisan language against the conceptual frameworks, which language philosophers have developed in their deliberations of how language orders the way we make sense of our everyday life. They include the pillars of truth telling, language and truth telling, truth, and attribution, objectification of everyday life, language and objectivity, and symbolic association with truth (Crossley et al., 2007; Pak & Paroubek, 2010; Jakobson, 1960).

Language in general shapes our social reality and in turn, our social reality shapes our language (Foucault, 2005). Thus, we need to distinguish between the different functions it plays in our life. When we say “President Joe Biden is a democrat,” we are abiding by the primary function of language; in other words, we are using plain language and referring to reality in a concrete and factual way. But when we call a democrat “a blue dog” because we think they may side with Republicans, we do not refer directly to a Republican. In fact, we resort to the hidden meanings we associate with the term (cf. Jakobson, 1960). Thus, the analysis does not aim at identifying terminology associated with a specific partisan group.

## Results and Discussion

A critical analysis of the data reveals that partisan language can be grouped into at least ten different but related discursive concepts or tactics (Barkho, 2021). I provide a synopsis of these discursive strategies and draw on them when discussing the language Donald Trump.

### 1. Metalingual Discourse

Partisan language is mostly metalingual in the sense that partisan linguistic signs usually represent the hidden meanings of things, i.e., cultural, political, or social connotations. Partisans place language in the service of their cultural and political affiliations. People of different cultures and orientations and partisans of different hues see reality in two different ways, and hereby their languages differ. Once we enter into controversy and partisanship, we slip into the hidden or what Jakobson



(1960) calls metalingual function of communication, and start recycling language with abstract notions and ideas, depending on our orientation, worldviews, or background. Note the following partisan terms and their metalanguage communicative function in partisan discourse: “ideologue, zealot, misogynist, mansplaining, bigot, fringe, moron, elitist” (cf. Harwood, 2014). As we shall see, traces of metalanguage as a distinct feature of partisanship discourse are not hard to detect in Trump’s language.

## 2. Catchphrase Discourse

In defense of their own ideological placement, partisans and their media rely on common, well-known, and frequently used words and phrases or neologisms. The meanings and use of these phrases may become hackneyed due to overuse, but partisans and their media stick to them. Note the following examples: “socialist, grassroots, doublethink, American dream, property right, God-fearing, free market, refudiate, Muslim ban, alt-right, nationalist, activism, divestment, disinvestment, Snowflakes, war on Christians, broflake, fake news, microagresion, fake news.”

Catchphrase discourse is loaded. Its overuse often makes it unoriginal and trite. Writing about the 2016 US election campaign, Bukszpan (2016) selects numerous political catchphrases like “rigged,” “baggage,” and “deplorable.” The last item is interesting as it shows the degree of importance partisans attach to the choice of language. When the Democratic presidential candidate, Hillary Clinton, contended that President Donald Trump’s supporters were a “basket of deplorables,” the phrase went wild in the media, forcing Clinton to apologize. However, interestingly enough, the phrase was a chance for some to dig up similar buzzwords that were fashionable at a particular time or in a particular context (David, 2016). Comparisons were made with Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney’s 2012 “47%” statement caught on a secretive camera (Corn, 2012). Once a phrase is used, it may unleash a barrage of criticism from both sides and an investigation of related history of relevant partisan phrases.

## 3. Counseling Discourse

Partisans employ experts for counseling to help create new, different, and opposite coinages and neologisms in their linguistic combat with the other side. Abadi (2017) argues that partisans invest heavily in the search for their own opposite terminology because they know using the other side’s language helps the other side’s cause. A 2017 poll conducted by Ipsos for NPR found that support for “estate tax,” a term part of liberal language, slumped to 65% from 76% when pollsters replaced it with “death tax,” a conservative catchphrase (Kurtzleben, 2017). Kurtzleben notes how Republicans suggested replacing “drilling for oil” with “exploring for energy;” “undocumented workers” with “illegal aliens;” “estate tax” with “death tax.” In their historical study of the trends in the partisanship of congressional speech from 1873 to 2016, Gentzkow et al. (2016) find that Democrats and Republicans spoke remarkably the same language until the 1990s. Struggle over labeling and sparring over language intensified with the advent of the digital age, when Democrats discovered that their poor performance in campaigns might be due

to their lack of skill in getting their messages across. Democrats' first think tank on how to frame language to advance their own perspectives came into being in 2000, while Republicans had already invested heavily in creating language to serve their own worldview nearly three decades earlier (Powell, 2003). Trump, as we shall see, resorted to "counseling" in the three moments of his career, evidence the influence Steven Bannon, the former head of Breitbart News and once his chief ideologists has had in turning his "zone-flooding" into a discursive strategy to inundate mainstream media with falsehoods and "lies" (see Barkho's chapter in this volume).

#### 4. Imperative Discourse

I call it "imperative discourse" because it is a good example of what linguistics refer to as "the grammatical mood" which essentially expresses the will to influence the mood or the behavior of the addressee. Grammatical mood could be a command, entreaty, or exhortation, but socially and discursively indicates power on the part of the speaker to control, direct, or restrain. US Republicans have their own "imperative discourse." Luntz's (2007) secret memo to Republicans on "The 14 Words Never to Use," is a classic example of how partisans of all colors impose restrictions on the use of language through advice, orders, or warnings of what is acceptable to say and not acceptable to say (Miller, 2011). Here are a couple of examples from Luntz's dos and don'ts for US Republicans (Luntz, 2007).

NEVER SAY: Undocumented Workers

INSTEAD SAY: Illegal Aliens

NEVER SAY: Drilling for oil

INSTEAD SAY: Exploring for energy

A linguistic analysis of Republicans' dos and don'ts can reveal numerous discursive threads (Barkho, 2021). Due to restrictions of space, I will concentrate on one important aspect, namely how the terminology sets Republicans linguistically, socially, and cultural apart from Democrats. The terminology is binary, categorical, commanding, and absolute. Note, "Never say" when it comes to Democrats' language, and "Instead say" when it comes to Republicans' language. These are dualist neologisms characterizing partisan language. However, it is important to note, as we shall see, how this particular partisan discursive thread has permeated the language of Donald Trump.

#### 5. Disparaging Discourse

Partisans of disparate affiliations have their own specialized and disparaging vocabulary to discredit opponents and hurl insults at them. Such disparaging discourse is not confined to political affiliation. It stretches out to differences due to race, ethnicity, religion, and gender. Disparaging language apparently has no restriction since, first, its source may be very important people, either defending themselves or their party, or reacting to an insult from the other side, and, second, its source may originate in the party literature. For instance, note how liberals blend "Republican" and "thug" to form "rethuglican" or "Rethug" for short, as a derisive expression. Other terms disparaging of Republicans include "wingnut," in reference to conservative irrationality and extremism. In response, conservatives have

“libtard,” a blend of “liberal” and “retard.” Conservatives are almost always ahead of liberals in linguistic sparring, characterizing what they see as ideology-crazed Democrats as “moonbat” or “barking moonbat.”

When examined closely, partisans’ disparaging discourse yields some salient discursive features, which can be summarized as follows: First, conservative language is derisive of the other side, whether at the level of politics, culture, or religion, and it is more varied and numerous. Second, although the sides may occasionally deploy the same term, like “idiot, lunatic, thug, or radical,” the conservatives are the ones who use it more frequently (Oxford Dictionaries, 2014). Third, in these times of spiraling partisanship, negative terminology deriding the ideology of the other side reigns high. Fourth, there is discernible “lack of civility” in the disparaging language, which many partisans take to buttress their messages. Fifth, partisans take “lack of civility” in a language beyond political polarization of verbal attacks”—attacks which Trump frequently posted on Twitter disparaging opposite religion, race, sex, culture, and denomination (Harwood, 2014).

Mainstream media have compiled special lists or compendiums of terms Trump, as a partisan, has used to denigrate and pour scorn on his opponents. *The New York Times* has a special compendium of thousands of words “Trump posted on Twitter, from when he declared his candidacy in June 2015 to Jan. 8, when Twitter permanently barred him” (Quealy, 2021).

## 6. Preventive Discourse

I coined the phrase “preventive discourse” as part of partisan language to indicate the terminology that is intended or used to forestall, or hinder an anticipated hostile but parallel terminology. Like preventive medicine, preventive discourse is a discursive discipline partisans pursue to keep their own partisan language (their bodies) healthy; void of the discursive traces (diseases) prevalent in the language of those opposing or resisting their way of life. While barriers to guard against diseases are necessary and vital in medicine, such walls or “discursive barriers,” which media outlets digest without questioning, are a threat to human communication (Power, 2004; Schlesinger, 2004). In their Washington Post op-ed “Terrorism as a Virus,” Stares and Yacoubian (2007) call for the use of an “ideological antidote” as part of measures, among them language, in the global war on “Islamist militancy,” for instance.

Partisan policy leaders vie with each other in coining language to deliver their messages: “So if terrorism is not a war, how should we understand it? Perhaps as a disease. There are steps that can be taken to eradicate or neutralize specific viruses” (Haass, 2005). Binary partisan discourse of health/sickness (Bernstein, 2005) is creeping into various walks of our life and the diversity of human affiliations. Urging the United States and its allies to launch a linguistic offensive alongside their military forays to combat “Islamic militancy,” writes: “In the ‘war of ideas,’ words matter. By accepting the enemy’s terminology and adopting definitions as our own, we cease fighting on our terms and place our ideas at the enemy’s disposal.” Trump resorted to preventive discursive measures, as we shall see, through his speeches and

statements, but mostly Tweets as part of a linguistic offensive to inundate the field of mainstream media with misinformation.

### 7. Euphemistic Discourse

Partisans resort to euphemisms because they help them build discursive walls through which others cannot see the reality of the situation they hide. Partisans employ what appears for them agreeable, inoffensive, or benign neologisms to categorize themselves and their actions, but in reality, they mask the truth of the situation.

It is no surprise to see partisan terms creeping into the mainstream media with a claim to objectivity and impartiality without any qualification or linguistic caveats that the terms are socially and linguistically euphemisms concealing the truth about the practice behind them (Barkho, 2013). Partisan euphemisms are like a word game or playbook camouflaging the truth of practices associated with them. They likewise constitute a good example of Bourdieu's (1998, p. 95) "double truth," a discursive conceptual framework in which false expressions mask true expressions. Nonetheless, institutions stick to euphemisms to mitigate detrimental practices. Language deftly used has the power to hide social reality. The danger of opting for euphemisms does not only conceal truth, but also masks "inhuman" practices. Arendt (1968) tells us that euphemisms of this type, could be the harbinger of something bad to happen. Trump's communication strategy of "zone-flooding" succeeded in inundating mainstream and social media with misinformed, false, and euphemized statements fueling an intensive campaign of fact-checking procedures that made it hard for audiences to separate fact from fiction (see Barkho's chapter in this volume).

### 8. Mercurial Discourse

Partisans of whatever color and hue have a penchant for responding quickly, even to perceived slights with attacks of their own. Anthony Zurcher (2018) of the BBC cites Trump as a good example of a "mercurial" partisan with the propensity for volatile and capricious Twitter taunts. Trump's tweets, language, and the way they are viewed by supporters and opponents incarnate the low levels of partisan political and ideological discourse that has attained in the past few years. Trump supporters call his partisan Tweets "counterpunching," while his opponents from the opposite party see them as evidence of ego and lack of composure (Crilly, 2017).

### 9. Fact-Checking Discourse

Providing evidence in support of one's partisan line is a two-way discursive channel. Once a partisan statement reverberates, opponents do their best to provide evidence not only in defense of their own views but also to refute the statement's validity. When former President Bill Clinton described Donald Trump's campaign slogan "Make America Great Again" as racist, pro-Trump media scoured the Internet and found that Clinton and other Democratic presidents had used the same term (Margolin, 2017). Defending partisanship is no longer restricted to mainstream media. Social media outlets have added an interesting touch to the partisan divide, with audiences showing great interest in heated debates on the falsehood or truth of a

partisan claim. For instance, for many, the discursive battle on the authenticity of former president Barak Obama's birth certificate was an interesting saga to follow (Tatum & Acosta, 2017).

#### 10. Recycling Discourse

I coin the term "recycling discourse" to label language that is specifically neologized to be reused or cycled again. Partisans tend to recycle their terminology even if they do not exactly know what it means. Take phrases like "Make America Great Again," "illegal aliens," "death taxes," "crooked Hillary," "undocumented immigrants," "estate taxes," "Islamist," "extremists," "Muslim bank," "Russians," "Iran," etc. Though occasionally used without much thinking, they serve a fundamental partisan purpose. Syverson (2017) calls them "fixed speech patterns," but they are problematic because those using them "don't scrutinize the issue at the heart of their subject" and dilute the causes they represent. Syverson notes that partisans and opponents develop two divergent interpretations of recycled terminology. The more recycled a partisan term, the more tenacious adherence to it by members of the same orientation or affiliation. Opponents, on the other side, work hard to mitigate the impact and coin retaliatory language in response. Lakoff and Johnson (2008), who has written extensively on how conservatives frame their messages to win hearts and minds, urges Democrats in an interview to "deliver the same messages and repeat them over and over . . . so that people understand, after a couple of years of hearing it . . . Not only that, they should repeat them every time they have a policy, and they should point out how the policy relates to these values". Trump, as we shall see, coined new terms and recycled some others despite the fact that he might not have been aware of what they exactly mean. A case in point is his neologism "covefefe" that went viral on social media and was widely covered in mainstream news outlets (Fox News, 2017).

### *News Practice and Partisan Media*

In a democracy, the press mirrors the political discourse it covers. The media scrutinize Trump, his discourse, his body language, and the things members of his administration say about him. The scrutiny is occasionally so detailed that it borders on forms of textual analysis one may come across in scholarly research when it becomes hard to read into the political discourse and difficult to predict policies through an analysis of the language uttered, the press resorts to certain practices to make it easy for audiences to follow. A survey of press coverage of the Trump era, overwhelmed by hacks and leaks, reveals a number of journalistic practices that have become a characteristic of mainstream media when reporting Trump.

In this section, I will attempt to operationalize the discursive threads identified in the analysis of partisan media discourse in the United States to see how Trump's language mirrors the communication strategies and linguistic patterns partisans pursue to deliver their message. The section also analyzes how Trump, particularly

through the strategy of “zone-flooding” (see chapter by Barkho in this volume), has reinforced the partisan and polarized language characterizing US media coverage. The operationalization arrives at some of the most salient features of the journalistic practices that have become a discursive hallmark of Trump's era coverage and which mirror the three important moments in his career: (1) as a presidential candidate, (2) as a sitting president, and (3) as a former president. The analysis of these salient features shows that they are linked, linguistically, and discursively, to the discursive threads that have become a hallmark of partisan and polarized media discourse in America.

### 1. Twitter's Anti- And Pro-bots

Twitter emerged as one of the winners in the era of Trump, at least until the microblog suspended his account shortly before leaving the White House. Journalism practitioners lean on Twitter. During Trump's presidency, journalism practitioners, for the first time, find social media as the main source of news when covering the leader of the mightiest nation in the world. Twitter was probably Trump's main arena to air his voice as president. The media strived to unravel Trump's practice of early-morning Tweets that have taken traditional journalism practices by surprise (Cassidy, 2016). The press analyzed, interpreted, and categorized Trump's penchant for early-morning Tweets through recourse to unhinged frames. Most of Trump's tweets fall under the category of irrelevant hypotheticals in which he “conjures up imaginary cases that are barely conceivable” (Thaler, 2016). One good example is Trump's famous “Covfefe” Tweet (see below), which though an apparent typo, shows a propensity toward a social reality with certain orientations. The BBC (2017), in its coverage of the world interest in Trump's “Covfefe,” says the invented and imaginary word was close to melting the Internet and tearing it apart.

However, journalism practitioners found themselves in the midst of a multifaceted Twitter storm, which Trump initiated, and an environment in which bots, whether hostile or friendly, intensified. Digital communication systems, during Trump's presidency, were in the midst of what one may call “a bot revolution” fueled by bot armies shaping campaigns on Twitter, and other social media outlets. But the bots are no longer a phenomenon restricted to social media. They have fueled mainstream press interest, prompting journalism practitioners to make them part of the content in their coverage of stories trending on social media (Jones, 2017). Bots took a new turn with Trump's ascent to power. According to Steve Dempsey of *The Irish Independent*, they have become a hot topic for both digital technology and the media, at the same time, have started influencing media practice (Dempsey, 2016).

It is important to note that metalingual discourse is a major discursive trait of Trump's language that permeated Twitter and other social media outlets, including mainstream news media. It mirrors partisan language in which meanings of signs are usually hidden, and the discourse though simple, it is “impulsive, and uncivil” (Ott, 2017, p. 34).

## 2. Vitriolic Discourse

A careful examination of the press coverage in Trump's era will show that "vitriolic discourse" has become a striking feature and practice of the press. The most quoted examples occurred when Trump responded with vitriolic Twitter diatribes to the co-presenters of the MSNBC breakfast show, which continuously mocked the US president. Mika Brzezinski and Joe Scarborough in one of their June 2017 shows called Trump a "bumbling dope," and likened him to "a kind who pooped in his pants." They also derided his staff as "lobotomized." Trump's Twitter response was vitriolic, harsh, cheap, personalized, and abrupt. He called Brzezinski "low IQ crazy Mika," pointed to her "bleeding badly from a facelift," and hit out at her co-presenter Scarborough (Stelter, 2017; Thrush & Haberman, 2017). The dual vitriolic discourse earned extensive coverage.

One can make a few insightful observations about the nature of what I call "vitriolic discourse" practice. The Trump-related media discourse is personalized and vitriolic at the same time. It is occasionally cheap and mostly negative, particularly in the spats pitting him against the mainstream liberal media. I call it "vitriolic discourse" because it obscures truth and deflects attention from the target of criticism (Trump), by resorting occasionally to blunt and direct Twitter diatribes. "Vitriolic discourse" turns serious coverage, a cornerstone of which is holding power to account, into cheap, negative, crude, and personalized discursive practice. "Vitriolic discourse" forces prominent officials and prominent media to engage in discursive practices that are beneath their standing, paying no heed to decorum and expression of politeness verbally or in writing.

Trump leans on disparaging discourse, which partisans use to represent their opponents as being of little worth to discredit opponents and hurl insults at them. Colker (2020, p. 1) argues that many members of the economic and political power elite, like Donald Trump, "have effectively used insults to help achieve their ambition." Disparaging discourse is a form of criticism that shows that the speaker or writer has no respect value for the other and treats them with disrespect and scorn.

## 3. Collusion

The Trump era has thrust the press and particularly its investigative arm into the sort of coverage and journalistic practice in which reporters themselves raise doubts about the authenticity, credibility, and impartiality of their own coverage. There is much talk about "collusion" in the press and the attempt to spread lies. There are allegations, mainly in liberal press, of *Fox News* colluding with Trump administration even at the expense of promulgating "a malicious lie." (Rajan, 2017). On the other hand, there are counter allegations of anti-Trump media colluding with liberal groups and personalities. *CNN* was found to have fed presidential debate questions to Trump's rival, Hillary Clinton (Schultz, 2016). Partisans are not usually satisfied for their discourse to dominate their own supplicate media. They target mainstream news media on the other side of the fence of a polarized society like the United States. Trump has occasionally praised liberal-leaning outlets like the BBC (Sommers & Demianyk, 2017). And also, note how his communication strategists



resorted to the concept of “zone-flooding” to deluge mainstream news media opposing Trump and have them engaged with the search for truth in the thickest of misinformation they kept feeding mainstream press (see Barkho’s other chapter in this volume).

#### 4. Vulgar Discourse

Trump’s presidency ushered in a torrent of vulgar discourse, which the press has covered extensively. Some outlets, known for their refined discourse, focus on the occasional vulgar tirades of Trump’s administration and even cross their ethical lines in bringing them to the public’s attention as was the case with Scaramucci’s “furious, foul-mouthed attack on White House rivals” (Smith, 2017). Examples of Trump’s discursive fury represented in his uttering or tweeting rude and extraordinary attacks are plenty the last of which he launched against MSNBC host Mika Brzezinski (Buncombe, 2017). The Guardian’s columnist Jonathan Freedland (2017) has described the vulgar discourse from Trump and some of his officials, and which has found its way into the news practices, as “expulsive behavior,” saying that the conduct “needs to be shaped into a coherent political argument.” The anti-Trump media is of course not innocent and reporters, particularly opinion writers, may descend to what Trump camp see as “profanity discourse” when covering the president. *UC Riverside* and *CNN’s* Reza Aslan resorted to swearing at Trump when tweeting and was forced to apologize for the profanity (Tadayon, 2017). Trump’s use of profanely indecent language is no secret. It is a reflection of disparaging discourse which partisans are fond of. There are compendiums on Trump’s offensive language, most notably *New York Times* “The Complete List of Trump’s Twitter Insults” (2015–2021) (Quealy, 2021). However, the important issue is how come that mainstream US news media violated “their own journalistic norms against profanity to use his (Trump’s) precise language” (McCluskey, 2019, p. 415). One good example is “shithole” which Trump used to describe countries from which immigrants fled and sought refuge in the United States (Fram & Lemire, 2018).

#### 5. Comparative Discourse

With Trump, we see a focus on a journalistic practice that relies on comparative news discourse. Reporters use discursive parallels and comparisons in a bid to put Trump’s tweets and practices in context. There are, for instance, comparisons between Trump, his obedient associates, and cabinet with “Beijing-like obeisance” (Fish, 2017). Fish draws parallels between “Emperor Trump’s sycophantic cabinet . . . staff members and even some Republican lawmakers” who find it part of their job to praise the president publicly. Mainstream media’s emphasis on discursive parallels with China are most interesting. The press occasionally depicts actions and statements by Trump’s cabinet officials, staff members including a few Republicans, as reminiscent of the Chinese practice of kowtowing, which required touching the ground with one’s forehead in deference to the emperor. It draws parallels between some public statements by some of Trump’s senior officials and public statements by counterparts in China, who always attribute achievements to the wisdom and sound



leadership of the man at the helm of the Chinese communist party. “The modern American act of kowtowing requires absurdly praising President Donald Trump” in response to his “prodding his underlings in Washington toward Beijing-like levels of obeisance, opacity, prevarication and corruption.” (Fish, 2017).

## 6. Mocking Discourse

There are attempts at mocking or mimicking Trump discursively not only by the press but also by foreign government leaders and staff particularly in Scandinavia. Two pictures, one depicting a meeting by a Swedish government official and another by Nordic leaders are reported to have been arranged in a manner in which participants discursively ridiculed Trump (Reilly, 2017). Reporters examine Trump’s pictures, gestures, and videos, his discourse in general, and see them as metaphors, which they try to interpret to guess his plans and strategy (Beauchamp, 2017). The practice, which I call “mocking discourse,” occupies a prominent position in press coverage. The practice is two-way. Sometimes, Trump initiates the practice; evidence his mocking of a *New York Times* reporter with a disability, the practice that spawned an avalanche of press coverage (Camron, 2016). Trump’s way of governing, and speaking has likewise provided United States talk shows with plenty of information that revitalized the late-night programs, with the practice propelling some hosts to the international limelight (Stolworthy, 2016).

“Mocking discourse” is mercurial in the sense of the penchant to respond almost abruptly in a scornful and contemptuous manner in the same funny and unkind way. It is a discursive hallmark of partisanship and flourishes in polarized societies. Mocking is confrontational, and during Trump’s era, it flooded the news media sphere, rendering it “an important argumentative tool” (Jenks, 2022, p. 58). Trump has even mocked a disabled reporter (Carmon, 2016). Trump was also mocked by mainstream news media. In one instance, an Atlanta news station *WSB-TV* commentator was fired for mocking Trump (Kenney, 2022).

## 7. “Inventory” discourse

Journalism practice in Trump era has concentrated on what one might call “inventory discourse” or discourse of listing. Mainstream media now and then produce content in which they first provide an introduction on the topic of the compendium they are writing about and then come bullets or lists of recurrent themes in Trump discourse. Major media outlets have inventories, which they update regularly. Newspapers present “justification” for providing these inventories, which they update regularly. *Politico Magazine* says media’s interest in Trump’s “falsehoods” and the attempt to have them cataloged is due to their “sheer frequency, spontaneity and seeming irrelevance” as they “come not singly but in constant stream” (Konnikova, 2017). The news practice relies heavily on databases to produce running lists of, for instance, “Trump’s lies and other bullshit” with a vow to keep track of any untrue statements he makes in the future (Georgantopoulos, 2017). The practice has introduced the emergence of a new journalistic genre, that is the compiling of catalogs about lies and falsehoods on the one hand and the writing of news stories about these catalogs (for further details, see Barkho in this volume).

Fact-checking is a two-pronged discursive tool in a society divided along partisan and polarized lines. It is a two-way discursive channel, which Trump communication strategists employed as part of their “zone-flooding” strategy to keep the mainstream media busy with fact-checking the flow of misinformation streaming from Trump’s White House.

## Trump’s Linguistics

The press devotes a large space to discuss and interpret Trump’s linguistics. A glance at news coverage involving Trump’s language reveals a practice with some discursive points of its own. There is, for instance, the issue of “mystery” terms, which he coins himself and sometimes has the Internet and online press creaking out. A good case in point is his tweeting of “covefefe” which caused a Twitter frenzy and became the world’s number one topic on the microblog (Fox News, 2017). Trump’s misspellings, unconventional capitalizations, unusual use of quotation marks, excessive and unconventional use of punctuation, bizarre spellings, and grammar errors have become a topic of interest to the mainstream press (North, 2017).

Trump’s use of language has likewise provided the press with the opportunity to delve into Trump’s thinking and even mentality through a discursive or psychological analysis of his unconventional use of language (Conrad, 2017). The press borrows from linguists and social justice movements terms like “noun-free syntax, gibberish, rhetorical style, untethered from both meaning and reality, frivolous abstraction, political correctness” in its textual analysis of Trump’s language (West, 2017).

Trump is known for using his Twitter feeds to react to his critics, often through harsh language, sometimes replete with threats and taunts. Tweets like these have become a good source of information for the press and particularly analysis and opinion pieces. Reporters go to lengths in analyzing Trump’s language, which they describe as “muscular . . . untampered . . . unrestrained . . . fiery . . . jingoistic . . . over-the-top rhetoric . . . kind of blustery and provocative . . . inflammatory . . .” (Blow, 2017a, 2017b; Davis, 2017). Linguistic tools like these are part of partisans’ discursive toolkit which helps them recycle their terms as a retort even if they are incomprehensible for them. Most of these terms are euphemistic in nature meant to hide the reality of the situation. Despite all this, partisans, as has been the case with Trump’s diehard supports and supplicate media, find this language agreeable, and benign, though it masks the reality of the situation.

### Implications

The analysis of the discursive threads characterizing partisan language and some of the major salient discursive hallmarks defining Trump’s tweets, speeches, and statements shows that metalanguage is the major tool for partisans and political and economic elites to hit out at opponents, reinforce their ideological placements, and win hearts and minds.

It likewise shows that partisans, particularly in their search for authority, view language as power, and merge their partisan discursive metalingual tactics with “zone-flooding” as a concept and strategy to advance their cause and policies. In the case of Trump, “zone-flooding” turned out as a major communication strategy to persistently feed the media with misinformation in an apparent attempt to create a situation of confusion and bewilderment in which it becomes hard for the public to tell what is true and what is false.

When examining the linguistic patterns partisans resort to with those characterizing Trump’s era, it becomes obvious that the choice of language is to subvert the truth not only of what is happening in the world out there but also when it comes to the rules of the language itself as evidenced on how partisans manipulate terminology to their own benefit, and the special linguistics Trump pursued. In a situation like this, for both, partisans and Trump, and to a lesser extent the mainstream media, telling the truth is no longer a major concern, so long as ethical representations are only true and objective in their eyes.

The analysis of partisan language and Trump’s speeches and Tweets has produced a variety of discursive tactics and threads, each of them exhibiting its own salient discursive features. Nonetheless, they do not stand in isolation, as they mirror each other in their two different but intertwined moments: the partisan moment and the moment of power.

If we try to present in a bullet point format how partisans and Trump make sense of events in life world, we find:

- First, partisans, and likewise Trump, are averse to seeing things referentially, i.e., as they are. Their language and discursive concepts mask the truth to hide the true meaning of the reality of the situation.
- Second, both tell it as they see it, and rarely say things as they are, hence the massive flow of misinformation, and subsequently the massive labor of mainstream media to fact-check the falsehoods (see Barkho’s chapter in this volume).
- Third, both present “truth” as far as their own life world is concerned. It rarely occurs to them that their language representations are biased, one-sided, and lack balance.
- Fourth, both lean on attribution, but their citations reflect their own reality, in which they adamantly believe, and thus do their best to recycle.
- Fifth, both exhibit tremendous potential to generate or neologize linguistic symbols and patterns pertinent to their own life world. Language, for them, plays three essential discursive functions: (1) to create a community through linguistic belonging, (2) to exclude or rather subvert and destroy opposite discourse, and (3) the discursive strategy which Trump pursued as a major communication tactic, is highlighted by the concept of “zone-flooding,” i.e., invading “hostile” mainstream news media with your own linguistics no matter if it is full of falsehoods, and leave them busy and engaged with fact-checking so that the search for and the meaning of truth is lost.

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**Part VI**  
**De-democratization—Populism,**  
**Partisanship and Pandemic**



# Trump Redux: The Former President and Political Turmoil Go Hand-in-Hand



**Kenneth Lasson**

**Abstract** More recently, Time has revealed that Donald Trump, in 2023, became the first U.S. President to be indicted in the nation’s 234 year history—and has since broken that record three more times. There are many serious charges in which Trump finds himself currently embroiled stem from efforts by his business associates in New York to avoid taxes and who are currently under indictment for conspiracy to commit tax evasion and other frauds over a fifteen-year period. There has been an indictment, arrest, and arraignment emanating from the investigation, conducted by Mr. Bragg’s Manhattan district court office, focusing on Mr. Trump’s involvement in the payment of hush money to the porn star, Stormy Daniels during the final days of the 2016 presidential campaign. Debate is currently raging among both pundits and prosecutors about what those trials might portend for the former president of the United States. This chapter examines the broad sphere of the Trump spectacle and the reach of its influence. It begins with a litany of his Administration’s positive deeds; continues with a discussion of his lingering and largely negative effects on both the Presidency and the national mood; and concludes with some empirical conjecture as to how his continuing contributions to the national malaise could possibly be avoided.

**Keywords** Egocentrism · Mar-a-Lago · Classified Documents from White House · Jerusalem · Israel Capital · GOP · Narcissism · Racism · Hate Crime · Populism · Political Turmoil · Democracy · Donald Trump · Joe Biden · Barrack Obama · Birthism · Hillary Clinton · 2016 Presidential Election · Stormy Daniels · Separation of Powers · Trumpism · Partisan Divides

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Many thanks to the anonymous reviewers for their comments and to Dr. Adebowale Akande for his professorial editorial assistance.

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## Introduction

When Donald Trump directed that some documents be moved from the Oval Office to his Mar-a-Lago residence in Palm Beach, Florida, little did he—nor virtually anyone else—realize that he may have been committing the essentially nonconsequential crime of violating a tiny clause in the Federal Records Act which says that only the Justice Department can determine where classified documents should be stored.<sup>1</sup>

By far, the more serious charges in which Trump finds himself currently embroiled stem from efforts by his business associates in New York to avoid taxes, and who is currently under indictment for conspiracy to commit tax evasion and other frauds over a fifteen-year period. An indictment, arrest, and arraignment has emanated from the investigation, conducted by Mr. Alvin Bragg's Manhattan district attorney court office, focusing on Mr. Trump's involvement in the payment of hush money to the porn star, Stormy Daniels during the final days of the 2016 presidential campaign is a possibility. Debate is currently raging among both pundits and prosecutors about what those trials might portend for the man whose name appears on virtually every page.<sup>2</sup>

Either way, one thing's for sure: Neither the specter nor vulgar reality of the Trump phenomenon is going to go away for a long time. President Joe Biden could largely avoid the quicksand of political turmoil he has been sucked into by Donald Trump—were he simply to preemptively pardon the former president for a virtually nonconsequential crime. But while a pardon might assure Mr. Trump's supporters that he would no longer be a political target, there's little Mr. Biden can do that might pacify the entrenched partisan divides.

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<sup>1</sup>Pundits and scholars alike are unclear what if any law Trump violated by moving classified documents from the White House to his residence in Mar-a-Lago. See Norman Eisen and E. Danya Perry, "Trump Wasn't Indicted. But It's Clear He's Far from Safe," WASHINGTON POST (July 2, 2021), available at <https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2021/07/02/trump-indictment-prosecutors-analysis/>, and Brett Wilkins, "New Memo Details Legal Case to Indict Trump Over Mar-a-Lago Documents," COMMON DREAMS (November 17, 2022), available at <https://www.commondreams.org/news/2022/11/17/new-memo-details-legal-case-indict-trump-over-mar-lago-documents>

<sup>2</sup>See Andrew Prokop, "Will 2023 Be The Year Donald Trump Is Indicted?," Vox, January 9, 2023, available at <https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/23518814/trump-investigations-jack-smith-january-6-classified> See also Alison Durkee, "Trump Organization Found Guilty of Tax Fraud at Trial," FORBES (December 6, 2022), available at <https://www.forbes.com/sites/alisondurkee/2022/12/06/trump-organization-found-guilty-of-tax-fraud-at-trial/?sh=63a7934a7e73>

## Past

### *Presidents Are Capable of Good Deeds*

As far back as 1866, the Supreme Court ruled that the pardon power “extends to every offense known to the law, and may be exercised at any time after its commission, either before legal proceedings are taken or during their pendency, or after conviction and judgment.” Over the course of history, various Presidents have liberally exercised their pardon power on behalf of others even though many such reprieves have been blatantly political and consequently controversial.<sup>3</sup>

In 1858, for example, James Buchanan pardoned the polygamous Mormons of Utah in exchange for their accepting US authority over the state. Similarly, in 1865, Andrew Johnson forgave thousands of Confederate troops who were willing to pledge allegiance to the federal government.<sup>4</sup>

In 1977, on his first day in office, Jimmy Carter gave a blanket pardon to over 200,000 young Americans who fled the country to avoid serving in Vietnam. In 2001 Bill Clinton, on his last day in office, pardoned newspaper heiress Patty Hearst for crimes committed while she was a member of the renegade Symbionese Liberation Army—as well as Marc and Denise Rich, two major donors to his political campaigns.<sup>5</sup>

In 2017 Barack Obama pardoned former US Army Private Chelsea Manning for having turned over more than 750,000 classified documents to Wikileaks, a non-profit organization that publishes news leaks and classified media provided by anonymous sources. And in 2017, Trump himself pardoned four men convicted of killing Iraqi civilians in 2007.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>Whether a president can pardon himself remains a contentious question among legal scholars. Some feel that such an action would likely ignite a constitutional crisis. “No man is allowed to be a judge in his own cause,” wrote James Madison in the Federalist Papers, “because his interest would certainly bias his judgment, and, not improbably, corrupt his integrity.” See Michael J. Conklin, “Can a President Pardon Himself? Law School Faculty Consensus,” *NORTHEASTERN UNIVERSITY LAW REVIEW* (December 20, 2019), available at <http://nulawreview.org/extralegalrecent/2019/12/19/can-a-president-pardon-himself-law-school-faculty-consensus>. See also Tom Murse, “Can A President Pardon Himself?,” *THOUGHTCo* (August 15, 2019) available at <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/research-reports/presidential-pardon-power-explained> and Lauren Brooke Eisen, Hernandez D. Stroud, and Josh Bell, “Presidential Pardon Power Explained,” *BRENNAN CENTER FOR JUSTICE* (January 29, 2021), available at <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/research-reports/presidential-pardon-power-explained>

<sup>4</sup>See <https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/offering-a-full-pardon-to-mormon-rebels-in-the-utah-territory-pages-1-and-15-james-buchanan/rgGOcDUXkCKWwg> and <https://ancestralfindings.com/president-johnson-pardons-the-confederate-troops-famous-christmases-in-history>

<sup>5</sup>See <https://history.com/news/carter-draft-dodger-pardon-half-returned> and <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2001/jan/21/edvulliamy.johnarlidge>

<sup>6</sup>See <https://www.nbcnews.com/feature/nbc-out/chelsea-manning-released-prison-after-obama-grants-clemency-n760616>

Even before he took office, then-President-elect Trump was being urged to move the American Embassy in Israel from Tel Aviv to the national capital in Jerusalem.<sup>7</sup> There were good diplomatic and constitutional reasons for him to do so. In 1995 Congress had passed the Jerusalem Embassy Act, which firmly asserted that “Jerusalem should be recognized as the capital of the State of Israel” and that our embassy should be established there “no later than May 31, 1999.” But the law was never implemented—because Presidents Bill Clinton, George W. Bush and Barack Obama all came to view it as an infringement on the executive branch’s Constitutional authority over foreign policy, and they consistently exercised a built-in presidential-waiver clause based on their perception of national-security interests.<sup>8</sup>

In so doing, all three missed the forest of Middle East reality for the trees of diplomatic denial and intransigence.

The Founding Fathers were heavily influenced by French philosopher Charles Secondat, Baron de Montesquieu, most notably in connection with the separation of powers. In his *The Spirit of Laws* (1748), Montesquieu warned that “Were the executive power not to have a right of restraining the encroachments of the legislative body, the latter would become despotic; for as it might arrogate to itself what authority it pleased, it would soon destroy all the other powers.”<sup>9</sup>

James Madison was an ardent though rational advocate for such separation. In one of the *Federalist Papers*, he wrote that “An elective despotism was not the government we fought for; but one in which the powers of government should be so divided and balanced among the several bodies of magistracy as that no one could transcend their legal limits without being effectually checked and restrained by the others.” An important but often-ignored word in that statement was “balanced.”<sup>10</sup>

John Adams, in his 1776 book *Thoughts on Government*, wrote that “A representative assembly, although extremely well qualified, and absolutely necessary, as a branch of the legislative, is unfit to exercise the executive power, for want of two essential properties, secrecy and dispatch.” In the openly and everlastingly analyzed Palestinian-Israeli dispute, there has seldom if ever been such “secrecy and dispatch.”<sup>11</sup>

The preamble to the Jerusalem Embassy Act noted that every country in the world has had the right to designate the capital of its choice, with Israel the lone exception. It noted that “Jerusalem is the seat of Israel’s President, Parliament, and Supreme

<sup>7</sup> See Kenneth Lasson, “Why Trump Should Move US Embassy to Jerusalem,” JERUSALEM POST (January 14, 2017), available at <https://www.jpost.com/Opinion/Why-Trump-should-move-US-Embassy-to-Jerusalem-478425>

<sup>8</sup> See <https://www.congress.gov/bill/104th-congress/senate-bill/1322>

<sup>9</sup> See <https://www.coursehero.com/file/92590499/Founding-Fathers-Writingdocx>

<sup>10</sup> See <https://tenthamentmentcenter.com/2014/09/14/thomas-jefferson-on-elective-despotism-a-warning>

<sup>11</sup> See <https://press-pubs.uchicago.edu/founders/documents/v1ch4s5.html>

Court, and most of its ministries and cultural institutions.” It recognized since the reunification of the city in 1967, and religious freedom has been guaranteed to all.<sup>12</sup>

Yet since the celebration of the 3000th anniversary of King David’s declaration of Jerusalem, in 1996, as the capital of the Jews, there has been no progress in the physical relocation of the US Embassy.<sup>13</sup>

The separation of powers envisioned by the Founding Fathers was a wise principle. But it was not intended to strangle the legislative branch or the will of the people. In this case, constitutional democracy (read, an unequivocal act of Congress) should trump executive diplomacy.<sup>14</sup>

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Indeed there were a good number of positive accomplishments during the Trump Administration—practically all of which were promptly and thoroughly touted by the White House. Among them were an unprecedented economic boom; increased support for American farmers; re-enforced energy independence; more affordable and higher-quality child care for workers and their families; greater economic empowerment for women worldwide; and continued American leadership in technology and innovation.<sup>15</sup>

President Trump also took historic actions to promote peace in the Middle East—in particular by recognizing Jerusalem as the true capital of Israel by moving the American Embassy to Jerusalem. His administration brokered peace agreements between Israel and Arab-Muslim countries, including the United Arab Emirates, the Kingdom of Bahrain, and Sudan, and negotiated a normalization agreement between Israel and Morocco.<sup>16</sup>

On the other hand, Trump’s election to President in 2016 set in motion a number of attacks on civil rights and liberties. From his nomination of Supreme Court justices who rolled back the federal right to abortion secured in *Roe v. Wade*, to the Muslim ban executive order that discriminated against people from Muslim-majority countries, his administration saw a rollback of American rights and liberties, many of which are still being felt today. The American Civil Liberties Union filed 246 legal actions against the Trump Administration during his tenure in office.<sup>17</sup>

Many now consider democracy to be unquestionably the best form of government. That was not always the case. For Plato, Aristotle, Thucydides, and Plutarch,

<sup>12</sup> See <https://www.congress.gov/bill/104th-congress/senate-bill/1322>

<sup>13</sup> See <https://www.jta.org/archive/israel-plans-festival-to-celebrate-3000-years-of-jerusalem-as-king-davids-capital>

<sup>14</sup> (The pun was unintentional, but it works.) For a thoughtful exposition of the separation-of-powers concept, see <https://billofrights.org/essays/separation-of-powers-with-checks-and-balances>

<sup>15</sup> See THE WHITE HOUSE, “Promises Made, Promises Kept: Trump Administration Accomplishments,” available at <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/trump-administration-accomplishments/>

<sup>16</sup> See “Trump Announces ‘Peace Deal’ Between Bahrain and Israel,” BBC News, September 11, 2020, available at <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-54124996>

<sup>17</sup> See <https://www.aclu.org/news/voting-rights/a-look-at-history-civil-liberties-are-on-the-ballot>

democracy was typified by the figure of the demagogue, the democratic leader—who was often viewed as hasty, angry, impulsive, brash, and punitive, a man who sought the favor of those like himself. He opposed people of quality (gentlemen, noblemen, and aristocrats), and accused them of being enemies of the people, the majority for whom he spoke.<sup>18</sup>

President Biden rebuked Trump for saying that the Constitution should be “terminated.” (The former president “must be universally condemned.”) Andrew Bates, a White House spokesperson, said: “Attacking the constitution and all it stands for is anathema to the soul of the nation and should be universally condemned.” Bates called the Constitution a “sacrosanct document,” saying: “You cannot only love America when you win.”<sup>19</sup>

Trump lost to Joe Biden in 2020 by more than seven million votes and by 306–232 in the electoral college (a result he called a landslide when it was in his favor, in 2016, against Hillary Clinton). Yet he continues to claim that Biden won key states through electoral fraud, a falsehood that fueled the deadly attack on the US Capitol on January 6, 2021. Nine deaths have been linked to the riot, including law enforcement suicides. More than 950 people have been charged. Two members of the far-right Oath Keepers militia were convicted of seditious conspiracy. Other members of far-right pro-Trump groups face similar charges.<sup>20</sup>

Trump’s declared candidacy for the Republican nomination in 2024 has faced increased criticism from Republicans and Republican-supporting media since the midterm elections, in which many of the candidates he had endorsed were defeated. Republicans took the House by a narrow majority but failed to retake the Senate.<sup>21</sup>

John Bolton, George W. Bush’s UN ambassador who became Trump’s third National Security Adviser, said: “No American conservative can agree with Donald Trump’s call to suspend the Constitution because of the results of the 2020 election. And all real Conservatives must oppose his 2024 campaign for president.”<sup>22</sup>

Trump may have lost the presidency, but to date, his most vociferous opponents have not achieved the victory they want most: An end of the so-called “Trump Movement,” a repudiation so complete that it would leave him few other options than to leave the spotlight he seems to crave. But such a choice would be totally out of his character.

For now, Trump dominates conversations about the political picture both present and future. His outlandish claims that he won the election except for comprehensive fraud have helped raise more than \$200 million since Election Day. Many of his

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<sup>18</sup> See Harvey Mansfield, “The Vulgar Manliness of Donald Trump,” COMMENTARY, September 2017, available at <https://www.commentary.org/articles/harvey-mansfield/vulgar-manliness-donald-trump>

<sup>19</sup> See “Trump Administration,” available at <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/trump-administration-accomplishments>

<sup>20</sup> *Id.*

<sup>21</sup> *Id.*

<sup>22</sup> *Id.*

partisans share his dream of recapturing the presidency in 2024. For those who despise him, to paraphrase a famous Democratic speech, “it seems clear the work goes on, the cause endures, the fear still lives, and the nightmare shall never die.”<sup>23</sup>

There are a number of reasons to be skeptical that Trump’s domination of Republican consciousness will last very long. Cults of personality in American politics are somewhat common—read, Joseph McCarthy, George Wallace, Ross Perot—but they seldom endure. Trump’s persona is not only self-created but self-worshipped as well. When he vaulted into presidential politics, he retained his penchant for mockery, channeling anger, and conspiracy theories. As others have pointed out, no one can follow Trump’s Twitter feed and believe that he cares more about the public’s problems than his own. Chief among the latter is his loss of a second term.<sup>24</sup>

And there are still other reasons to beware of future Trumpism. He has upwards of 85-million Twitter followers. He has talked about starting his own news network? He will not likely stop repeating claims of a stolen election that thwarted his second term in office. His persona has been likened to that of the notorious mid-Twentieth-Century conspiracy theorist Senator Joseph McCarthy.<sup>25</sup>

Like McCarthy, Trump used accusations and grave warnings of national betrayal and declined to tap into currents of nativism and suspicion of elites that stretched back to the country’s early days. Like McCarthy, Trump is regarded by people who know him well as vastly more interested in publicity for himself than he is about the issues on which he inveighs. And just like McCarthy, Trump seemed to become intoxicated by publicity and power, becoming louder and more unleashed from the fact the more he was challenged and the more his moment seemed to be slipping away.<sup>26</sup>

As an old aphorism put it, “It’s not that his bark is worse than his bite. He doesn’t really want to bite at all. He wants to be petted.”<sup>27</sup>

Trump, of course, and in character, took no responsibility for the insurrection, even though he encouraged supporters to descend on the Capitol grounds and “cheer” on senators who would break laws governing US elections. He may have used phrases like “you have to show strength” and “demand that Congress do the right thing,” but there is no evidence to suggest that he explicitly encouraged or condoned any collective criminal activity.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> *Id.*

<sup>24</sup> *Id.*

<sup>25</sup> See David Remnick, “What Donald Trump Shares with Joseph McCarthy,” *New Yorker*, May 17, 2020), available at <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2020/05/25/what-donald-trump-shares-with-joseph-mccarthy>

<sup>26</sup> See <https://hackspirit.com/meaning-behind-he-doesnt-know-what-he-wants>

<sup>27</sup> See <https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2020/12/10/trump-comeback-2024-not-happening-444135>

<sup>28</sup> See <https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2021/jan/12/trump-takes-no-responsibility-for-violent-insurrec> and <https://www.snopes.com/fact-check/trump-tell-supporters-storm>

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In March of 2023, Trump—aiming to become only the second commander-in-chief ever elected to two nonconsecutive terms (Grover Cleveland was the first, serving from 1885 to 1889 and 1893 to 1897) announced that he would seek the Republican presidential nomination in 2024.

“In order to make America great and glorious again, I am tonight announcing my candidacy for president of the United States,” Trump told a crowd gathered at his waterfront estate in Mar-a-Lago, Florida, where his campaign will be headquartered.<sup>29</sup>

His announcement contained a number of spurious and exaggerated claims about his four years in office.<sup>30</sup> It is probably fair to say that many of those perceived accomplishments—from strict immigration actions to corporate tax cuts and religious freedom initiatives—remain deeply polarizing to this day.

Moreover, the possibility of an indictment on charges related to a hush money payment during the 2016 campaign, could easily throw a wrench into Trump’s nascent 2024 GOP presidential primary. He has already said in interviews that he plans to continue his campaign for the presidency even if he is indicted, and he that he would not be deterred by the latest possibility of criminal charges stemming from his payment of money to porn star Stormy Daniels so that she would remain quiet about an alleged affair he had with her during the 2016 campaign—nor by suggestions from some Republican voters and leaders that it may be time for the party to move on to a candidate with less baggage.<sup>31</sup>

Republican strategists have long raised concerns that Trump may be the only GOP candidate who could lose to President Biden in a general election due to ever-lingering concerns about his conduct and character.<sup>32</sup>

Nevertheless, national polls still largely show Trump garnering the most support among declared and potential 2024 presidential candidates, with only Florida’s Republican Governor Ron DeSantis coming close or surpassing him—his star rising

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<sup>29</sup> See FACTS FIRST, “Fact check: 20 false and misleading claims Trump made in his announcement speech, available at [Fact check: 20 false and misleading claims Trump made in his announcement speech | CNN Politics](#); see also <https://time.com/6234562/nonconsecutive-terms-president-grover-cleveland-donald-trump/>

<sup>30</sup> *Id.*

<sup>31</sup> Trump has denied having an affair with Daniels, and in a lengthy statement late Thursday denied any wrongdoing while casting the probe in Manhattan as the latest in a slew of politically motivated investigations into his conduct. “This is a political Witch-Hunt, trying to take down the leading candidate, by far, in the Republican Party while at the same time also leading all Democrats in the polls, including Joe Biden and Kamala Harris,” Trump wrote. See Brett Samuels, “To Topple Trump, GOP Challengers Lean On Personality Over Policy,” THE HILL, March 2, 2023, available at <https://thehill.com/homenews/campaign/3880081-to-topple-trump-gop-challengers-lean-on-personality-over-policy/>

<sup>32</sup> *Id.*



since a resounding reelection victory last November—as he makes the rounds in early voting states and moves closer to a 2024 campaign of his own.<sup>33</sup>

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Donald Trump has a long history of speech and actions that have been widely perceived by commentators, scholars, and the public as little more than the rantings of a racist or a white supremacist. This may be due partly to the fact that the focus of his political campaigns often appears to be a fight against unfettered immigration, in which he utilizes the rhetoric of racism, racialism, separatism, and sexism—all in the service of his “Make America Great Again” agenda.<sup>34</sup>

In the process, Trump has defamed both the Muslim and the Black communities. In January 2017, Trump introduced an executive order banning people from seven Muslim-majority countries from entering the United States, which resulted in a global backlash. He allegedly referred to El Salvador, Haiti, and African countries as “shitholes,” which was widely condemned as a racist comment. In July 2019, Trump tweeted about four Democratic congresswomen of color, three of whom were American-born: “Why don’t they go back and help fix the totally broken and crime-infested places from which they came. Then come back and show us how it is done.” “I’ve got Black accountants at Trump Castle and at Trump Plaza. Black guys counting my money! I hate it! The only kind of people I want counting my money are short guys wearing yarmulkes, nobody else . . . Besides that, I’ve got to tell you something else: I think that the [Black] guy is lazy—and it’s probably not his fault because laziness is a trait in Blacks.” After calling for the return of the death penalty, he said, “The problem with our society is the victim has absolutely no rights and the criminal has unbelievable rights.”<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> A Justice Department special counsel is simultaneously investigating Trump’s efforts to overturn the results of the 2020 election, including the events of Jan. 6, 2021, when pro-Trump rioters violently stormed the Capitol, as well as whether Trump mishandled classified documents after dozens of sensitive materials were found last year at Trump’s Mar-a-Lago home. *Id.*

Among the growing list of potential Republican candidates who could challenge Trump in 2024 are Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis, former Vice President Mike Pence, former New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie, former UN Ambassador Nikki Haley, Sen. Tom Cotton of Arkansas, Sen. Ted Cruz of Texas, former Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, and Rep. Liz Cheney of Wyoming (although it’s not clear whether she’d run as an independent).

<sup>34</sup> Racism is the belief that each race has distinct and intrinsic attributes, that one race is superior to all others. Racialism is the belief in the existence and significance of racial categories, with an emphasis on perceived social and cultural differences among races. See WIKIDIFF, “Racism vs Racialism—What’s the Difference?,” available at <https://wikidiff.com/racism/racialism>

<sup>35</sup> See “Donald Trump’s ‘Racist Slur’ Provokes Outrage,” BBC NEWS, January 12, 2018, available at <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-42664173>; See also Jack O’Donnell, “Donald Trump Says He’s ‘Never Used Racist Remarks.’ I Know Different.,” POLITICO, November 07, 2018, available at <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2018/11/07/donald-trump-says-hes-never-used-a-racist-remark-i-know-different-222314/>; and Julissa Arce, “Trump’s Anti-Immigrant Rhetoric Was Never About Legality — It Was About Our Brown Skin,” TIME MAGAZINE, August 6, 2019, available at <https://time.com/5645501/trump-anti-immigration-rhetoric-racism/>

Although Trump is quoted widely and seriously, viewing some of his more off-the-cuff comments can be instructive as well. Here are a few of them.

On domestic policy: “I think if this country gets any kinder or gentler, it’s literally going to cease to exist.”<sup>36</sup>

On immigration: “We’re rounding ‘em up in a very humane way, in a very nice way. And they’re going to be happy because they want to be legalized. And, by the way, I know it doesn’t sound nice. But not everything is nice.”<sup>37</sup>

On Syrian refugees: “What I won’t do is take in two hundred thousand Syrians who could be ISIS . . . These are physically young, strong men. They look like prime-time soldiers . . . but where are the women? . . . Why aren’t they fighting for their country?”<sup>38</sup>

On education: “[Overseas] we build a school, we build a road, they blow up the school, we build another school, we build another road, they blow them up, we build again. In the meantime we can’t get a fucking school in Brooklyn.”<sup>39</sup>

On helping women: “I will be phenomenal to the women. I mean, I want to help women.”<sup>40</sup>

On abortion: “Do you believe in punishment for abortion—yes or no—as a principle?” “The answer is there has to be some form of punishment.”<sup>41</sup>

On Blacks: “I have a great relationship with African Americans, as you possibly have heard. I just have great respect for them, and they like me. I like them.”<sup>42</sup>

On health care: “The U.S. cannot allow EBOLA-infected people back. People that go to faraway places to help out are great—but must suffer the consequences!”<sup>43</sup>

On global warming: “It’s really cold outside. They’re calling it a major freeze, weeks ahead of normal. Man, we could use a big fat dose of global warming!”<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>36</sup>PLAYBOY (March 1990), available at [https://www.ebay.com/sch/i.html?\\_nkw=playboy+maga+zine+march+1990&\\_sop=12](https://www.ebay.com/sch/i.html?_nkw=playboy+maga+zine+march+1990&_sop=12)

<sup>37</sup>60 Minutes, September 27, 2015, available at <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/donald-trump-60-minutes-scott-pelley/>

<sup>38</sup>Face the Nation, November 10, 2015, available at <https://www.cnsnews.com/news/article/susan-jones/trump-what-i-wont-do-take-200000-syrians-who-could-be-isis>

<sup>39</sup>Meet the Press, April 10, 2015, available at <https://twitter.com/jgBigBoy1/status/1457878469166071809>

<sup>40</sup>Face the Nation, September 8, 2015, available at <https://time.com/3989907/donald-trump-women-2/>

<sup>41</sup>MSNBC, March 30, 2016, available at <https://washingtonmonthly.com/2022/06/28/chris-matthews-hardball-trump-abortion/>

<sup>42</sup>The Gawker, July 24, 2014, available at <https://www.gawker.com/the-collected-quotes-of-donald-trump-on-the-blacks-1719961925>

<sup>43</sup>The Atlantic, August 3, 2019, available at <https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2019/08/the-rank-hypocrisy-of-trumps-ebola-tweets/595420/>

<sup>44</sup>CNN Politics, October 19, 2015, available at <https://www.cnn.com/2015/10/19/politics/donald-trump-global-warming-tweet/index.html>

Hyperbole or Potential Valuation Fraud or “Genius”? There are many others.<sup>45</sup>

There are also many questions about inflated figures and their tax implications. Between 2011 and 2011, Trump listed the value of this asset at between \$90.9 million and \$350 million. In July 2020, the Trump Organization received an appraisal with a value of \$84.5 million, but in the 2020 Statement the Trump Organization valued Trump Park Avenue at \$135.8 million. He allegedly valued his triplex apartment at \$327 million in 2015 and 2016 financial statements, based on claims it was nearly 30,000 square feet in size, when it was actually 10,996 square feet.<sup>46</sup>

The September 2022 lawsuit accused Donald Trump, members of his family and Trump Organization executives of orchestrating ‘an extensive fraudulent’ scheme related to valuations of property and Trump’s personal financial statements. Earlier on, Trump and many of his family have sat for disposition in the case. However, Donald Trump was deposed again in April 2023, that time answering questions in Attorney General Letitia James’ New York City office for about eight hours. The 250 million lawsuit case is scheduled to go for trial on October 2, 2023. Amid ongoing criminal and civil investigations into whether Trump illegally inflated the value of his assets, writes, *New York Times*, Trump’s longtime accounting firm, Mazars, USA, cut tie with him and his family business and retract financial statements, saying ‘it could no longer stand behind a decade of annual financial statements it prepared for the Trump Organization’. The *New York Times* continues, ‘Mazars is the latest in a long line of companies to break with Trump over the last year, following in the path of several banks, insurers and lawyers.’

According to the House Committee on Oversight and Reform, which revealed that Trump hotels allegedly charged the Secret Service as high as \$1185 per night on dozens of trips to protect Trump even after he left the White House. This figure is five times more than the recommended government rate for hotel stays while protecting the former President and those around him. The Trump Organization said that Secret Service agents traveling with him to the properties he owned stayed for free or at cost, but the committee’s report said otherwise. He reportedly visited his properties 547 times, including 145 visits to Mar-a-Lago in Palm Beach, Florida, while in office.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>45</sup>The following were collected by political commentator Chris Cillizza (*see* “The 47 Wildest Lines from Donald Trump’s South Carolina Speech,” *THE POINT*, March 14, 2022, available at <https://www.cnn.com/2022/03/14/politics/donald-trump-south-carolina-speech/index.html>.)

<sup>46</sup>An independent bank-ordered appraisal in 2010 valued the 12 rent-stabilized units at \$750,000, but they were valued at nearly \$50 million in 2011 and 2012 tax statements. The value of Ivanka Trump’s penthouses in Trump Park Avenue was also inflated significantly. Similarly, Trump’s Florida home was valued as high as \$739 million based on the premise that it was unrestricted property and could be developed for residential use. The lawsuit claims that the resort should have been valued at closer to \$75 million. *See* Priscilla DeGregory and Emily Crane, “Inside the Properties Trump Is Accused of Massively Overvaluing—‘327 M’ Penthouse, ‘739 M’ Florida Estate,” *NEW YORK POST*, September 21, 2022, available at <https://nypost.com/2022/09/21/the-properties-trump-is-accused-of-overvaluing-in-alleged-fraud-scheme/>

Trump takes on both political figures and pundits with equal abandon. In his speeches, he often quotes Benito Mussolini, praised Vladimir Putin, Kim Jong-Un, Rodrigo Duterte, and President Xi Jinping (the last particularly after the Communist party announced the elimination of the presidential two-term limit). He has assaulted US journalists as the “enemy of the people.” He has heaped all the blame for unfair trade practices on migrants and Mexicans. He labels GOP opponents as weak “RINOs” (Republicans in Name Only).<sup>48</sup> He nicknames Democratic challengers (like Elizabeth “Pocahontas” Warren, “Crazy Joe” Biden, and Ron “DeSanctimonious” DeSantis).<sup>49</sup>

Trump rigidly refused to concede his election loss to Joe Biden in 2020, instead pushing unfounded allegations of systemic fraud that the vote had been stolen. The Justice Department found no evidence to support that claim. When Attorney General William Barr promptly and directly contradicted it, Trump dubbed him a “spineless RINO.” When advisors urged the President to speak out and ask the protesters to leave the Capitol, he became “really angry,” at one point suggesting that then-Vice President Mike Pence “deserved to be hanged” for refusing to overturn the 2020 election.<sup>50</sup>

The famed journalist Bob Woodward describes Trump as “raw, profane, divisive and deceptive,” his language “often retaliatory.” Woodward further observed that Trump relied on personal instinct more than any other president he would encounter, and commented that he would be taken aback by Trump’s admiration for North Korean dictator Kim Jong-un. “I have chemistry with Kim Jong-un.” One might question how any reasonable world leader could voice great affection for a brutal dictator flourishing nuclear weapons—dedicated to terrorizing his widely impoverished citizens by way of highly visible public executions of any individual who dares to contradict him.<sup>51</sup>

Indeed the Kim-Trump relationship has cast a somewhat bizarre tinge upon Trump’s already quirky but ever-increasing legacy of singular eccentricities. “We fell in love,” he told a rally in West Virginia in September 2018. “No, really. He wrote me beautiful letters.” Correspondence between the two emerged publicly after

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<sup>47</sup> Trump is also alleged to have increased values of a number of his other golf courses by treating them as fixed assets without factoring in any depreciation, as well as artificially increasing their value by claiming unsold memberships were more expensive and more common than they actually were. *Id.*

<sup>48</sup> *Id.*

<sup>49</sup> See Kaitlyn Schallhorn, “Trump’s Nicknames for Rivals, from ‘Rocket Man’ to ‘Pocahontas,’” FOX NEWS, August 13, 2018, available at <https://www.foxnews.com/politics/trumps-nicknames-for-rivals-from-rocket-man-to-pocahontas>

<sup>50</sup> See Steven Nelson, “Trump Said Mike Pence ‘deserves’ Hanging Amid Chants During Capitol Riot: Liz Cheney,” NEW YORK POST, June 9, 2022, available at <https://nypost.com/2022/06/09/trump-said-pence-deserves-hanging-at-capitol-riot-liz-cheney/>

<sup>51</sup> See David Smith, “Interview: ‘It’s on the tape’: Bob Woodward on Donald Trump’s ‘Criminal Behavior,’” THE GUARDIAN, November 20, 2022, available at <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2022/nov/19/bob-woodward-donald-trump-tapes>

it was seized from his Mar-a-Lago, Florida estate because it had been taken out of the White House without proper authorization.<sup>52</sup>

What was once private—and perhaps should have remained so—had now become the subject of ridicule.

By August 2023, when this book is about to be released, Donald J. Trump, the first former president in American history to be charged with either federal or state crimes, is now facing four separate indictments. And his indictment in Georgia carries the most risk.

## Future

### *He Isn't Going Away*

Before, during, and after his presidency, Democrats and others said that Trump was finished. Truth be told, he is just getting started.

In November of 2022, at his Mar-a-Lago resort in Florida, Trump officially announced his candidacy for the 2024 election. With the tune “God Bless the U.S. A.” playing in the background and amid cheers from the crowd, he delivered an hour-long speech about what he called “issues, vision and success” and laid out a “platform of national greatness.”<sup>53</sup>

The announcement itself was perhaps not as surprising as the wave of Trump-bashing that came from vociferous critics in both parties. National Public Radio, for example, posted this headline: “Donald Trump, Who Tried to Overthrow the Results of the 2020 Presidential Election and Inspired a Deadly Riot at the Capitol in a Desperate Attempt to Keep Himself in Power, Announced He Is Running Again for President in 2024.”<sup>54</sup>

Both Democrats and never-Trump “Republicans-in-name-only” sought to portray Trump’s impending candidacy as something that will not only fail on its own but will cause the entire Republican Party to fail. Trump himself acknowledged, “We will be resisted by the combined forces of the establishment, the media, the special interest, the globalists, the Marxist, radicals, the woke corporations, the weaponized power of the federal government, the colossal political machines, the tidal wave of

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<sup>52</sup>In one of them, about a meeting in Singapore in June 2018, Kim wrote: “Even now I cannot forget that moment of history when I firmly held Your Excellency’s hand at the beautiful and sacred location as the whole world watched.” And after a summit in Vietnam in February 2019, Kim wrote that “every minute we shared 103 days ago in Hanoi was also a moment of glory that remains a precious memory.” See Martin Pengelly, “Trump Papers Including Kim ‘Love Letters’ Retrieved from Mar-a-Lago, THE GUARDIAN, February 7, 2022, available at <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2022/feb/07/trump-papers-kim-love-letters-national-archives-mar-a-lago>

<sup>53</sup>See <https://www.foxnews.com/politics/donald-trump-announces-2024-re-election-run-president>

<sup>54</sup>See <https://www.ideastream.org/2022-11-16/donald-trump-who-tried-to-overturn-bidens-legitimate-election-launches-2024-bid>

dark money and the most dangerous domestic censorship system ever created by man or woman” and said his movement is heading into a “very incredible but dangerous journey.”<sup>55</sup>

Trump went on to say that “the citizens of our country have not yet realized the full extent and gravity of the pain our nation is going through, and the total effect of the suffering is just starting to take hold. They don’t quite feel it yet, but they will very soon. I have no doubt that by 2024 it will sadly be much worse and they will see much more clearly what happened and what is happening . . . . Our country could not take four more years. . . . It’s all very fragile to start off with. It can only take so much.”<sup>56</sup>

Although Trump may be sincere in his belief that the economy is going to get worse between now and 2024, his understanding of the facts behind that opinion appears to be shallow. As usual, he offers little more than casual generalities. “With no helper for Israel, many terrible things are going to occur. Already other nations are betraying America, as well as its brother nations Britain and Israel. Iran is developing nuclear weapons. It is seeking ways to humiliate the United States. China is becoming more belligerent. . . . Europe is increasingly determined to become more independent from America and is expanding trade with China. Germany has pursued alignment with Russia through the Nord Stream 2 pipeline and other means. As God prophesied, our national ‘lovers’ are going to betray us and besiege us.”<sup>57</sup>

Trump’s inherently poor taste and judgment regularly come to the fore with declarations about notable public figures he does not like. In 2015 he bashed Senator John McCain on his military record: “He’s a war hero ‘cause he was captured. I like people that weren’t captured.” In 2019 he attacked Rep. Debbie Dingell (D-Mich.) by saying that her late husband John Dingell, the longest-serving member of Congress (59 years), was probably “looking up from Hell.” And in 2021, after Secretary of State Colin Powell died from Covid-19 complications: “Wonderful to see Colin Powell, who made big mistakes on Iraq and famously, so-called weapons of mass destruction, be treated in death so beautifully by the Fake News Media . . . . Hope that happens to me someday. He was a classic RINO, . . . always being the first to attack other Republicans . . . . But anyway, may he rest in peace!”<sup>58</sup>

Trump’s outbursts underscore how quickly the Party he claims to represent can find itself overshadowed by the ex-President—a problem that came into focus during the 2022 midterm elections, which he used to launch his 2024 campaign in concert with his mission to vindicate his view that the 2020 race was stolen.

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<sup>55</sup> *Id.*

<sup>56</sup> *Id.*

<sup>57</sup> *Id.*

<sup>58</sup> *Id.* See also note 36 and accompanying text.

In any event, there's little reason to expect that the former President's self-reverent aggrandizing will change in any significant way.

"Nobody knows the system better than me, which is why I alone can fix it," he declares. Perhaps that is because, as he has said at various times, "No one is more conservative than me," and "No one is stronger on the Second Amendment than me," and "No one respects women more than me," and "nobody feels more strongly about women's health issues," and "There's nobody more pro-Israel than I am," and "There's nobody that's done so much for equality as I have," and "Nobody knows more about taxes than me, maybe in the history of the world," and "I have studied the Iran deal in great detail, greater by far than anyone else," and "Nobody's ever been more successful than me," and "Nobody knows banking better than I do," and "Nobody knows more about debt than I do," and "Nobody's bigger or better at the military I am," and "Nobody knows politicians better than me," and "Nobody builds better walls than me," and "Nobody knows more about trade than me."<sup>59</sup>

Lest one might view such statements fail to reflect a modicum of humility, there are these Trumpets as well: "No one reads the Bible more than me," "I am the least racist person you'll ever meet"—and "With the exception of the late, great Abraham Lincoln, I can be more presidential than any president that's ever held this office."<sup>60</sup>

None of these quotes would be of consequence to most people, of course, because many of us have met individuals with a similar sense of self-esteem—except that these pronouncements were uttered by the President of the United States, arguably the most powerful man in the world.<sup>61</sup> Therein lies the crux of the problem.

\* \* \*

There is a fine line between narcissism and egocentricity. Most people see the world from the inside out, which leads practically everyone to be at least somewhat self-centered. The fact that we are generally guided by our own unique personal perspectives, and that it usually requires special effort to observe things through others' eyes, is not necessarily a bad thing. Perhaps we are in fact wiser or more street-savvy or blessed with a stronger strain of common sense than others.

Donald Trump's narcissism and egocentricity are easily recognizable, and their manifestations are thoroughly describable by psychologists and psychiatrists. Children's thoughts and communications are typically egocentric (that is, about themselves). They are unable to see a situation from another person's point of view. They assume that other people take things in exactly the way they do. Egocentrism becomes even stronger in adolescence. Teenagers, too, tend to envision how friends would react to each of their actions or thoughts.<sup>62</sup>

<sup>59</sup> See Eric Black, "Donald Trump's Breathtaking Self-Admiration," MINNESOTA POST, June 20, 2016, available at <https://www.minnpost.com/eric-black-ink/2016/06/donald-trump-s-breath-taking-self-admiration/>. See also note 36 and accompanying text.

<sup>60</sup> *Id.* See also note 36 and accompanying text.

<sup>61</sup> See "It's Presidents Day, So We Asked: Is the President of the United States Still the Most Powerful Person on Earth?," NORTHEASTERN GLOBAL NEWS, March 15, 2023, available at <https://news.northeastern.edu/2023/02/16/presidents-day-2023/>



Most people are amateur psychologists. Sooner or later, many come to realize that those around them often feel similarly awkward and embarrassed, such as at high-school and college freshman “mixer” dances. It may take some time to get over such feelings, and some of us never do. As Ann Landers once remarked, “At age 20, we worry about what others think of us; at 40, we don’t care what they think of us; at 60, we discover they haven’t been thinking of us at all.”<sup>63</sup>

Likewise, we often intuit that other people agree with our views when there is little objective evidence to support that supposition except perhaps for a polite nod-of-the-head or smile. We may be right in assuming they agree, but there’s a decent chance we’re not. It could be that most people do not like to be confrontational. In any case, body language may be hard to discern and interpret—and mind-reading, at best, is a tricky business.

The same with humor, whether telling “in-jokes” or otherwise. How many of us are surprised when those to whom we’re speaking do not seem to see what’s funny? If we’re talking from a stage to a larger audience, the story that falls flat becomes a gaffe of even greater magnitude—and sometimes a source of friendly scorn or internal embarrassment (and maybe sleeplessness) for years to come.

The problem is exaggerated among people in the public eye. No one is more so at the moment than Donald Trump: every television news segment, daily newspaper, casual supermarket conversation, and evening talk show is likely to have at least one passing mention of him—which, needless to say, is music to the ears of the man himself.

More disturbing is that egocentric narcissists like Trump are frequently either unable to see someone else’s point of view or simply do not care about it or become visibly angry. It is also quite possible they may be totally unaware of the resentment they have caused or created. The former President clearly craves the spotlight, his self-esteem at a considerably lower ebb than when he was in office.

When egocentrism resides in a person vested with power and influence over others, a different set of dynamics comes into play. Decisions of the moment by the President of the United States carry great ramifications on the world stage. Granted, he can, should, and often does rely on the advice of others—the sage counsel, we hope and trust of Cabinet members, military commanders, even family. But in the end, it is he is charged with making the call.

In 2017, a group of mental health professionals gathered at a “duty to warn” conference, after which they published their considered opinions in a book, *The Dangerous Case of Donald Trump*. Contending that he was unfit to be president, they offered their professional perceptions of his statements and actions known at that point, drawing a connection between his behavior and a pathological narcissistic

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<sup>62</sup>This is the so-called “imaginary audience” impulse. See DAVID ELKIND, *A SYMPATHETIC UNDERSTANDING OF THE CHILD: BIRTH TO SIXTEEN* (third EDITION).

<sup>63</sup>Although this remark is often attributed to Ann Landers, its origin is open to question. See “This quote about age didn’t originate with Ann Landers,” POLITIFACT, October 17, 2019, available at <https://www.politifact.com/factchecks/2019/oct/25/viral-image/no-evidence-ann-landers-said-quote-about-age/>



**personality disorder** which entails feelings of entitlement, exploitation, and **empathy** impairment—to wit, believing one is superior to others; fantasizing about success; exaggerating talents and achievements; expecting constant admiration and praise; believing one is special and acting that way; failing to recognize others' feelings; expecting others to do what one wants; taking advantage of others; expressing disdain for the “inferior”; **jealousy** of others; feeling easily hurt and rejected; having fragile **self-esteem**; appearing tough and unemotional; setting unrealistic **goals**; and being unable to keep healthy relationships.<sup>64</sup>

Although Trump may be *stubborn as a donkey and dumb as a mule*, as the old saw goes, you cannot teach either of them new tricks.<sup>65</sup> Such may be the prospect we face in the next few years. But no individual is bigger than a NATION!

On the other hand, could it be that our pessimism is misplaced or unfounded? Are we reading politics as if we know what's happening? Perhaps it would be a balm to our sense of worry were we to sit back, take a deep breath and a sip of lemonade, force a smile, and look at the phenomenon of Donald Trump through the sage eyes of someone like Mark Twain—who once said, “The more you explain it, the more I don't understand it”?

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<sup>64</sup> See Darcia F. Narvaez, “The Psychology of Donald Trump,” *PSYCHOLOGY TODAY*, August 8, 2020, available at <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/moral-landscapes/202008/the-psychology-donald-trump>

<sup>65</sup> Or can you? See “How to Train A Donkey,” available at <https://farmandanimals.com/how-to-train-a-donkey>

# Nietzsche, Trump, and the American Far Right



Jacob Dahl Rendtorff

**Abstract** This chapter discusses Donald Trump and the American far right from the perspective of Friedrich Nietzsche's philosophy, which is the inspiration for right-wing ideologists behind Trump's ideology and politics. Trump adopts Nietzsche's perspectivism, the morality of resentment, and the search for superman. These elements of Nietzsche are the basis of ultra-Conservative political ideology in America and Republican politics. Their use of Nietzsche requires analysis. To what extent do far-right ideology and Trump abuse the thought of Nietzsche as a political philosopher? Is it correct to say that Nietzsche was a radical conservative? Finally, it is important to demonstrate that Nietzsche's philosophy differs from Trump's political ideology.

**Keywords** Nietzsche · Donald Trump · Far-Right Politics · Superman · USA · Ultra-Conservative political ideology · Kant's Political philosophy

## Introduction

Political philosopher Ronald Beiner analyzed right-wing political thought from the philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche. Rendtorff (2010, 2013a, 2013b, 2013c, 2013d, 2015) develops hermeneutic philosophy of governance and leadership to understand ethics and politics. The twentieth century writings of Leo Strauss, Alexander Kojève, and Allan Bloom provide additional insight into right-wing politics. These paradigms reveal that the New Right applies truth, morality, and power. And, what does this mean for morality and ethics? And, what significance does this philosophy have for our current political and social situation?

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Many thanks to the anonymous for copyediting/overhaul and to Dr. Adebowale Akande for his professorial editorial assistance.

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## What Is it in Trump and the Far Right that Makes us Think about Nietzsche?

But what is it in Trump's politics that makes us think that he is inspired by Nietzsche? Among many scholars, there is a lively debate about Trump and Nietzsche. Sable & Torres, [2018a](#), [2018b](#) wondered if there was a political philosophy behind Trump. Some scholars try to demonstrate that Nietzsche's philosophy is essential to understand the political ideology of Donald Trump (Bartholomew, [2022](#); Dolgert, [2016](#); Harris, [2022](#); Heit, [2018](#); Kellner, [2019](#)). Harper and Schaaf ([2018](#)) argued that Nietzsche explains Trump's ideology and the positions of the right wing. Newman ([2022](#)) argues that Nietzsche's thought opens up analysis and critique of Trump's politics while also proposing a deep and much more reflective alternative to contemporary postmetaphysical and nihilist society. In this debate, the work of Ronald Beiner constitutes one of the most thoughtful attempts to discuss Trump and Nietzsche.

Another approach to Trump's presidency is through the concept of "spectacle society" or "the politics of spectacle" by Guy Debord (Kellner, [2017](#)). Trump distracted from the issues with one spectacle after another. The spectacles highlighted social discontent among many people and transformed it into a populist theater of revolution of the masses. Or, we can refer to a society that has become a postmodern society of relativism. The hypermodern economy of consumerism and the pursuit of personal pleasure and joy made Trump's political successes possible. Populism built around personal consumption without ethical guardrails opposed calls for the end to economic and political inequalities in American society. The Trump political movement ignored the real contemporary challenges of overcoming climate change and creating more global equality through sustainability and cosmopolitan ethics (Rendtorff, [2014](#), [2018](#), [2019](#), [2020](#)).

Three of Nietzsche's themes are essential: posttruth and postfactual society, the politics of resentment, and the theme of superman and the creation of new values of the society to come. Posttruth, postfactual society, and alternative facts played an essential role in Trump's politics (Klavan, [2017](#); Dellinger, [2019](#); Venizelos, [2022](#); Vine, [2020](#); Wilber, [2017](#)). Trump attempted to please the masses by use of fake news and alternative facts rather than traditional political objective facts (van Dyk, [2017](#); Silva, [2022](#)). Trump's conservative, right-wing movement used myth and narrative to form a strong, populist vision of success for the future (Robin, [2018](#)). Trump's political ideology is a kind of postmodern fascism, which integrates totalitarian elements in a postmodern populism, playing on the discontent of the poor labor classes in society (Lawtoo, [2019](#)). Trump used entertainment and spectacle as essential elements in the creation and construction of new facts to create a better future for lower, middle-class, white laborers. From the perspective of Trump supporters, radical perspectivism and relativism permitted each person to create a singular and subjective perspective (Neugebauer, [2019](#)). When Trump's election defeat did not fit the storyline articulated by Trump, the mob invaded the U.S. Capitol Building on January 6.

Nietzsche's slave morality fits Trump's resentment of elites. Slave morality meant the owners were in charge of the slaves and they determined morality. To Nietzsche, the purpose of the slave was to obey the master in humility and recognition of the master's greatest and most powerful position in society (Waite, 1996). Trump presented a paradigm where educated elites and the wealthy in society told everyone else what to do, reducing them to obedient citizens. Trump promised a new morality based on the values of the strength of the masses. Trump's neoliberalism was based on populism of the survival of the strongest, which became clear with the *laissez-faire* politics in relation to Covid-19 (McQueen et al., 2020). In this concept of neoliberalism, resentment toward the weak played an essential role (Brown, 2018). Through strength, the masses could "Make America Great Again."

Trump plays the Nietzsche role of Superman. As leader, Trump will make America the greatest of all nations (Sable & Torres, 2018a, 2018b). The masses, with Trump as the head, can reevaluate all values and norms (Sharpe, 2021). As a superman of new values, Trump is presented as an anti-hero of the search for new values in the age of relativism and postmodernism (Prusa & Brummer, 2022). Trump was the strong, heroic individual who represented the interest of the powerful working class against the dominance of the nationalist beliefs of the traditional political elites of lifeless and decadent democratic culture.

## **Nietzsche and Right-Wing Ideologists behind Trump's Politics**

Ronald Beiner (2018) believes Richard B. Spencer led Trump toward white nationalism. Spencer is a so-called American "White Suprematist" and neo-Nazi, who, in 2016, shouted "Hail Trump." Spencer seeks a showdown with petty-bourgeois, American middle-class society. This is an example of a combination of the riot against slave morality with the reevaluation of all values to create a new foundation of society. Spencer believes the ideology of the white race is superior to all others (Beiner, 2018). Accordingly, when whites alone govern America, whites will destroy a degenerate American society, which is a society that has no other values than a pension and dying old in bed. According to Beiner, Spencer wants chaos and some almost fascist values in American politics. Trump made Spencer's white superiority an acceptable, mainstream, populist position by integrating racial ideology with ideas of consumerism and spectacle, softening the fascist dimension.

Basically, Ronald Beiner argues, that Nietzsche's philosophy was used as an ideological backup for Trump's populist project. Stephen Bannon and other right-wing ideologues who have influenced Trump were inspired by Nietzsche's philosophy of the superman and his creative destruction, which calls for the destruction and reevaluation of all values in a showdown with liberalism's mediocrity, egalitarianism, and petty bourgeoisie (Beiner, 2018). Thus, to explain Trump's Nietzscheanism, we need to look at the ideological strategic reflections that were

behind the development of the radicalization of conservatism through the combination of neoliberalism with postmodern populism as it was developed in Trump's political ideology.

However, the Nietzsche-inspired, right-wing ideology that affected the United States did not come only from radical conservatives within America. According to Beiner, there was a link between Russian, ultra-conservative ideology and the U.S. development of right-wing populism. Russian thinker Alexandr Dugin combines defense of conservative values with a strong belief in traditional values of the Nation, the family, the Church, and the Russian military force (Eltchaninoff, 2015). According to Dugin, the emergence of the transgender and woke culture of the decadent West represents a destruction of all values of traditional metaphysics. Therefore, a new foundation for cultural values is needed. In a television interview, Dugin pays tribute to posthumanism and says "man is something that we have to get over" with an implicit reference to Nietzsche's superman (Beiner, 2018). In another context, Dugin argued for the emergence of a new era of slavery, the return of archaic sanctity, and the return of superman. He hopes for a society of heroes and supermen (Eltchaninoff, 2015). Dugin is a military strategist and neoconservative. He has close ties to the Kremlin and Putin. He has developed a philosophy of Russia's geopolitical supremacy based on the idea of the superman. Dugin is at the same time partly believer, partly Nietzschean, partly occult, guru, partly warlord, geopolitical strategist, and partly magical, and thus he expresses the postmodern subject per excellence, and he is a good example of the new postmodernist right turn of the ideology of the superman (Beiner, 2018; Eltchaninoff, 2015).

According to Beiner, behind these contemporary right-wing ideologues is the Italian ideologue Julius Evola (1898–1974). He was an Italian neo-fascist Nietzsche follower. With his monocle, he appeared as an Italian superfascist aristocrat, inspired by Nietzsche, who wanted to abolish a society where the masses ruled and introduce instead a society ruled by the powerful aristocrats and dominated by their belief in the ancient virtues of war (Beiner, 2018). He emphasized the necessity of a Nietzschean, neo-aristocracy, and believed that war is a therapy that leads man to a new form of spiritual existence. Evola argued that the essence of man is to be a soldier (Beiner, 2018). Evola also managed to interpret Nietzsche's philosophy from the perspective of radical, right-wing politics. Evola contributed to the development of Nietzsche's philosophy as the basis for postmodernist conservatism.

Dugin believes the flat, petty-bourgeois, birth-control culture that has prevailed in the West is threatened with extinction by the less decadent, more aggressive, and viable Islamic and Asian cultures. According to Beiner, this is an anti-liberal and anti-egalitarian rhetoric that is characterized by Nietzsche, and thus, Nietzsche's philosophy is clearly present in Russian right-wing thinking (Beiner, 2018). This demonstration of the similarity between Russian right-wing ideology and Trump's populism sheds an interesting light on the Russian attempt to manipulate the U.-S. presidential elections of 2016 through internet trolls on social media. Seen from the Russian perspective, Trump's political ideology supported many ideas of the Russian regime. Trump's ultra-conservatism was welcomed by Putin's political regime in Russia.

## Nietzsche and the Move from Conservative to Ultra-Conservative Political Thought in America

This demonstration of the influence of Nietzsche on the right is interesting if seen in the light of American political thought, which is characterized by Leo Strauss and his successor Allan Bloom (Bloom, 1987; Rendtorff, 2017; Sable & Torres, 2018a, 2018b). Strauss's political philosophy takes its starting point from a consistent critique of the political philosophy of modernity, which begins with Hobbes's power politics in *Leviathan* and is filled with Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Max Weber's value-relativistic sociology. According to Strauss, politics is the struggle for power, and the prevailing values are those enforced by the strongest in society. This concept of politics finds its fulfillment in Carl Schmitt, who asserts that politics consists of fighting to the death with one's enemies (Rendtorff, 2017). Leo Strauss believed instead that it is important to get back to Plato and Aristotle and classical political philosophy. Classical virtues realized the best political order with phronesis and practical wisdom. Politics was a matter of realizing the best political regime with a focus on the good and just in the sensible arrangement of the state.

Strauss believed, however, at the same time as his distinction between exoteric and esoteric political philosophy, that one should be careful in spreading Nietzsche's nihilistic ideas. As an expression of the challenges of modernity, nihilism could undermine the creation of the best political regime. Strauss acknowledges the importance of the ideas of Nietzsche but also emphasizes that they should not be spread to the public, since this would destroy the political community (Lampert, 1996). From the point of view of classical conservative political philosophy, Nietzsche demonstrates important challenges to the political community that the virtuous and considerate political leader must overcome through good governance.

Allan Bloom (1987), who followed Leo Strauss as a professor at the University of Chicago, claims in *The Closing of the American Mind* that the left had been greatly influenced by Nietzsche. Bloom asserted that the relativism of Nietzsche, Freud, and Heidegger led to postmodernism and poststructuralism and the destruction of the values in American society and American culture. Bloom sees youth rebellion and the subsequent nonconformism and lack of values as the realization of Nietzsche's philosophy in the American middle class. Bloom argues that we must return to the classics if we are to save American culture and American society (Beiner, 2018; Bloom, 1987).

According to Shadia B. Drury (2005), Strauss and Bloom were behind the neoconservative theorists who formulated the ideology behind George W. Bush's Republican policy from 2000–2008. The neoconservatives wanted to realize the good in the state with the help of conservative politics, and that was what was behind the invasion of Iraq with the aim of democratizing the political institutions in the Middle East.

These interpretations of American political thought show an evolution from classical virtues to populist spectacles. The American right has moved beyond the criticism of postmodernism and poststructuralism to formulating a right-wing

philosophy that interprets Nietzsche's philosophy in a new way (Beiner, 2018). The move from neo-conservatism to ultra-conservatism in American politics implies a final farewell to the political philosophy of Leo Strauss and Allan Bloom among American conservatives. With Trump, it seems like the conservatives have no more reservations toward Nietzsche's radical ideas, but instead, they try to adopt Nietzsche's ideas of posttruth, resentment, superman, and reevaluations of all values through a specific ultra-conservative interpretation of Nietzsche's political thought, leading to Trump's populist political regime (Bartholomew, 2022; Dolgert, 2016; Harris, 2022; Heit, 2018; Kellner, 2019).

## **An Ultra-Conservative Interpretation of Nietzsche as the Ideologist of the Right**

Nietzsche has at once become a teacher for the real right and an ideologue for the inauthentic left, which has not understood the real implications of Nietzsche's philosophy (Beiner, 2018). In Nietzsche's paradigm the key idea is that there is no truth, and that truth is a metaphor. Poststructuralists and postmodernists, like Foucault, find truth relative because truth is controlled and maintained by the regimes of power as a means of holding onto privilege. Trump, in 1998, made fun of analytic philosophy and ironically claimed that he could have become a great analytic philosopher who could manipulate truth schemes. Trump reinvented conservative political ideology by moving beyond the aristocratic, classical, virtue conservatism toward the populist, neoliberal, revolutionary populism as a means of gaining support from the lower, and middle classes. At the same time, Trump kept the cynicism of the esoteric concept of politics in Strauss' philosophy, since Trump, like Strauss, knows that the values of populism are built on perspectivism and on the will to power without any firm basis in an objective reality. Trump's use of populist values includes the strategic awareness of the subjectivity and relativity of these values so that Trump can use them to ensure maintenance of his power as superman (Kelly, 2020).

## **How Does the Right with Trump's Ideology Abuse Nietzsche as a Political Philosopher?**

An argument can be made that the right-wing ideologues in the USA and Europe use Nietzsche's thinking to formulate their ideology. In Nietzsche's writings about truth, we find the basis for radical perspectivism and relativism (Nietzsche, 1983). In his book *Zur Genealogie der Moral* (On Genealogy of Morals), we find critical reflections on the slave morality and resentment of the weakest in society (Nietzsche, 1983). Nietzsche's book about superman, *Also Sprach Zarathustra* (Thus Spoke

Zarathustra), is thus used to formulate the settlement of the moral decline of the middle class (Nietzsche, 1983). Here, Nietzsche proposes that superman overcomes the crisis of nihilism of the postmetaphysical Western culture. Likewise, the right-wing can find inspiration from *Jenseits Gut und Böse* (Beyond Good and Evil). Here Nietzsche argues for a new grand politics, an imperialist project, and at the same time, he argues critically against the democratic-liberal political project, claiming that we need new political rulers to rule in Europe (Nietzsche, 1983). To Beiner (2018), Nietzsche thus belongs to the group of European thinkers who have rejected liberal democracy to create another new society with better values. Beiner believes that Nietzsche's core idea is that Western civilization is perishing because of too much focus on truth and rationality and too much focus on the equal dignity of human beings. Against this, Nietzsche proposes the notion of the superman as the strong singular individual who moves beyond the morality of the slaves (Beiner, 2018). According to Beiner, the dangerous core idea of Nietzsche is precisely this belief in the *Übermensch* (superman), the belief in the will to power as what must triumph over nihilism. It is in such a confrontation with the sick civilization that the new right will rely on the superman, as when Trump talks about "Make America Great Again." Beiner believes that the right wing makes full use of Nietzsche's potential as a seductive thinker by focusing on the riot against the subhumans and slaves and thereby questioning liberal democracy's belief in equality and freedom for all people (Beiner, 2018).

## Is it Correct to Say that Nietzsche Was a Radical Conservative?

Nietzsche may be interpreted as a right-wing thinker and a radical conservative, but such a conclusion misses the complexity of his thinking. An academic reading of Nietzsche may reach different conclusions than a political reading. Moreover, a counterargument could be that the social, cultural, and political context of Nietzsche's life in Germany more than a hundred years ago is so different from the contemporary reality of hypermodernity that it makes no sense to apply Nietzsche's philosophical concepts to contemporary politics. From a more philosophical and critical point of view, Nietzsche is a creative, hard-hitting critical philosopher who forever smashes metaphysics to pieces. In this perspective, Nietzsche does not have an ideological mission but rather is the philosopher who deconstructs metaphysics. This means that Nietzsche is not a philosopher that cultivates a normative ideology of the will to power, but quite the opposite – he is a thinker who will critically expose religion, politics, and thinking as moralism based on the will to power. From this perspective, Nietzsche is not a philosopher who seeks an idealistic superman, but rather a concrete existentialist thinker who affirms the body over consciousness in a critique of philosophy's displacement of the body in the long tradition of metaphysics going back to Plato. Seen from this angle,



Nietzsche is not a right-wing radical ideologue but rather a critical thinker who demonstrates the dilemmas and conflicts of the modern liberal-democratic project and draws attention to the possibility of modernity's cultural collapse. Jaspers (1947) and Derrida (1978) suggest Nietzsche is a philosopher who deconstructs the political, cultural, and philosophical ideology of society. Moreover, Nietzsche's critique of modernity is complex and profound and impossible to reduce to a right-wing ideology of the superman. The core of Nietzsche's thinking is, as I said, nihilism. This means that the horizon for modernity, in contrast to the traditional metaphysics-based societies, is the experience of total meaninglessness, which with Nietzsche can be described as horizonless and meaningless modernity.

Nietzsche contributes here to emphasize that humanity needs a new affirmation of life, a new authenticity, where we can find meaning in a time when all meaning-giving bodies have been problematized. For example, consider the paradox of the victory of Christianity in European culture. The domination of Christian thought ultimately led to the argument that God is dead and that we have to accept the emergence of total nihilism as a fact of modern society. A further contradiction is that Nietzsche himself is an atheist and nihilist who, on the consistent basis of nothingness, will reassess and rediscover values. Here, Sartre's existentialism emphasizes human existence as a tragic passion, a useless passion that must find meaning in an absurd universe without meaning (Sartre, 1943). Sartre has reinterpreted superman as a free individual who must choose himself and the meaning of the world to overcome nihilism. Sartre follows Nietzsche's idea of superman's infinite responsibility for creating himself and the world.

A similar attempt to find meaning in meaninglessness can be found in Michel Foucault's philosophy in his idea of the ethics of the self, where the self must find meaning by focusing on the care of itself and its aesthetic life in a hyper-liberal reality, which is characterized by the will to power and the interplay between different types of dominant and disciplinary biopolitical discourses that threaten to obliterate the ethics and politics of the self (Foucault, 1984).

## **Trump's Nietzscheanism Adopts the Search for Superman as the Core of Radical Conservatism**

Beiner (2018) believes an implicit search for the dominance of superman in a world characterized by the tragic experience of the meaninglessness of the universe led to the right-wing political ideology and radical conservatism of Trump. Nietzsche can be used to justify right-wing radicalism's reassessment of all values to dismiss the subhumans of the vulnerable and weak classes in society. Nietzsche is obsessed with the nobility of the masters and their superhuman virtues. This aristocratic elite stands in stark contrast to the democratic mediocrity of the slaves in society. It is thus the belief in the strong and noble virtues of the superman that is Nietzsche's bid to get beyond contemporary decadence. Aristocratic morality is based on a movement

beyond traditional conceptions of good and evil. The morality of the aristocracy is the answer to the crisis of modernity and nihilism. Nietzsche's project of the noble soul is based on the belief in the future superman who rises above the common decay and thus creates a new society. And it is this idea that Beiner believes is pervasive in the right-wing ideology of Trump and Putin (Beiner, 2018).

Beiner thus believes that the new right, by basing itself on Nietzsche, tries to justify the emphasis on superman as the central category of politics. What has happened is that the right-wing ideologues have embraced Nietzsche as a postmodernist right-wing turn, abandoning moderate conservatism's return to Plato and Aristotle. Instead of seeing Nietzsche as a critical thinker who explains the tragic nihilism of modernity, Nietzsche's philosophy is chosen as a normative confrontation with modernity (Torres, 2018). With this position, Beiner relies on the interpretation of Nietzsche by Leo Strauss. As a political philosopher, Strauss believed that Nietzsche had the right to think the way he did, but he should never have said it or written it down, as he was dangerous to society and the masses (Beiner, 2018; Lampert, 1996). According to Strauss, Nietzsche's work is a destructive poison to the social order. Conversely, Nietzsche's interpretation is extremely clear-sighted. His philosophy is part of the contemporary world, and it explains the current tensions in politics and society. And it must then be possible to read Nietzsche as a social diagnostician without surrendering to his philosophy about the necessity of the future superman.

Even though this approach seems very plausible, and Trump's political ideology is inspired by Nietzsche's philosophy, I do not think that we can reduce the core of Nietzsche's philosophy to a radical conservative ideology. In contrast to Beiner's critical interpretation of Nietzsche and the American Right, it must be possible to propose another interpretation of Nietzsche that removes Nietzsche's philosophy from the far right. This approach goes in some sense against the interpretation of Beiner that is based on the critical approach by Leo Strauss and Allan Bloom. As I have suggested, we need to go back to the interpretations of Nietzsche by Karl Jaspers and Jacques Derrida, who are open to the understanding of Nietzsche as a critical and deconstructive philosophy. Regarding the idea of perspectivism, this implies an opening toward the deconstructive complexity of reality without ending in the reductionism of authoritarian fascism. Concerning resentment, we can argue that resentment also has a productive element implying an openness toward the other that searches for a new opening toward the other. This could be cultivated to develop a productive concept of leadership out of resentment (Ciulla, 2020). This could also be the basis for a more humanistic concept of superman based on human values of autonomy, dignity, integrity, and vulnerability (Valdés & Rendtorff, 2022). Moreover, in the case of the search for the existential superiority of superman, we must focus on the existential dimensions of the concept of superman, rather than considering superman as a fact of authoritarian populism. Here we can focus on the concept of superman as an expression of the search for an existential way of life in postmetaphysical reality that creates a better and more authentic human life on earth.

## Conclusion

Donald Trump's political ideology and far-right proponents used elements of Nietzsche's perspectivism, slave morality, and philosophy of resentment to justify the radical conservatism of authoritarian populism. Nietzsche made it possible to understand the move from conservative to ultra-conservative political thought in America, going beyond Aristocratic nobility toward a politics of authoritarian populism. However, critical voices argue that such an ultra-conservative interpretation of Nietzsche as an ideologist of the right may be considered as an abuse of Nietzsche as a political philosopher. Existentialism and deconstruction paradigms make it clear that radical conservatism may not absorb Nietzsche's philosophy. Nietzsche was not himself a radical conservative. Nevertheless, Trump's Nietzscheanism adopts the search for superman as the core of radical conservatism. From the perspective of the left, we see that Nietzsche's position is recognized as a critical and deconstructive philosophy at the same time as the left refuses to recognize the incorporation of some of the same ideas is taking place on the far right.

## Appendix

Donald Trump and the superman spectacle are part of his history. On May 25, 1977, *The New York Daily News* ran a photo of Trump showing off a drawing of his new convention center while standing in front of City Hall.<sup>1</sup> Trump did not have either a military record or sports accomplishments to prove his superman status. Instead, he married two fashion models and sponsored several beauty pageants. He has frequently been associated with Playboy models. Trump bragged about being on the cover of *Time Magazine* 15 times; he did appear 11 times.<sup>2</sup> He appeared with his father in *Forbes* in 1982 after making the list of one of the wealthiest people in the world. To announce he was running for president, Trump rode down the escalator at Trump Tower as the crowd gathered for the entrance. In 2017 Trump pushed other leaders of NATO nations to the side so he would be out front for the group photo. He was the board chair on *The Apprentice* for 15 seasons, deciding who among the show's contestants was to be fired. His website<sup>3</sup> features Trump in a purposeful stride, low-angle photo. The wording sums up his superman status on his website: "Donald J. Trump is the very definition of the American success story, continually setting the standards of excellence while expanding his interests in real estate, sports, and entertainment. He is the archetypal businessman—a deal maker without peer."

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.gettyimages.com/photos/donald-trump-1970s>

<sup>2</sup> <https://time.com/5928282/donald-trump-time-covers/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.trump.com/leadership/donald-j-trump-biography>

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# Donald Trump, Populist: Threat to American Democracy?



Joseph R. Rudolph Jr.

**Abstract** Donald Trump was the first person to occupy the White House without having any prior governmental experience, civilian, or military. The 2016 election was also the first time since polls were taken that both major parties ran nominees with public approval ratings below 50%. Lastly, Donald Trump was the first American President to refuse to accept the outcome of a presidential election and to resist the peaceful transfer of power after he lost his bid for reelection in 2020. In between, while in the White House, he exhibited more than the usual characteristics of a prototypical Negative Populist, coarsening public debate, condoning if not courting the support of White Supremacists, and leaving behind a bitterly divided nation.

**Keywords** Donald Trump · Populism · Democracy · 2016 US Presidential Election · Hillary Clinton · Demagogue · American Presidency · Executive Order

## Introduction

Susan Wise Bauer's *History of the Ancient World* reminds us that stories of popular individuals mobilizing the people to overthrow the corrupt elite victimizing them are nearly as old as recorded history (Bauer, 2007). Moreover, long before Donald Trump's presidency, both populists and populist movements had shaped American politics from the top-down and bottom-up.

The honor of being the first in a long line of populist presidential contenders belongs to Andrew Jackson, and the multifaceted impact that he had on the country's evolving political process has lasted until the present time. Following his loss in the 1824 election, Jackson devoted himself to building the country's first grassroots political organization, the Jacksonian Democrats, and father of the modern Democratic Party. In 1828 the Party held the country's first political convention,

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nominating Jackson as their candidate, and in the election that November, he swept to victory, winning carrying 15 of the then 24 states (including all states west of the Appalachian Mountains and south of the Mason-Dixon Line) and winning 55.5% of the popular vote over the incumbent president, John Quincy Adams.

Jackson's campaign message was simple in addressing an electorate whose Virginia and Massachusetts elites largely subscribed to the ancient Greek belief that—as Alexander Hamilton phrased it in *Federalist No. 55* in 1788—“Had every Athenian been a Socrates; every Athenian assembly would still have been a mob.” What leaders had offered until that time was thus government *by* the people who elected their representatives, and *for* the people by those elected. Jackson challenged the elitism and offered the pledge that if he and his fellow Jacksonian Democrats seeking office were elected, he would listen to the people once in the White House. In doing so, he not only transformed the government into one *by* the people as well as *for* the people but permanently democratized domestic policy-making in a new country.

It was nonetheless two generations before the first significant grassroots populist movement emerged, the Know Nothings (because that was what they professed to believe when asked), and the Native American Party (meaning Protestant European settlers) that they founded in 1844. Though fundamentally a xenophobic organization opposed to Catholic immigrants, who they feared would follow Papist degrees and destroy traditional Protestant American values, the Party embraced a variety of populist ideas, including advancing the rights of women and labor. It reached its political high-water mark in the presidential election of 1856 when it ran former president Milton Fillmore as a third-party candidate and garnered over 20% of the popular vote. Thereafter, it faded quickly as the Civil War approached. By 1860 the party was gone.

Another generation passed before the next populist movement succeeded it, the People's Party (1892) which became generally known as the Populist Party, thus formally adding the term Populist to the vocabulary of American politics. Derived from an agrarian base with a left-wing, pro-government regulation of business agenda, the Populists' power-to-the-people platform also included expanding the rights of labor and women and called for the direct election of the Senate, anti-monopoly legislation and enforcement, and government support of small businesses and farmers. As in the case of the Know Nothings, the Populist Party also endorsed a candidate for the presidency: William Jennings Bryan. Bryan's defeat by William McKinley in 1896 in both the popular vote and Electoral College was the beginning of the end for the Party. Within a short time, however, several of its proposals became parts of the American political system with the adoption of the 17th Amendment (1913), making the Senate directly elected, and the 19th Amendment (1920), giving women the right to vote.

Overlapping the Populists at the time was the turn of the century Progressive movement against corrupt politics in general and the control of cities by urban political machines in particular. More the handiwork of academics and politicians who often distained the humbler grassroots populists, Progressives nonetheless shared much of the Populists' agenda (the right of workers to unionize and of



women to vote, and the need for economic reforms). Still, their major impact during the Progressive Era (the late 1890s until World War I) lay in their more specific proposals to enhance the power of the citizenry to directly affect politics by implementing measures to allow the public to remove public officials from office before the expiration of their terms of office, and to introduce a primary system to give party members control over their parties' nominees for public office.

Subsequently, the primary system has become a part of elections at all levels in United States politics, giving candidates now have a means of bypassing their party's establishment in becoming their party's nominee.

A century after the Progressives lobbied for it, Donald Trump rode the primary trail to become, much to the dissatisfaction of mainstream Republican Party leaders, that party's presidential candidate,

## Populism, Populists, and the “will” of the People

Let us begin with a brief exploration of Populism. Populist candidates have sprung up across the ideological spectrum, though especially at edges on both the right and left, and in both major American parties as well as numerous minor ones founded around their populist philosophy and/or appeal. As already noted, quite a few have had dominant figures as leaders; for example, William Jennings Bryan, the Democratic Party's losing nominee in the 1896 presidential election and, most recently, Donald Trump in his capture of the Republican Party's nomination and—some would say—much of the party during the 2016 presidential election. Nevertheless, amid the often ambivalent and fuzzy definitions of populism, scholars around have noted its common elements regardless of the ideological or partisan posture of the person or movement (Horger, 2011; Molloy, 2018).

*Dichotomization: Victims and Victimizers.* All begin with a fundamental dichotomization of an “us versus them” nature, pitting “the people” against a malevolently defined elite. Within this framework, the people are rarely identified inclusively, but rather in terms of the groups being exploited and victimized because they lack institutional power. Likewise, those placed under the banner of evilness vary in time and place. The late nineteenth-century Populace Party found its nemesis in the Robber Barons, whose actions in their pursuit of fortune led to the bankruptcy of small farmers and the general exploitation of poor citizens; more recent populists on the right have focused on the economic, media, and political elites. It is true that some of the early populist movements sought broad coalitions—what former President Bill Clinton has called “inclusive populism”—but even they drew this people-versus-elites distinction (Clinton, 2022). As for those individuals seeking to exploit populism for personal political gain, “negative populism” has been the rule, with these would-be saviors of the public shunning pluralistic politics, defining themselves negatively in terms of what they opposed, and narrowly defining the constituencies representing the General Will of the governed.

*Real Grievances, Nonspecific, and Partial Solutions.* The concerns that have prompted populist movements, past and present, have often been susceptible to political exploitation by individuals seeking personal gain. A recent list of grievances propelling populists in the United States and Europe would include runaway inflation, a fear of economic collapse, mandatory Covid-19 lockdowns, and the refugee settlements ordered by the European Union. Such matters are also invariably beyond easy resolution. Illegal immigration can be curtailed but never ended in a country with as long and porous external border as the United States.<sup>7</sup> Once inside, immigrants have a continent in which to hide and where work is always available to those willing to toil below the market price. In a globalized economy with barriers to trade declining, outsourcing of jobs is a duty that corporations owe their stockholders. The United States is a multicultural, multiracial and, in some regions, bilingual country. Working-class white citizens are reminded of that every time they turn on their televisions or venture into a mall. Those who feel entitled because of the color of their skin are destined for frustration. They may find temporary solace in social media contacts with like-minded individuals, and some may act on extremist views; however, no populist leader can reverse that reality. Nor can that leader change the demographic dynamics, which show Americans of European ancestry declining in the population both relative to the share of *residents* from elsewhere and—in the official 2020 Census compared to 2010—in absolute numbers. Hence, populists tend to be long on promises and broad in framing their lists of ills, but normally vague in detailing the solutions they put forth.

*Appropriating the “Language of the People.”* Though not a universal trait of populists, it is common for populist leaders to speak, either by nature or conscientiously, in simple and sometimes vulgar phrases. The rhetoric serves many purposes. It is apt to be more memorable than the more elegant words of politicians like former President Barack Obama. It thus sets populists apart from the elite whose exploitive rule of “the people” they oppose. Likewise, such language helps forge a bond between the leaders and their followers, locked together in a similar vernacular. More importantly, it allows them to stay on the political offensive, furthering the animosity between their supporters and their foes, and perhaps gaining immense, free media attention. Calling an opponent, a “crook” and urging one’s followers at gatherings to chant “lock her up” a la Hillary Clinton in the 2016 presidential election *was*, despite the already negative nature of so many American campaigns, more or less extraordinary in national politics in the United States.

*An Authoritarian Inclination.* To the extent that they *are* addressed, solving identified problems often means sidestepping or overstepping the rules of the game of mature democracies. Due process can be troubling when you want to evict large numbers of immigrants. Hence, an independent judiciary may need reshaping by what Pippa Norris, Paul F. McGuire Lecturer in Comparative Politics at Harvard’s [John F. Kennedy School of Government and Founding Director of the Electoral Integrity Project](#), identifies as “authoritarian populism” (Norris & Inglehart, 2019). A media which monitors a government’s respect for the rights of others and reports on violations of that principle of established democracy may require strident supervision. Worse, the electorate in general (not your supporters of

course) may be duped into believing that your opponent has won an election just because the final tally confirms it. The rule of law may thereby become troublesome, along with the peaceful transition of authority. Whatever the reason, and whether as a means of achieving or consolidating power, common threads of contemporary populism on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean now include attacks on the judiciary, a free press and competing centers of power, at least a consideration of declaring states of emergency, and a disinclination by the populists in office to deny their citizens the benefit of their continued stay in office.

*Appropriating Evocative Symbols and Banners.* The other side of attacking marginalized groups has been the aggressiveness of populists in wrapping themselves in broader movements that share their view of the enemy/enemies *and* that are perceived in positive terms. None has been more a complement to the anti-immigrant and/or anti-“outsider” stance of populists on the far right than nationalism and the colorful draping of a country’s flag at rallies. And few appeals have been more effective and less destructive than the pairing of individual victimization with national victimization. Hitler rode to power by attacking the World War I peace settlement at Versailles, Jews for Germany’s defeat in that war, and France for invading the Weimar Republic during the 1920s when it fell behind in its reparations payments. In the process, he whipped the German public up into what many commentators have called a “national madness” culminating in not just a self-destructive World War II but the collective guilt of the German people in abetting the Holocaust. Nor was Hitler the last populist to lead his country into war. Slobodan Milosevic’s appeal to Serbian nationalism and promise to preserve Greater Serbia turned much of the former Yugoslavia into a bloody battlefield between 1991–1995 when Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, and Slovenia followed their own majority’s nationalistic desire to separate from Serbia and the rule of Belgrade.

Elsewhere, and less apocalyptic in result, the rhetoric of the nationalism has been artfully integrated into anti-immigrant platforms, as in a campaign slogan of Jean-Marie Le Pen’s anti-immigrant *Front National* party during the 1970s: “2 million French unemployed is 2 million foreign workers too many!” Attacking the forces of globalization has also been a crowd-gatherer and pleaser for orators on the right, while those at the opposite end of the spectrum have often found gold in mining the emotionally evocative power of socio-economic class issues and attacking profit-driven mega-corporations.

## **Donald J. Trump, Populist**

Genuinely spontaneous grassroots populist movements focusing on reform rather than revolution tend to be benign. Movements manufactured by self-proclaimed populists to abet their rise to power tend to be otherwise. Donald Trump and his most ardent MAGA (Make America Great Again) devotees fit more into the latter category. Indeed, his brand of populism checks all of the above boxes, and in many ways, “improves” upon them.

## *Exemplifying Negative Populism*

*We versus Them Coalition Building.* As discussed, populists, including those mobilizing a base for personal gain, have customarily articulated their demands on behalf of politically marginalized groups. Overt efforts to court the ideologically marginal groups at the extreme of the political spectrum have, however, normally been avoided, lest they be counterproductive in attracting broader support in the middle. Not so Donald Trump, whose approach to coalition building never reflected an umbrella style, catch-more tactic. To the contrary Trump's hard-core base more reflects an anybody welcome, catch-as-catch-can willingness to accept support from even the more extreme elements in American society (see *infra*). The usual targets have been the nemeses of the conservative right: the liberal bureaucrats of the "deep state" and their allies in the media with their "false news"—a phrase associated first with Trump, which has now become a favorite response to unfavorable coverage by politicians around the world with less than pure commitments to democratic government.

Beyond these moves, Trump has also appealed to and/or not rejected the endorsement of far-right fringe elements with unsavory reputations and willingness to undertake political violence. When asked if he would condemn White Supremacists during the first 2020 presidential debate opposite Joseph Biden, for example, he seemed to imply approval of the Proud Boys—a far-right group associated listed as a terrorist organization in Canada—when he mentioned them by name in saying "stand back and stand by" (Frenkel & Karni, 2020). Or consider as a yardstick measuring how far President Trump moved from the politics of President George H.W. Bush only a little over a generation before, when asked how they felt about David Duke. President Bush unequivocally reputed the then candidacy for the governorship of Louisiana of the former Ku Klux Klan leader, lifelong White Supremacist, and Neo-Nazi Holocaust denier (Suro, 1991). Trump not only refused to disavow Duke's support for his candidacy on the eve of the multiple, Super Tuesday primaries in 2016; he claimed not to "know anything about" this longtime fixture of United States rightwing extremism (Qiu, 2016).

*Conversing Daily with "the People."* New technologies offer new opportunities to the scrupulous and unscrupulous alike. The household presence of radios enabled President Franklin Delano Roosevelt to ease the American public through both the Great Depression of the 1930s and the years of World War II prior to death in April 1945, shortly before the Allies' victory in Europe. Likewise, the widespread presence of television in American homes by 1960 enabled two presidents at ease with that medium, John Fitzgerald Kennedy and Ronald Reagan, to communicate effectively with their public in both good and bad times. On the other hand, there is also the argument that Hitler's rise to power would not have been possible had cinematography been still limited to the making of silent films in the 1930s. The arrival of soundtracks allowed Hitler to spread his highly effective albeit negative oratory by means of films throughout Germany, vastly multiplying the number of his followers.

Candidate Donald Trump sought office in the age of social media and partisan television networks. He made very skillful use of both in running for and occupying the Oval Office. Campaign rallies were public events, with social media and more traditional advertising used to attract audiences and enhanced publicity. On occasion, to maximum local and national television coverage, candidate Trump would arrive in his own helicopter to the delight of spectators. The importance of these crowds was frequently underestimated by the campaign managers of his opponent, former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton. To them, the crowds were gawkers; however, often enough if you can get people to commit a day to watching you, you have their vote, and the television coverage of the event may attract other voters as well as be free.

The approach continued while in office, with the President making numerous personal appearances at meetings that guaranteed a friendly reception and scheduling his own rallies and other events in Republican strongholds. The latter was true even during the Covid-19 period, and especially so as the 2020 presidential election approached. Gradually Trump's use of his Twitter account and his increasing number of nightly tweets became his signature means of communicating with the faithful. Indeed, both the number of his tweets and the size of their audience increased steadily from his days as a television personality around 2012 to his campaign months in 2016, to his years in the White House. Even conservative estimates place the number of his followers by 2020 in the tens of millions—some ranking the number as high as nearly 100 million by the time he left Washington, arguing that the Democrats had stolen the election (Perrett, 2020).

The character of his tweets also expanded over time, particularly during the days running up to and beyond the vote in November 2020. Such messaging kept him steadily in touch with his Twitter followers; it also guaranteed coverage by not just partisan-friendly but mainstream news organizations. Indeed, the more outrageous, controversial, colorful, critical, or even tasteless his tweets, the more likely they were to gain widespread media coverage and delight Trump's base. Most lists of the more than 57,000 messages attributed to him after he began tweeting in 2012 and first pronounced himself the "best" at the 140-character post usually include: his claim that global warming is a hoax initiated by China to disadvantage its competitors by causing them to adopt more costly manufacturing techniques; his attack on "extremely unattractive" actress Bette Midler; his multiple attacks on the "Lamestream media" for its efforts "to foment hatred and anarchy" and spreading of "false news;" his frequent tweets about his great intelligence; his unfounded boast that he actually won the popular as well in the 2016 presidential election "if you deduct the millions of people who voted illegally"; and his post-2020 presidential election, knowingly false assertions that he won and that it was "The most corrupt election in history by far" (Coles, 2020; Sky News, 2021).

In the end, it was not the tastelessness, mean-spiritedness, or outrageousness but the openly false nature of many of his claims and his use of social media to spread that false information—especially about the outcome of the 2020 presidential election and January 6, 2021, riots at the Capitol when the Congress gathered to certify Joseph Biden's victory in that election—that put an end to his presidential

tweeting. Of these, none was more self-damaging than his January post following that insurrection.

These are the things and events that happen when a sacred landslide election victory is so unceremoniously & viciously stripped away from great patriots who have been badly & unfairly treated for so long. Go home with love & peace. Remember this day forever.

On January 9, Twitter canceled his account.

*Finding Enemies for Patriots.* Immigration had been a simmering concern in the United States long before Trump began his run for the Republican Party's presidential nomination, with most estimates putting the number of illegal aliens in the United States by mid-decade between 11 million and 13 million. The overwhelming majority of these had entered the country from its southern border with Mexico, and there were no signs things would change in 2015, with large numbers of immigrants from south of the United States' border moving north, many as refugees and asylum seekers. It was a tide that would grow while Trump was in office. As in Europe, American opponents of immigration—legal and otherwise—had previously cast their arguments in economic terms. Immigrants willing to work for low pay were taking jobs from patriotic American workers. Trump enlarged the anti-immigrant argument by making it also a law-and-order issue with respect to those at the Mexican border and giving it an anti-terrorism spin vis a vis Muslims entering the country through international airline terminals.

Most studies debunk the theory that immigrants take jobs away from the host population that the latter are interested in performing, and there are no studies statistically indicating the number of violent crimes that can be attributed to illegal or legal immigrants. Every year, however, a few, often well-publicized instances of this nature occur, and as they took place in 2015 and 2016, each quickly became campaign fodder. Likewise, Trump drew no distinction between those crimes attributed to the Salvadorian criminal gang MS-13 versus those committed by individuals (Federation for American Immigration Reform, 2016). The picture painted was one of hordes of illegals slipping across the United States' porous border with Mexico, and cutting a trail of rape, murder, and destruction across American cities. To stop this invasion, he pledged that, if elected, he would build a wall the entire length of the border. And Mexico would pay for it!

To be sure, instances of terrorism are statistically insignificant every year compared to violent crimes involving nonterrorist mass shooting incidents, and foreign-born terrorists have constituted only a small minority of crimes within this universe. But terrorist acts receive a level of national publicity that other acts of violence lack unless particularly grizzly, and while Trump was running for office two highly publicized instances occurred, the first in San Bernardino, California in December 2015 and the second on the other side of the country in Orlando, Florida in mid-June the following year.

The San Bernardino incident took place on December 2, when Chicago-born Syed Rizwan Farook and his Pakistan-born wife Tashfeen Malik launched an active shooter attack at the Inland Recreational Center, killing 14 and injuring another 22 (Owen, 2022b). The next day, while local police were still trying to determine the

cause of the attack, Trump pronounced it terrorism, saying “look at the names” (Santucci, 2015). Months later, in a presidential debate with Hillary Clinton, he enlarged the threat they (and Islamic terrorism) posed by falsely claiming that the couple also had bombs in their home (Hamilton, 2016). By then, in the midst of the 2016 summer election campaign, the shooter at an Orlando nightclub who killed 49 people and injured another 53 and saw himself as an ISIS warrior, Omar Mir Seddique Maleen, had given candidate Trump another incident upon which to justify his argument that the United States needed to ban Muslims from entering the country (Owen, 2022a).

Nor was the threat of globalism in Trump’s campaign limited to the increased movement of people posing a potential threat to the safety and solidarity of the country’s population. Trump cast his net widely in finding demons, and recent US foreign policy offered ready examples. The Obama Administration had just partnered in two international collaborations which could be—and were—quickly interpreted by Trump to require abrogation or renegotiation. The first of these, officially the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action designed to delay Iran’s acquisition of nuclear weapons by limiting its production of weapon-grade uranium (known simply as the Iran Deal), was created on July 14, 2015, with all five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council on board as well as Iran and the European Union as signatories. Trump attacked it primarily for having too weak a monitoring system. The heavy ammunition was reserved for the second agreement, the Paris Agreement on Climate Change.

Signed on April 22, 2016, when presidential primaries were well underway for both major parties, the Paris Agreement (or Paris Accord) was primarily aimed at combatting global warming, already a *bête noire* to many Republicans. Additionally, as previously noted, Trump was already on record rejecting global warming as the handiwork of Chinese leaders seeking to saddle American producers with costly anti-pollution devices, thus reducing their competitiveness in the global marketplace. Attacking and promising to withdraw from the Agreement won votes among those disbelieving in global warming and seeing the Obama Administration as elitist for joining the Accord.

Beyond attacking the agreements based on their alleged defects and the degree to which the Democrats were sacrificing the country’s well-being in their dedication to globalism, Trump’s campaign against the Paris Accord and Iran Deal was consistent with and emphasized again the campaign’s America First theme. MAGA itself, as Georg Löffmann at the University of Warwick writes, was a call to regroup against domestic and foreign “Others” in the name of America First (Löffmann, 2022). To focus resources at home. To re-examine costly commitments; for example, to NATO when numerous other members were not keeping up with their assessed dues. All of which not so accidentally tapped into the country’s long present, isolationistic desire to minimize involvement in the outside world, so well described by the architect of the United States’ post-World War II Containment policy, George Kennan in his classic collection of lectures at Harvard University, *American Diplomacy, 1900–1950* (Kennan, 1951). Having failed to keep the United States out of two World Wars between 1900 and 1941, the longing took second place to the

constructive internationalism that became the hallmark of the Truman Administration and remained the dominant, if often challenged, theme of American foreign policy. But it never vanished, resurfacing both after the failure of the Vietnam War (neo-isolationism) and the successful outcome of the Cold War (the “peace dividend” that would allow more resources to be invested at home).

Finally, from the danger posed by immigrants and visitors from Muslim countries to the insidious traps set by international agreements, all were marketed skillfully in nationalistic and patriotic garb by the Trump organization. Likewise, the candidate himself, whose posters and gatherings invariably pictured him in a red tie, white shirt, and blue suit with a large portrait of the American flag as the backdrop. Moreover, if he did not actually wrap himself in the Stars and Stripes, there is at least one video moment in which he was captured literally hugging and kissing it. Meanwhile, and initially masked by this patriotic choreography was Trump’s anti-democratic disposition, which would come into full view as the last results of the 2020 presidential election arrived. But before going there, let us stay a little longer with candidate Trump and how he gained the nomination and won the 2016 election.

## **Becoming President**

Donald Trump was the first American populist to run as the candidate of a major political party since the Democrats nominated William Jennings Bryan for the third time in 1908, and the first American president to be elected with no prior government service, either in government or the military. In part, his achievement can be credited to the rules of the game in 2016 and in part to luck, as is undoubtedly true to some extent of anyone winning the presidency. But it also resulted from the campaign strategy devised by a campaign team headed in the last months by Kelly Ann Conway, which made maximum use of Trump’s reputation, nature, ability to gain widespread media coverage, and skillful reading of the political climate surrounding his run for the country’s highest office.

## ***Gaining the Republican Party’s Nomination***

Trump was also the first populist candidate to achieve the nomination of either the Republican or Democratic Party since the primary system had taken over the process by which parties choose their flag carriers. Historically, party conventions attended by insiders and party regulars actually nominated their presidential and vice-presidential candidates. Since the 1980s, however, the process has been more one of anointing the contestant who has already acquired the necessary number of delegates through success in the primaries. And, until 2016, the primaries had resulted in the nomination of established politicians from either governorship (Ronald Reagan, George W. Bush), the vice presidency (George H.W. Bush), or



the Senate (Bob Dole, John McCain). What made 2016 different were three elements: the name recognition of the outsider, voter fatigue with insiders, and a fear of losing power spread broadly across the Republican Party's base, where those who vote in primaries are to be found.

*The Making of the Brand—The Donald as a Figure of Pop Culture.* The story of Donald Trump's years in the service of his father, the wealth he inherited from him and parlayed into a fortune of billions, and the business wheeling and dealing in that quest is best told elsewhere. Here, the starting point is probably his penchant for stamping his name on everything in his orbit and rise to becoming a part of America's mass culture. In fact, his name had already become familiar throughout the country by the last days of the twentieth century, when wrestling celebrity and then Governor of Minnesota Jesse "The Body" Ventura convinced him to seek the presidency as a third-party candidate on the eve of the 2000 presidential election. He dropped out of the race in early February, but the idea of Donald Trump as president had already been planted, and later that year, in an episode of the long-running 'The Simpsons' series set in the future, one of the main characters referenced Trump as a former president.

Four years later, as host of "The Apprentice" television series for the next 14 years, Trump moved into the homes of American households on a weekly basis. More broadly, by the time he declared his candidacy for the Republican nomination, it was hard to find any gathering place across the United States and several other countries in which the Trump name was not visible. The greatest concentration is still found in New York City, with its Trump Plaza, Trump Tower, Trump World Tower, Trump Apartments, and much more. Nevertheless, other parts of the country were also well served with Trump Hotels in Chicago, Las Vegas, and Honolulu, Trump golf courses in a dozen cities, and (pregoing bankrupt) at least a half dozen casinos. To this can be added the Trump Towers and Hotels in India and Turkey, Trump wine and other consumables, and Trump business school. There was even a board game, "Trump: The Game," available as early as 1989. In short, nobody needed to look hard to find the brand. In many cities, it was literally right above you.

*The Love of the Amateur meets the Primary Means of Candidate Selection.* Not all news passed along by the electronic media was flattering to be sure. In their divorce proceedings, Ivana, to whom he offered an ambassadorship when President, alleged physical abuse. His affair with at least one pornography star became national news when he ran for President, as did a video revealing him bragging about how easy it was for him to grab women's genitals. There was also a lengthy procession of stories about Trump suing everyone who maligned him or his brand. But Trump's cultivated image was that of an extraordinarily successful tycoon who practically invented "the deal," not that of a nice guy, and to no small degree the adage that "There is no such thing as bad publicity" applied to him. He may have cultivated it, and in a primary method of selecting party nominees, name recognition is, well, of primary importance, at least in the initial campaign stages.

Trump's bid was also abetted by a lingering distrust of elites spread widely across the electorate, and a widespread belief that if someone can be exceedingly good at

one thing, they are likely to be good at something else, like governing. In fact, the United States system for recruiting the political executives who new Presidents appoint as agency heads and under-secretaries in the Cabinet, and often as Cabinet Secretaries, runs on it. Secretaries of Defenses have come to Washington from running major automobile companies. Law School deans have frequently been Assistant Attorney Generals. Trump's first Secretary of State was the former Chief Executive Officer of the largest private corporation in the world, Exxon-Mobil. Having no prior government experience was not a major handicap to candidate Trump. In 2016 it may have been a major asset.

*A Party seeking Caesar.* Primary season opened with Republican voters longing for a leader capable of reversing a long-term trend of Party failure in winning the presidency. In the six elections from 1968 through 1988, five Republican candidates were elected to office, all winning at least a plurality of the popular vote. In the subsequent six elections prior to 2016, the Party only won the presidency twice—both times by George W. Bush—and only once in the six elections outpolled the Democratic Party opponent. The party establishment was vulnerable, and it was a very good time for an outsider to seek the votes of the strong partisan Republicans most likely to vote in primaries.

Important segments of winning Republican coalitions were also looking for leadership, none more so than many of the one in four American adults who then belonged to an evangelical Christian denomination (Husser, 2020). Moderate-to-liberal secular policymaking under the Democratic Party administrations that had governed for the majority of two-plus decades had hardened the loyalty of the White Evangelical Christians who Ronald Reagan had attracted in 1980. But after more than 40 years of listening to Republican governors and senators seeking the presidency promise to appoint Justices willing to reverse *Roe v. Wade* and end the right to an abortion, they too were willing to take a chance on an outsider. Even if that person's personal moral behavior fell short of their ideals (Pew Research Center, 2020). Prohibitionists a century before had willingly accepted the votes to repeal liquor by the drink of state legislators, as long as they could be propped up long enough to vote to ratify the 18th Amendment.

Nor could the Republican Party afford to ignore the growing number of White Southerners with higher expectations than their working-class jobs were fulfilling. Although working class White Southerners were not as reliable a voting bloc as the Evangelicals supporting Trump, they were no friend of the liberal policies of the Democratic Party. Moreover, many were unhappy to have seen a black man in the Oval Office for 8 years, and thus available for courtship. Their votes in the years ahead were also potentially essential for the Republican Party's continued success in swing states like Georgia and North Carolina.

*Pick Your Competition.* In the race for the nomination, Trump benefitted initially from the crowded field of 16 opponents. Fourteen of these were established Republican office holders, and the other two were outsiders with no name recognition. Like Bernie Sanders, who ran as a populist challenging Hillary Clinton for the Democratic Party's nomination, he also benefitted both in free media publicity and a consistent share of the vote as *the* outsider in the race.

He also benefitted from the fact that his competition was certain that he would fade and self-destruct given the frequency with which his off-the-cuff remarks drifted into areas considered to be off limits. There was also the fact that in 2000, when he dropped out of seeking a third party's nomination, polls had shown his support in the single digits against the presumed nominees of the major parties. By the time the Republican establishment realized the need to coalesce behind a single insider candidate, it was too late. Trump clinched the nomination as early as May 26 when 28 uncommitted delegates announced that they would support him at the Convention, giving him the majority of delegates needed for the nomination—all before the June 7 Super Tuesday primaries in five states, including California (Kelly, 2016). In the end, Trump won 41 of the 56 primaries and caucuses participating in the race and 44.9% of the total votes cast. His nearest rival, Senator Ted Cruz of Texas, won only 11 contests (including his home state) and garnered only 25.1% of the vote (Berg-Andersson, 2016).

As for his opponents' hope that he would self-destruct, Trump crossed that Rubicon before the primary season even began at a Family Leadership Summit in Ames, Iowa, on July 18, 2015. There, in response to the moderator's reference to John McCain as a war hero, Trump pronounced the long-time Senator from Arizona, Vietnam War veteran captured and tortured in Hanoi, and 2012 Republican Party presidential nominee "a loser" for being captured. It was a frequent epithet used by Trump, often aimed at veterans, without major repercussions at the ballot box (Jacobson, 2020).

### *Winning the Presidency*

On July 26, 2016, approximately one week after the Republican Party confirmed Donald Trump as its presidential candidate, the Democratic Party selected Hillary Clinton as its flag carrier. The contrast between the two candidates was vast. Donald Trump had no previous governing experience; Hillary Clinton had been a United States Senator from New York and served as President Obama's Secretary of State for 4 years. Trump loved campaigning among adoring multitudes; Clinton preferred money-raising from the party's movers and shakers. Clinton focused on policy issues and turning out minority voters in her campaign; Trump focused on attacking his adversary. In one important manner, however, they had something in common. For the first time since records had been kept, both major parties had chosen candidates whose public approval rating was significantly below 50%—31% for Trump shortly before his nomination according to one poll, and 39% for Clinton. The intensity factor was particularly a problem. In many state polls along the campaign trails it was common to find between 30 to 40% of respondents expressing a *strongly* unfavorable view of both (Shephard, 2016).

The former Secretary of State's unpopularity worked to the advantage of Trump's name-calling style of politics. More importantly, it allowed his campaign strategists to think in terms of winning normally Democratic states given Clinton's particular

unpopularity among and Trump's connection with white voters—especially males—without a college degree. Targets included Pennsylvania, Michigan, and Wisconsin, traditionally blue states whose votes in the Electoral College were safely in the hands of the Democratic candidate. Indeed, so certain did its support seem that Hillary Clinton did not even campaign in Wisconsin (Silver, 2016). Given his success elsewhere, Donald Trump only needed to win one of the three states by a small plurality to become President.

He won all three.

## A Negative Populist in the White House

Apart from the policies he prioritized and his relationship with the foreign leaders who he courted or criticized, much that defined Donald Trump's presidency was his style of governing. Other presidents have temporarily allowed their egos to cloud their judgment, and even moments of presidential petulance have occurred. Nonetheless, Trump's mix of ego, demand for absolute loyalty and deference, constant campaigning among adoring fans, questionable relationships, and thirst for media attention seem previously unmatched. Additionally, the way he treated the prerogatives of the office was, uniquely, almost cavalier in nature. Some actions were of an amusing nature, like his offer to purchase Greenland from Denmark. Others were more serious, like bypassing security procedures in his handling of secret documents (Harris et al., 2022).

*Fulfilling Campaign Promises.* Presidents-elect have regularly found that what they promised as candidates were either beyond their power to implement in office or something that needed to be walked back in order to meet the challenges facing them as President. One of the more celebrated instances accounted by President Johnson's Press Secretary, George Reedy in his book entitled *Twilight of the Presidency*, was candidate Franklin Delano Roosevelt's promise in 1932 to get the country out of the Great Depression without deficit spending. As the story goes, when he asked his most trusted adviser what to do, the advice was to deny he ever made that statement (Reedy, 1970). Trump did not just break from that tradition, he virtually shattered it in following up on many his campaign promises over the recommendations of the policy professionals in the "deep state." Some of the more important decisions of this nature included:

- Withdrawal from the Iran Nuclear Deal in May 2018, promising to negotiate a better deal (never happened).
- Withdrawal from the Paris Climate Accord as soon as the terms of the Agreement Permitted (i.e., 2020—the United States rejoined in 2021).
- Appointing Justices to the Supreme Court who would reverse *Roe v. Wade*. Trump fulfilled this pledge in appointing three Federalist Society-recommended, ideological conservatives to the Court, and on June 24, 2022, the Supreme Court

in *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization* did so despite public opinion solidly supporting a woman's right to choose (Pew Research Center, 2022).

- Appointing only similar-thinking judges recommended by the Federalist Society to all lower-level posts in the federal judiciary (ignoring the established procedure of relying on the American Bar Association's review of potential nominees).
- Pursuit of building the Wall along the southern border to the point of diverting funds from other federal agencies and creating ill will with Mexico.
- Three separate Executive Orders to prevent Muslims from entering the country needed before finding a formula for, in part, constitutionally doing so upheld by Supreme Court in *Trump v. Hawaii* (2018).
- Promises to protect US producers resulted in a trade war with China and France.
- Moving the US Embassy in Israel to Jerusalem from Tel Aviv, removing from the Department of State one of its few bargaining chips in trying to persuade Israel to accept a Palestinian state.
- Meeting with the leader of North Korea, thereby bestowing a claim of legitimacy on a previously isolated state pursuing a nuclear arsenal that led President George W. Bush to include Korea with Iraq and Iran in his Axis of Evil speech following the September 11, 2001, attack by al Qaeda on Washington and New York.

Historians can weigh the long-term costs of these actions against the immediate impact of these and other choices, like repudiating the findings of the intelligence community and accepting Putin's word that Russia does not meddle in US elections. For Trump's supporters, however, the positive effect of these choices is noncontroversial. It gave his words credibility. So deep a credibility that when he told them he won the election, they believed him.

*Reaching the Base: Tweeting Through the Night.* Teddy Roosevelt, the father of the country's national park program, is remembered as the Environment President. FDR as the Wartime President. Lyndon Johnson as the Civil Rights President. Trump fits into this company as the Twitter President—a title not to be dismissed lightly or jokingly because his social media rants, boast, and discussion of his life and policies gained him personal publicity the mornings after and furthered the sense of personal contact that his supporters felt toward him. As one analyst of his tweets and speeches noted in labeling his use of rhetoric “remarkable” and “unprecedented,” the immediacy of social media “makes communication feel spontaneous and *authentic*” (Lacatus, 2020, italics added).

Less laudable were Trump's use social media to announce the firing of his first Secretary of State, Rex Tillerson and the costly problems that sometimes resulted from his carelessness with facts while tweeting (Rucker & Paquette, 2017). Perhaps above all, the cumulative weight of his twitter relationship with his base contributed to the divide in the country that followed the 2020 presidential election, with NBC pollsters finding nearly a third of the voting electorate willing to believe that the election was stolen from Trump by fraudulent means (Murray, 2022).

Also relevant is what Trump's tweets did not encompass; in particular, any negative comments toward the rightwing-leaning extremists among his active supporters. These include the aforementioned Proud Boys and the Oath Keepers, who

were among the most ardent of those involved in the January 6, 2021, efforts to prevent the Congress from certifying the results of the previous year's presidential election. Also on the list, allowing for overlap, would be the self-declared White Supremacists whose support Trump never rejected if he did not exactly openly court it (Clark, 2020; Haltiwanger, 2020). Unlike the majority of those believing Trump's lie that the 2020 election was "stolen," these were groups quite prepared to use political violence to defend their president, who in their minds defended them. Having been locked into social media that capsuled them in a balloon with others of similar outlooks during the Covid-19 lockdowns, their views had been reinforced to the point of being accepted as obvious truths. To save the Republic from itself, insurrection became a noble calling.

*Substantive Policy Making—a Mixed Legacy.* Donald Trump's Inaugural Address was a broad, populist declaration of war on the Washington, D.-C. Establishment, promising to transfer power back to the people with such early lines as "For too long, a small group in our nation's capital had reaped the rewards of government, while the people have borne the cost." Broad forces like globalization were also targeted, as in "We will follow two simple rules: buy American and hire American." (Trump, 2017) When those are your adversaries, a mixed record in achieving policy outcomes may not be a bad outcome. In any event, it was Donald Trump's was a mixed one judged by his own goals.

In the area of National Security, as noted, his ban explicitly on Muslims entering the country could not pass judicial scrutiny, but reframed in national security terms, tightened procedures for admitting individuals coming from countries deemed dangerous in a world of transnational terrorism were upheld by a narrow 5 to 4 Supreme Court majority. Alternately, Trump's efforts to erect a wall the length of the country's more than 1700 miles border with Mexico failed. At the end of his term, only 307 miles of fences had been built, and only five of these miles were in an area previously lacking any type of barrier. On a broader front, he continued Obama's policy of opposing the renegade Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and relaxed the rules of engagement for drone strikes and commando raids, initiated diplomatic moves to withdraw from Afghanistan, and took important steps to secure the country's electrical grid. Domestic terrorist incidents, however, spiked during his presidency, particularly by individuals and groups associated with militias or defining themselves as White Supremacists (Rudolph Jr., 2022).

Elsewhere, beyond withdrawing from the Paris Agreement and Iran Accord, foreign policy suffered, as was to be expected given the MAGA commitment. Allies in NATO were often chastised for not bearing their burden, diplomatic fights were picked with the Muslim major of London and others over their failure to combat terrorism, and Trump made no secret of his admiration for such nondemocratic leaders as Russia's Putin and Turkey's Erdogan. Meanwhile, at home he succeeded in bringing down the tax rate on the richest individuals and corporations but failed to repeal the estate (inheritance) tax altogether. More important going forward was the selection of three conservative justices for the Supreme Court, with a big assist from Republican Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, who blocked hearings on an appointee in the last days of the Obama Administration and rammed through Trump's final

appointee in the waning days of that Administration on a strict party-line vote, As for combatting Covid-19, he eventually sanctioned lockdowns but was slow to acknowledge that the pandemic threatened the United States and—even after he contacted the disease himself—to encourage inoculations when vaccines became available.

In sum, it was not a presidency without accomplishments—some temporary, as in the case of his Executive Orders involving immigrants at the border staying in Mexico until processed (quickly reversed by President Biden); for others, like opening the door to the withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan (completed by President Biden) and the recasting of the federal judiciary, long-lasting consequences are already apparent. At the same time, Trump’s presidency was a chaotic one whose unifying theme often was reflecting the ego of the man rather than fulfilling a clear policy agenda.

Still, nothing besmirched the American Presidency so much as the way Trump departed from it.

## **Donald J. Trump, Populist or Demagogue?**

### ***The President and the January 6 Insurrection***

Trump supporters trying to prevent the certification of Biden’s victory in the prior November election was not an aberration so much as a culmination of a variety of factors. One element is the very nature of US elections. In most democracies, campaigns are short—a month, typically in the United Kingdom, 2 months in Canada, for example. In the United States, policy-making is partially disrupted for 2 years as candidates gradually declare that they are running for the presidency, weave their way through the primary gauntlet, and the two survivors face off in the election constitutionally scheduled for the first Tuesday in November after the first Monday every 4 years. On the other hand, by then, there are no secrets remaining about those vying for the office. Richard Nixon was the guy from whom you would not buy a used car. Donald Trump was a divider and would sue you if you criticized him,

Events that January can also be tied to other schedules in the Constitution, which was written when lengthy periods were needed to collect and tabulate votes, communicate results to intermediate actors like those voting in the Electoral College, and certify those numbers at the seat of the federal government. Elsewhere, votes are counted, results are certified immediately, and the transition from incumbent to designated winner takes place within a week. Sometimes sooner. In the United States, it is a matter of some 10 weeks, with ample time for mischief to occur along the way, like persuading Electors to vote other than as expected based on the results in their states or losers to foment schemes for staying in office.

That stated, given what Americans saw of Donald Trump prior to the January 6 attack on the Capitol, including his efforts to get Vice President Pence to stop the count of electoral votes, and all that was made known through the televised hearings

of the January 6 Select Committee, why did so many Republicans remain loyalists? Relatedly, why did so many Republican politicians continue to embrace the lie that the 2020 presidential election was fraudulent?

It is easier to answer the latter question than the former, and a good part of the response leads us back to the primary system uniquely used in the United States to determine party nominees. Voter turnout in primaries is notably lower than in general elections and often dominated by the most ardent party members, who frequently hold more extremist views than those of the average party registrant. In the contemporary Republican Party, they are the MAGA Trump devotees, and in 2022, they followed their leader's recommendations and nominated hundreds of candidates who subscribed to Trump's interpretation of the 2020 presidential election. Especially at the top of the ballot—House and Senate races—these candidates, often drawn from the ranks of celebrities rather than experienced politicians, frequently lost.

Whether that loyalty will linger into the 2024 presidential election, for which Trump is the first to announce his candidacy, is an open question, largely because of the former President's impolitic and often erratic behavior since leaving office.

### ***Not Being the President, a Populist Wandering the Wilderness?***

There are no set criteria for judging an ex-President's post-White House performance. Jimmy Carter, who lost his bid for a second term, devoted the rest of his life to humanitarian endeavors—building homes for the homeless, contributing to democratization efforts in the developing world. Richard Nixon, who resigned midway through his second term to avoid impeachment and removal from office, retired to California to write his memoirs. Others have taken pleasure in presiding over the creation of presidential libraries housing their collections of public documents, private correspondence, and journals. Moreover, since 1900, only one ex-president, Theodore Roosevelt in 1912, has run for the presidency while out of office and he did so largely at the last minute out of disappointment in the performance of his handpicked successor, William Howard Taft, and as the candidate of a third party (the Bull Moose Party). In contrast, when Donald Trump left the White House on January 20, 2021, the expectation was that he would seek his party's nomination and run again for president in 2024. It proved to be true, Trump announcing his candidacy shortly after the 2022 Congressional elections, on November 15 (Singman, 2022).

By the time of that announcement, however, Trump's support inside the Republican Party was visibly slipping. In part, this was the result of the candidates who he supported failing to win in the general election, costing that party control of the Senate and giving it only a narrow majority in the House of Representatives. But it was also the result of Trump being Trump, shunning the advice of professionals and making impolitic moves that many inside his party felt could further harm the Republican Party's election prospects. In the short span of a couple of weeks near



the end of 2022, for instance, he hosted a dinner with a well-known anti-Semitic (formerly known as Kanye West) and white supremacist, and openly advocated a redo of the United States Constitution when rightful winners like himself are cheated out of their victory.

Other news has also been less than favorable for Trump: like the disclosure of the fact that the mogul's tax bill for both 2016 and 2017 was \$750 because of business losses. Worse, or at least as embarrassing has been the information that the principal anchors at Fox News were privately disparaging Trump even as their coverage of the 2020 election gave credence to his charges of election fraud and insistence that Joe Biden and the Democratic Party had stolen the presidency. Tucker Carlson, for one, called the charges of fraud "insane" and "absurd, and texted of the former President 'I hate him passionately'" (Durkee, 2023).

Nevertheless, partisan loyalty has long legs, if only because people who have voted four times for *their* candidate (twice each in primaries and general elections) find it hard to admit that they were guilty of misjudging that person. Despite all the revelations involving President Nixon in the conspiracy to coverup White House involvement in the Watergate break in, as of February 1974 only 38% of Americans favored impeachment and large numbers continued to believe that Nixon was being hounded from office by his political enemies (Thompson-DeVeaux, 2019). Moreover, *he* was "tricky Dick," not someone who had spent decades cultivating a positive image and—most recently and effectively—that of a champion of "the people."

As for Trump himself, the final report of the Congressional Committee investigating the events of January 6 recommending to the Department of Justice that Donald Trump be indicted on four counts, including Assisting or Aiding an Insurrection. Elsewhere, investigations are being pursued at the state level that could lead to criminal charges; for example, of his efforts to reverse the outcome in Georgia.

In short, it is an established fact that he knew that he had lost the election but remains unwilling to admit it, that either he personally schemed or allowed others to scheme on his behalf to undo the outcome of the election and remain in power, and that for 2 years he has maintained the lie that fraud robbed him of a second term (Bernardini, 2022). Without that perseverance, not to mention his criticism of his own Vice President for refusing to do what he had no authority to do (declare Trump the election's winner), even militant groups like the Oath Keepers—who scaled down the walls of the Capitol and threatened to hang Vice President Pence—might not have felt so confident that they could do so with a presidential pardon awaiting them.

The deeply divided Republican Party that has resulted from his insistence on the lie and his doings while in office are only a part of the negative legacy of his presidency that the prestigious Pew Research Center has documented. American society is more divided now than when he entered office on both partisan and personal lines. Half of the country has come to believe that much of the news they receive is "made up." A dark sense of concern over the future of democracy in America pervades large parts of the population. A majority believe that race relations

are worse today than in 2016, and the story does not end there (Dimock & Gramlich, 2021).

Given the degree to which former President Trump used his popularity for personal advantage, ultimately at the expense of democratic government in condoning, if not inciting, the actions of a mob that acted to prolong his power, it is easier to label him a demagogue than even a “negative” populist. In fact, the line between the two has never been very clear. Rabble-rousing demagogues by nature, are dividers, anti-elitists, and anti-established institutions. Populists are normally the first two, and Trump’s willingness to attack the bureaucracy as the deep state and the liberal international order clearly aligned him with the latter. The elements of nativism, anti-immigration, and nationalism mixed into his politics likewise are to be found regularly in the politics of demagoguery. A person can even be both if the operative dividing line is no more than whether the populist is doing so for personal gain (Diamond, 2017). Even if Trump started out to accomplish policy goals for the good of his followers, like many other populists who have achieved power, he unmistakably crossed that line when he ended his presidential term calling upon his followers to preserve *his* popular hold on power.

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# Trump Administration's Approach to Global Health Governance



Yannis A. Stivachtis

**Abstract** Global health governance and its cornerstone institution, the World Health Organization (WHO), have encountered significant financial, operational, and other challenges over the years. The outbreak of COVID-19 not only exacerbated these already existing challenges but it also pushed the international community to rethink ways to strengthen global health governance and policy and its response to health-related threats. At the same time, global health governance confronted an existential crisis as a result of President Trump Administration's decision not only to withdraw from the WHO but also to reduce or even cut funding for many global health-related United Nations (UN) programs. This essay examines how the global health governance system works; investigates the challenges this system had experienced up to the time that President Trump came to office; and provides an assessment of the actual and potential effects of the decisions taken by the Trump Administration, including the decision to withdraw from the WHO.

**Keywords** United States · USA · Trump Administration · Global health governance · World Health Organization (WHO)

## Introduction

Global health refers to “those health issues, which transcend national boundaries and governments and call for actions on the global forces and global flows that determine the health of people” (Kickbusch, 2006b, p. 561). Pandemics clearly constitute a global health security issue, but their management has not, so far, reflected a common security approach. Although pandemics have been the central focus of international health governance, states have pursued independent policies and approaches to them, thereby preventing the existing health security regime from operating according to the principles of common and cooperative security.

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Global health governance and its cornerstone institution, the World Health Organization (WHO), have encountered significant financial, operational, and other challenges over the years, and the outbreak of COVID-19 exacerbated these already existing challenges. In fact, the recent pandemic has caused the international community to rethink ways to strengthen global health governance and policy and its response to health-related threats. At the same time, global health governance and the WHO confronted an existential crisis caused by President Trump Administration's decision not only to withdraw from the organization but also to reduce or even cut funding for many global health-related United Nations (UN) programs.

It is important to note that the United States has played a central role in the establishment of the UN, the WHO, and other UN agencies and programs. The United States has also served as one of the largest donors of the WHO and other UN health-related programs and agencies. Thus, the decision of President Trump's Administration to withdraw from the WHO and reduce or cut funding for many global health-related UN programs was of fundamental importance and very consequential for the future of global health governance and global health security. Therefore, it is imperative that populist rhetoric and policies that undermine the well-being of humanity are avoided.

The purpose of this essay is twofold: first, to provide the reader with a picture of how global health governance works and the challenges it faced up to the time that President Trump came to office; and second, to provide an assessment of the actual and potential effects of the decisions taken by the Trump Administration, including the decision to withdraw from the World Health Organization.

## **Global Health Governance: Theoretical Considerations**

Traditionally, the term "government" has been associated with political authority, institutions, and, ultimately, control. Unlike the domestic environment of the states, which are under the political authority and control of the government, the international system is anarchic. "Anarchy" in international relations does not imply chaos and disorder but denotes the absence of a world government that can lay down the law for all states. Since the states that comprise the contemporary international system are sovereign, they accept no superior political authority above them that has the capacity to impose its will over them.

Nevertheless, the absence of a world government does not necessarily imply the absence of international order, peace, and stability. The term "global governance" has been employed to indicate that in the condition of international anarchy, there is a process through which international institutions coordinate the behavior of states and transnational actors, facilitate cooperation, resolve disputes, and alleviate collective action problems (Barnett et al., 2021). Various terms have been used for the dynamics of global governance, such as "complex interdependence," "international regimes," "multilevel governance," "global constitutionalism," and "ordered anarchy" (Alter, 2022).

Global governance broadly entails making, monitoring, and enforcing rules (Young, 1994, p. 54). Moreover, scholars have also used “governance” to denote the regulation of interdependent relations in the absence of an overarching political authority, such as in the international system (Rosenau, 1999). Some also speak of the development of “global public policy” (Stone, 2008). In any case, “governance” is broader than government, and thus “global governance” is different and much broader than “world government” (Lake, 2021). Within global governance, a variety of types of actors—not just states—exercise power (Barnett & Duvall, 2004).

Global governance began in the mid-nineteenth century. It became particularly prominent in the aftermath of World War I and more so after the end of World War II. Since World War II, the number of international organizations has increased substantially. The number of actors (whether they be states, nongovernmental organizations, firms, and epistemic communities) who are involved in governance relationships has also increased substantially.

Processes of global governance can be observed in various fields of human life such as the environment, human rights, and health. This is the reason for which we can talk about “global health governance.” The latter denotes a process through which international institutions related to global health coordinate the behavior of states and transnational actors, facilitate cooperation, resolve disputes, and alleviate collective action problems. It also denotes making, monitoring, and enforcing rules pertaining to global health.

“Global health” is the health of the populations in the worldwide context. It has been defined as the area of study, research, and practice that places a priority on improving health and achieving equity in health for all people worldwide. Problems that transcend national borders or have a global political and economic impact are often emphasized. Thus, global health is about worldwide health improvement, reduction of disparities, and protection against global threats that disregard national borders, including the most common causes of human death and years of life lost from a global perspective.

Global health is not to be confused with “international health,” which is defined as the branch of public health focusing on developing states and foreign aid efforts by industrialized countries.

It is also important to note that global and/or international health reflect mostly state-centered approaches to health security. Although national securities are interdependent, and since the forces of interdependence, density, and proximity make it difficult for states to pursue national security by seeking unilaterally to reduce their vulnerabilities to outside pressure, states are still reluctant to pursue collaborative measures to reduce health threats by dealing with them as multilateral health security issues that require common attention and action. As a result, health-related threats have not been viewed by states as “common” thereby undermining what is truly their common security.

In other words, a “common security” approach to global health would imply that health security is indivisible and, consequently, a state cannot be secure without all other states enjoying security at the same time (Väyrynen, 1985 and 1986; Palme et al., 1982). Differently put, the actions or inactions of a state in the field of health



would have significant implications for the security of another state and vice versa. In turn, this realization implies that for all states, transnational groups, and individuals to be secure, common actions should be undertaken. This realization has led to the idea of cooperative security.

The longer-term consequences of the increase in human activity have affected the conditions for life on the planet, and therefore, ecological and health-related issues emerged as a greater source of danger than any immediate threat of deliberate, calculated aggression. Consequently, in achieving security and in the presence of rising density and security interdependence, states need to collaborate (Dewitt, 1994). “Cooperative security” is “a strategic principle that seeks to accomplish its purposes through institutionalized consent . . .” (Nolan, 1994, p. 4). It presupposes fundamentally compatible [health] security objectives and seeks to establish collaborative rather than confrontational relationships among states.

At the practical level, cooperative security in the field of health seeks to devise agreed-upon measures to first prevent and, if not possible, then manage health security threats and ensure safety. Thus, cooperative security places more emphasis on preventing the emergence of health security threats in the first place rather than countering and managing them. Moreover, cooperative security purports to make existing international health arrangements a more conscious, central objective of international/global health security policy.

A cooperative security order does not necessarily need to take the form of a single, all-encompassing legal regime, such as the WHO, but it can include and begin with a set of overlapping, mutually reinforcing arrangements. Such agreements may extend to cooperative verification and transparency measures. For example, the outbreak of COVID-19 made it imperative to learn about the origins and evolution of the pandemic (i.e., what happened, where, when, and how) so that we could be better prepared in the future to address a new pandemic effectively. Addressing these questions, however, would require verification and transparency measures. But unless a common security approach is adopted by national governments, states would still consider public health-related issues as falling within national sovereignty and, as a result, being reluctant to become subjects to international cooperative health security policies requiring verification and transparency. In addition, great powers that have invested heavily in research and development are for economic, political, and military reasons very reluctant to allow such cooperative security practices to occur. China’s secrecy in relation to the outbreak of COVID-19 is illustrative of this point.

Global health employs several perspectives that focus on the determinants and distribution of health in international contexts. For example, medicine describes the pathology of diseases and promotes prevention, diagnoses, and treatment; epidemiology helps identify risk factors and causes of health problems; demography provides data for policy decisions; economics emphasizes the cost-effectiveness and cost-benefit approaches for the optimal allocation of health resources, while other social sciences such as sociology, development studies, psychology, cultural studies, and law can help understand the determinants of health in societies.



Finally, both individuals and organizations working in the domain of global health often face many questions regarding ethical and human rights while critical examination of the various causes and justifications of health inequities is necessary for the success of proposed solutions.

As it was noted previously, the predominant agency associated with global as well as international health is the World Health Organization. However, dealing with the causes and subjects on global health requires the involvement of other international bodies and agencies, many of which operate within the UN system, such as UNICEF and the World Food Program (WFP). Moreover, the UN system plays a part in cross-sectoral actions to address global health and its underlying socioeconomic determinants with the declaration of the Millennium Development Goals and the more recent Sustainable Development Goals.

## **The World Health Organization and Global Health Governance**

The WHO was established on April 7, 1948, and constitutes one of the oldest specialized agencies of the United Nations. Since its establishment, the organization has been the backbone of global health governance serving as one of the primary actors in driving the health agenda globally while remaining the only international political body able to create legally binding treaties.

Apart from being part of the global health governance system, the WHO is also a security organization. However, its recognition as such depends on how one understands security. Only a comprehensive approach to security would recognize the WHO as a global health security regime. Moreover, the WHO is part of a network of UN specialized agencies that are associated with sustainable development and global security and which consequently address political, social, economic, and environmental threats facing states. These threats are inextricably linked in the sense that a pandemic may be exacerbated by certain political and societal conditions while causing economic devastation and thus undermining the development of states.

Despite the political and financial constraints facing the organization, the WHO has been quite successful in its mission as it has played a leading role in several public health achievements, most notably the eradication of smallpox, the near-eradication of polio, and the development of an Ebola vaccine. Nevertheless, the media coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated that the national public do not know how the WHO works, what it does, what are its operational constraints, how it is financed, how decisions are made, and who makes these decisions. This is very important because national governments consider public health issues as falling within national sovereignty, but when they are unable to address those issues, they complain about the inability of the WHO to deal with them. In other words, some national governments resort to the well-known tactic of getting credit for everything going well and blaming the WHO for everything going

bad without at the same time providing the necessary political and financial support to the organization to achieve its mission.

Unfortunately, academic curricula have not helped to enrich the understanding of generations of students about the WHO's usefulness and effectiveness. For example, unless a university instructor specializes in issues of global health, students will not learn about the World Health Organization. Even in courses pertaining to international organizations, the work of the UN specialized agencies is not highlighted and, as a result, is not adequately and properly valued. Of course, students learn about the UN and its collective security system and its principal organs, such as the General Assembly (UNGA) and the Security Council (UNSC), and rightly so, but not so much, if at all, about the UN Economic & Social Council (ECOSOC) that constitutes the core of the UN's daily work.

Journalists and especially the hosts of TV political shows, who have the capacity to attract and even command the attention of the general public, have also failed to educate the general public on issues pertaining to global health governance and policy; even during periods when particular global health issues (i.e., HIV/AIDS, Ebola, SARS, COVID-19, etc.) have emerged and are in the front lines of global news.

Consequently, the general public has the misperception that international organizations have the capacity, the resources, and the authority to address issues under their purview, but they do not do so because they are useless, incompetent, and subject to political manipulation from particular states. For example, President Trump used such arguments to attack the WHO for the spread of COVID-19 in the United States. Such attacks obscure the fact that international governmental organizations do what their member states want and allow them to do and operate according to the constraints (i.e., financial and political) posed by their member states and, most importantly, the great powers. So, the capacity, resources, and authority of international organizations depend on the will of their member states.

The study of the evolution of global health governance reveals that the management of global health issues reflects an intergovernmental approach to global health security but not a common and/or cooperative approach to global health security.

### ***The World Health Organization: An Intergovernmental Approach to Health Security***

The establishment of the WHO provided a global multilateral framework for monitoring, regulating, and managing health risks, advocating for universal healthcare, promoting human health, and well-being, coordinating responses to health emergencies, and promoting health diplomacy. Since its establishment, the WHO has set the standards for global health policy within the context of the international community. Since 1948, the organization has sought to set the global health agenda, establishing norms and guidelines and engaging partners for international health

policy development and implementation. In 1969, the WHO's World Health Assembly (WHA) adopted the first International Health Regulations (IHRs), which were revised and updated by the Assembly in 2005 within an environment of global health diplomacy.

In the context of the postwar global order, the WHO was unique in terms of its legitimacy as the only international institution with a mandate to promulgate international law within the context of global diplomacy for ensuring health security (Lisk & Bindenagel Sehovic, 2020). To this end, the WHO provides technical assistance to countries, sets international health standards and guidelines, and collects data on global health issues through the *World Health Survey*. The organization's flagship publication, the *World Health Report*, provides expert assessments of global health topics and health statistics in all states. The WHO also serves as a forum for summits, debates, and negotiations on global health issues.

The WHO's current priorities include communicable diseases, particularly HIV/AIDS, Ebola, COVID-19, malaria, and tuberculosis; noncommunicable diseases, such as heart disease and cancer; health diet, nutrition, and food security; occupational health; and substance abuse. As part of the UN Sustainable Development Goals (UNSDG), the WHA, composed of representatives from all 194 member states, serves as the agency's supreme decision-making body. It also elects and advises an executive board made up of 34 health specialists. The WHA convenes annually and is responsible for selecting the director-general, setting goals and priorities, and approving the WHO's budget and activities.

In terms of its funding, the WHO relies on contributions from member states (both assessed and voluntary) and private donors. The majority of its budget comes from member states' voluntary contributions. Assessed contributions are decided by a formula that includes GDP per capita. Among the largest contributors are Germany (which contributed 12.18% of the budget), the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation (11.65%), and the United States (7.85%).

During the Cold War and its immediate aftermath, global health was not an integral part of the overall development agenda. This lack of interest in global health matters was due predominantly to the framing of the role of the state in the national development process, essentially in economic terms. What did eventually bring the increase in global health initiatives in the post-Cold War era was a convergence between the development and security agendas, particularly in the context of the burgeoning HIV/AIDS pandemic (Buzan et al., 1998, p. 117). This link was necessary to ensure that health issues received the resources necessary to respond.

However, over time, this development focus morphed into a predominantly security focus to the point where the response to infectious diseases was no longer part and parcel of health as a global public good but rather as a way of preventing bioterrorism and providing security (Van de Pas et al., 2016). This linkage was counterproductive as it distorted the health governance agenda and created competitive convergences, as reflected in the North-South power relationship and the subsequent divide in relevant global health negotiations (Van de Pas et al., 2016, p. 48). Such an approach to global health governance in effect undermined the validity and legitimacy of existing international organizations, such as the World

Health Organization. This was a clear example of a lack of a common and cooperative approach to global health security.

Since 2000, when the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) were adopted the idea of global health has featured increasingly in health policy literature (Van de Pas et al., 2016, p. 49). MDGs highlighted the important contribution of health to the overarching objective of poverty reduction. As a result, the first decade of the new millennium saw a significant number of activities and initiatives in the field of global health, which led some observers across the international community to label this period as “the grand decade for global health” (Fidler, 2001, p. 844). The growth of these global health initiatives in the 2000s reflected an awareness of the inadequacy of the traditional responses of WHO and other multilateral development agencies to recognize the urgency of global health problems in the 1980s and 1990s.

Although they had their own particular priorities regarding global health challenges, political leaders from the world’s most advanced industrial and emerging economies (G-7 and G-20) incorporated health global health issues into the globalization response agenda at their annual meetings, resulting in some of the most innovative health initiatives (Fidler, 2001, p. 845). The launching of the *US President’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief* (PEPFAR) in 2003, which constituted a multi-billion-dollar initiative, gave a big boost to official development aid for global health with emphasis on disease treatment, vaccines, and medicines. This amount tripled over the decade, but more significantly, in terms of global health diplomacy, this initiative represented the strategic use of health interventions in selected developing countries to achieve the foreign policy goals of the donor country (Fidler, 2001, p. 847). This was clearly a state-based approach to global health security but certainly not a common approach to it.

The 2000s also saw the establishment of multi-sectoral (public–private) partnerships and a shift from a system-focused toward a problem-focused approach to global health challenges emphasizing demand-driven funding. Consequently, collaborative public–private efforts toward finding solutions to global health problems often involve exploiting market dynamics to stimulate investment in research and production capacity for medical products and drive prices down (Van de Pas et al., 2016). At the same time, multilateral organizations and national governments entered into open-ended discussions with civil society organizations, private philanthropic foundations, and academics to find solutions to some of the largest health problems facing the global community (Van de Pas et al., 2016, p. 49). Significantly from a governance standpoint, the role of nonstate actors (NSAs) in civil society in the success of some of these ventures should not be underestimated. For example, without the moral voice and protests of the AIDS activist movement, it is unlikely that the decisions made by political leaders and multilateral agencies would have been as bold as they were or the financial commitments as large as they were.

Despite the wave of new global health initiatives, key indicators of global health status (i.e., reduction in child mortality; improvements in maternal health; and proportion of population with access to affordable essential medicines) did not register significant improvements. Single-disease initiatives, which were encouraged and favored by prevailing global health approaches and policies, were not

complemented by the strengthening of domestic health systems, as it was required for strong and accessible healthcare services. This fundamental weakness in global health policy, namely the neglect of health systems in poor countries, was due to lack of policy coherence at all levels, as well as to gaps and distortions in resource allocation, which neglected the poorest and most vulnerable in society (Van de Pas et al., 2016, p. 50). Once again, this development reflected the absence of a common and cooperative approach to global health security.

In reality, policy coherence in global health did not evolve fast enough to ensure that emerging globalization and development issues related to public provision of health care were aligned at national, regional, and multilateral levels. This was another evidence of a lack of a common security approach to global health security. Further evidence that the global health architecture was not effective in achieving health improvements on a sustainable basis can be deduced from the unsatisfactory progress toward the achievement of the health-related MDGs between 2000 and 2015.

The increasing complexities of political and economic institutional arrangements at global and regional levels, and their interplay with developmental policies at the national level, also undermined policy coherence in global health architecture. In addition, globalization brought about changes in patterns of health and disease worldwide, which in turn affected the basis on which decisions on health were made globally. Globalization also contributed to the spread of disease and death globally due to the rapid increase in economic and social interconnectedness of the world brought about mainly by low-cost communications and budget travel.

The failure of international organizations to respond to emerging health challenges, particularly with respect to new diseases, has its root in imbalances in global decision-making power. In the case of the WHO, decisions concerning the allocation of resources to various health problems are largely determined by a few powerful member states and their interests, as reflected in their dedicated voluntary funding. In contrast, the organization's regular budget, which is used for its core operations, has declined steadily in real terms over the years. Most notably, funding of core work in health emergencies and epidemic and pandemic response has been significantly reduced. For example, in the 6 years leading up to the 2014 Ebola outbreak in West Africa, the WHO's budget for infectious disease outbreak and crisis response was reduced from US\$469 million for 2009–2010 to \$241 million for 2014–2015 (Fidler, 2001, p. 847). These realities constitute another clear evidence of a lack of a common approach to global health security.

The challenges posed by the necessity to tackle an increasing array of global health problems within the WHO's institutional framework have given rise to evolving and changing patterns of global health diplomacy and processes of agenda-setting and negotiations. These processes are conducted at country, regional and international levels, and mechanisms have been established to coordinate. Under the current global health architecture, certain elements of governance (process and agenda), institutional structures (i.e., WHO), and policy initiatives have emerged as key to the dominant response to global health problems (Fidler, 2001, p. 848).

## *Global Health Governance at a Crossroads*

Since 2000, the use of the term “global health” has increased exponentially, being used by public and private stakeholders, in networks and alliances, and diverse relationships, leading Ilona Kickbusch and Cassar Szabo (2014) to characterize it as a “global public health domain” with key health challenges faced by the international community being recast as issues of governance rather than disease (Kickbusch, 2006a, p. 561 and 2006b, pp. 6–8).

The management of this rich interdependence of actors, networks, and interfaces demands fresh imagining of governance (Van de Pas et al., 2016, p. 50). David Fidler (2010, p. 3) has provided an inclusive definition of global health governance as

the use of formal and informal institutions, rules, and processes by states, intergovernmental organizations, and non-state actors to deal with challenges to health that require cross-border collective action to address effectively.

Fidler’s definition has been parsed further by Kickbusch and Cassar Szabo (2014) who distinguish three global health governance concepts: “Global Health Governance,” “Global Governance for Health,” and “Governance for Global Health.”

“Global Health Governance” refers mainly to organizations and processes of global governance which have explicit health mandates, such as WHO or the Global Fund to fight AIDS, Tuberculosis, and Malaria (Global Fund). “Global Governance for Health” refers mainly to organizations and processes of global governance which have either a direct and/or indirect health impact, such as the UN, and World Trade Organization (WTO). Finally, “Governance for Global Health” refers to organizations and mechanisms established at national and/or regional level that support and contribute to global health governance and/or to governance for global health, such as national and/or regional global health strategies or initiatives.

Kickbusch and Cassar Szabo (2014) suggest that in order to keep global health firmly on the political agenda, and to strengthen action on the determinants of health, reform, and strengthening of the governance institutions in all three of these political spheres as well as how they interface is critical. But, as Julio Frenk and Suerie Moon (2013, p. 937) point out: “Global governance is distinct from national governance in one critical respect: there is no government at the global level.” Instead, there is a Westphalian arrangement of populations into states where

no rule of law with no institutions to set or enforce rules, and no way to agree and enforce contracts. . . no mechanism to raise money for, or to deliver effectively, public goods such as clean air, law and order, financial stability, public infrastructure, research and development or disease surveillance. . . a winner-takes-all economy. . . with no collective insurance for its citizens against natural disasters, and in which inequality is allowed to grow to the extent where the rich have to wall themselves off from the poor (Barder, 2014, p. 602).

The critique is not without substance but the reality remains that states remain the primary locus of political legitimacy and the pursuit of justice. However, although it may not always be equitable, it is through the expansion of complex multilateral networks and supranational arrangements between those states, initially pursuing

common interests rather than altruistic sacrifice, that global health governance arrangements will become institutionalized (Nagel, 2015, p. 117).

In this context, Frenk and Moon (2013) identified four essential functions of the global health system that parallel several key functions of the state: the production of global public goods, the management of externalities across countries, the mobilization of global solidarity, and stewardship.

*Stewardship* provides “overall strategic direction to the global health system” and embodies in many ways the functions of the executive branch of the state: the establishment of norms, values, and rules that guide the development of policy and setting of priorities, the advocacy for global health across sectors and the convening of partnerships at global and regional level that might enable its achievement (Frenk & Moon, 2013; Van de Pas et al., 2016, p. 50).

The *production of global public goods* is instrumental in progressively ensuring “the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health” and embodies and operationalizes the policy concepts elucidated in the stewardship function. This parallels the functions of the legislative branch of the state, implementing policy with the resources mobilized domestically and through global solidarity (Kickbush, 2016; Van de Pas et al., 2016, p. 50).

The *mobilization of global solidarity* combines four major subfunctions: the shared financing of global health; capacity building and technical assistance; humanitarian interventions in crisis; and agency for the marginalized and dispossessed. This function parallels the role of the state in revenue raising through taxation and other means, coupled with resources provided by global partners, and its disbursement in the implementation of redistributive policies determined through its stewardship functions (Van de Pas et al., 2016, p. 50).

Finally, the *management of externalities* embraces those functions that contain the negative impact of decisions made by one state—or transnational body—on others. Frenk and Moon (2013) list the deployment of instruments such as surveillance systems, coordination mechanisms, and information channels essential for controlling international risk, but the exercise of sanctions—analogue to the judicial branch of the state, would need to find equivalence at the global level (Van de Pas et al., 2016, p. 50).

In terms of *stewardship* for global health within the context of the SDGs—setting the global health agenda, establishing norms and guidelines, engaging partners for international policy development and implementation—WHO is unique in terms of its legitimacy as the only global health institution with a mandate to promulgate international law. But despite the representation of states through their ministers of health in WHA and respect for its norm-setting functions, the capacity of the WHO to embody the stewardship function of global governance for health is repeatedly questioned. Substantially under-resourced and operationally hamstrung, the WHO faces a situation where the bulk of its budget is earmarked by powerful “donor” states (Prah Ruger & Yach, 2009, p. 7). Devi Sridhar and Ngaire Woods (2013, p. 327) have termed this institutional gridlock as “trojan multilateralism,” defined as “increased funding to multilateral institutions that are creating the illusion of

multilateral intent, whereas it is covertly introducing bilateral goals and interests into multilateral institutions” (Sridhar & Woods, 2013, p. 327).

As a consequence, the WHO is constrained in terms of policy and direction, and there are equivocal perceptions of its capacity to drive the global health agenda (Hoffman et al., 2014). This was most recently evident in the critiques of its failure to achieve the relevant SDG health goal, its leadership response to the Ebola outbreak, and most recently, the COVID-19 outbreak. At the same time, recognition of the centrality of the WHO to global health governance is evident in recent proposals that would allow the organization to engage civil society more effectively, formalizing civil society’s current significant contribution to global health governance (Kickbush et al., 2010). Yet recent proposals for a new UN agency to address global health, revisit earlier proposals to extend the Global Fund from its targeted communicable disease mandate to become a Global Fund for Health, and an earlier UN decision that relocated management of the HIV epidemic from WHO into the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS) (Dybul et al., 2012, p. 3).

But the WHO has not held a monopoly on the stewardship for global health for some time: the UN agencies UN Children’s Fund (UNICEF), UN Population Fund (UNFPA), and UNAIDS have specific global health mandates that interface with WHO (Brown et al., 2006). Since the 1990s, the World Bank has also claimed to invest in the field of global health while WTO exercises a governance role for medicines through the Agreement on Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS). In addition, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD)—initially the provenance of high-income economies—has now redefined aid effectiveness (including for health) into development effectiveness, reaching beyond its immediate membership and embracing the multiple, complex contributors to global health and development (Van de Pas et al., 2016, p. 57).

What is increasingly clear is that there will be no return to an imagining of a global governance hierarchy and that the concrete, architectural metaphors of the past no longer suffice (Fidler, 2009). Global health governance will continue to be networked, with largely voluntary partnerships and alliances addressing key issues (Kickbush, 2016, p. 349). However, what is needed for an effective approach to global health is the adoption of a common approach to global health security in which states would be the driving forces but not the only actors in the process.

Despite its lethal and catastrophic consequences, one positive thing with COVID-19 is that it has led national governments to realize that pandemics cannot be effectively addressed unilaterally and has thus provided the fertile ground for the possible establishment of cooperative security frameworks. On the other hand, despite the significant financial, operational, and other challenges that the WHO has encountered, no action has posed such an existential threat to global health governance than the decision of President Trump Administration’s to withdraw from the organization and reduce or cut funding for many global health-related UN programs.



## President Trump's Approach to Global Health Governance

The robust growth of global health governance over the past 30 years has signaled the importance attached to global health within the international community. From the very beginning of his tenure as President of the United States, serious questions were raised about what global health governance would look like going forward and whether the United States would back away from its leading role within the global health system.

In fact, since the beginning of his electoral campaign for the 2016 US Presidential elections, President Trump demonstrated a preference for bilateral deal-making while regional and multilateral organizations that might constrain the United States were seen unfavorably. His view remained almost unchanged throughout his tenure in the White House.

Criticism of global institutions is not a novelty in American politics, but the breadth of criticism voiced by President Trump was new. There are two reasons for this. First, because this criticism originated from a president; and second, a central paradox of President Trump's rhetoric was its combination of claims that the United States has declined from past greatness and an assertion that the United States has unexploited bargaining power left on the table by his predecessors (CFR, 2017).

Unlike in other countries and world regions, global institutions are not viewed as instruments of American power but as restraints on the exercise of American power (CFR, 2017). As a result, President Trump viewed "globalism" and its institutional pillars (international organizations) as having promoted an open world economy that is tilted against the United States—even though the United States designed and promoted those institutions. In other words, unlike his predecessors who embraced a liberal institutionalist view of the world, President Trump embraced a Realist approach to international relations where the maximization of US interests would mean disengagement from international organizations and liberation from the constraints these regimes had imposed on US actions.

In keeping with the "America First" campaign and promises to re-examine the US role in world affairs, the Trump Administration made a number of notable changes in broader US foreign policy that affect global health. These included the administration's decision to withdraw from the Paris Climate Accord, its criticism of and new demands for US engagement in the context of international trade agreements such as the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) and North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), and skepticism of, and intent to reduce US support for the UN and potentially other multilateral organizations (CFR, 2017). In addition, President Trump proposed to cut foreign aid to countries that voted counter to US government wishes at the United Nations. While this threat was not without precedent, it was a notable departure from US policy over the prior two decades and underscored the President Trump Administration's theme of emphasizing US interests over other considerations (CFR, 2017).

It was not a surprise, therefore, that global health governance came significantly under threat as a result of declining US commitment to global health security under

the Trump Administration. This was exemplified first by President Trump's decision not to renew foreign aid funding in 2017 to sustain the US Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and USAID post-Ebola investments in infectious disease preparedness, significantly scaling down of CDC's presence and activities in sub-Saharan Africa. Furthermore, President Trump's decision in 2018 to return an unspent amount of US\$252 million in residual Ebola emergency response funds from the 2014 to 2015 outbreak to the US Congress could instead have gone toward combating future outbreaks (Kates et al., 2018). These developments pointed toward an abandonment of US global investments in health security preparedness and a reduction in resources available for responding to the COVID-19 pandemic. Furthermore, the US government's inability to effectively manage a potential pandemic was further compounded by the elimination of the position of global health security preparedness czar and the relevant White House Office. It is worth noting that before the Trump Administration, the United States contributed an estimated US\$10 billion a year to global health. This amount fell to about US\$6 billion when President Trump took office.

### ***Re-Organization, (De)Funding, and Unilateralism***

The Trump Administration also sought to make its mark on the agencies that carry out US foreign policy, including the State Department and the US Agency for International Development (USAID) (Kates et al., 2018). Following a March 2017 White House Executive Order on reorganizing the executive branch, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson attempted to reorganize and reform these agencies. At the same time, budget requests from the White House demonstrated the administration's desire to make significant cuts to these agencies' budgets (Kates et al., 2018). In addition, whereas human rights used to be a component of US foreign policy (especially under the Obama Administration), the Trump Administration downplayed the importance of human rights, leading to worries in the foreign policy and development community. Last but not least, a lack of ambassadors in some countries, the shifting stance on human rights, and a shrinking foreign policy workforce raised concerns about the planning and implementation of US global health programs. Such difficulties for global health are compounded by certain policy decisions, including proposals to significantly cut US global health funding.

The Trump Administration's request to significantly cut global health funding was unprecedented. For FY2018, the White House proposed cuts of over \$2B to global health, representing a 23% overall reduction compared to FY2017; these included a proposed reduction to PEPFAR of more than \$1 billion and a zeroing out of the family planning budget, among others (Kates et al., 2018). Multiple analyses of the potential impacts of such cuts concluded that serious negative health consequences would result, including many more infections and deaths from HIV and TB and an increase in the number of abortions along with greater maternal mortality (Kates et al., 2018). Although none of these requested cuts were enacted, this was the

first-time cuts of this magnitude had been proposed, and they marked a significant shift from the direction and emphasis of prior administrations.

On the one hand, actions taken by the Trump Administration signaled a reduced US engagement in the world and an intention to step back further in global health. On the other hand, US global health programs demonstrated resilience, buoyed by strong support from Congress and key stakeholders. As a result, the Trump Administration publicly stated support for select US global health priorities. For example, in his first major speech to the UN in September 2017, President Trump highlighted three major US global health areas of success: PEPFAR, the President's Malaria Initiative, and the Global Health Security Agenda (GHSA) (Kates et al., 2018).

The first and most concrete global health policy change of the Trump Administration came on the first Monday of President Trump's term, in the form of reinstatement and expansion of the "Mexico City Policy," often referred to as the "global gag rule" (Raveno, 2020). This policy prohibits US government funding to foreign nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) engaged in abortion-related activities. Unlike previous Republican administrations, President Trump's version expanded the restrictions from family planning to all US global health assistance. A new proposal aimed to further develop the policy to include US global health contracts.

This policy has had significant implications for developing countries as some NGOs were forced to reorganize their activities to comply with the policy (Sully et al., 2022). As a result, NGO operations affected family planning services primarily by reducing the number of community health workers engaged in supporting family planning services. On the other hand, NGOs refusing to comply with the "gag policy" lost US government funding. Consequently, programs were cut or scaled back. These included targeted programs providing sexual and reproductive health services to adolescents and to women living in rural areas; a program that provided contraceptive-related training and the provision of technical assistance to public health facilities and communities. Also, service coverage was reduced for a mobile outreach program providing contraceptive care at public health facilities.

A second major global health-related decision was announced on March 30, 2017, when the Trump Administration invoked the "Kemp-Kasten amendment" to withhold funding for the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), the lead UN agency focused on global population and reproductive health (Raveno, 2020). The "Kemp-Kasten amendment" prohibits US funding to any organization or program that supports or participates in coercive abortion or involuntary sterilization. The amendment was in response to concerns over potential UNFPA involvement in China's population control policies, an allegation that the UN agency repeatedly denied (Raveno, 2020).

A third important global health-related decision of the Trump Administration was announced in 2020. According to this decision, the United States would not join COVAX, the vaccines pillar of the Access to COVID-19 Tools Accelerator, the global framework meant to speed up and ensure equitable distribution of COVID-19 diagnostics, therapeutics, and vaccines (Raveno, 2020). While the Center for Global Development sought to demonstrate why joining and allocating funding to the

COVAX initiative should have been a priority for US national security and global health leadership, the Trump Administration instead focused on securing vaccine deals from a number of COVID-19 vaccine manufacturers for domestic use (Maxmen, 2020). Health experts argued that the decision put US global health investments and leadership at stake and could put the country's own vaccination goals in jeopardy if any of its prepurchased COVID-19 vaccines fail to deliver (De Luce, 2020).

Finally, as a result of President Trump Administration's decision, PREDICT, a US Agency for International Development-run program whose mandate was to detect viruses with pandemic potential and train scientists in other countries to strengthen their capacities in detecting and responding to pandemic threats, was closed in September 2019 (Raveno, 2020). USAID issued a 6-month extension to reinstate the program from April to September 2020 to support countries in detecting COVID-19 cases and investigate the source of the virus causing the disease. Experts found the decision to end the program unfortunate, given the need for early detection work amid a predicted increase in pandemic-level global health security threats like COVID-19 (De Luce, 2020).

However, none of the global health policies of President Trump was more consequential than the decision to withdraw from the World Health Organization.

### ***US' Withdrawal from the World Health Organization***

The United States has traditionally been the largest contributor to the WHO, providing between \$107 million to \$119 million a year over the past decade, but has additionally given extra contributions of as much as \$400 million a year.

In April 2020, President Trump announced a temporary halt to funding for the WHO and sent a letter to the agency in early May of the same year warning that the US would permanently pull funding if the WHO did not "commit to major substantive improvements in the next 30 days" (cited in Maxmen, 2020).

Right before President Trump unveiled punitive measures against China on May 29, he inserted a surprise into his prepared text: "We will be today terminating our relationship with the World Health Organization," he announced during a press conference in the Rose Garden (cited in Rotella et al., 2020). Most of the president's top aides—and even some of his Cabinet secretaries—were blindsided. Some senior officials hoped that he was bluffing or would change his mind about a decision that could hobble efforts to fight dangerous diseases.

The Trump Administration notified the UN Secretary-General António Guterres in July 2020 of its intention to withdraw from the World Health Organization. During his announcement, President Trump said China did not properly report information they had about the coronavirus to WHO and that China pressured the WHO to "mislead the world," as reasons for the termination (cited in Maxmen, 2020).

According to administration officials, President Trump's decision to leave was not solely due to the WHO's stumbles on COVID-19, but because they capped a record of unresolved structural issues and failures during crises (cited in Maxmen, 2020). As the pandemic spread early this year, the WHO reported that only 1% of cases were asymptomatic, while Chinese doctors were privately saying that the number was actually as high as 50%, a senior administration official said (Maxmen, 2020). As a result, President Trump thought that the organization "had no credibility," and that "It was either clueless or cut out, being manipulated" (cited in Rotella et al., 2020). Other perceived missteps, including conflicting advice about the efficacy of masks, raised further questions in the mind of President Trump.

Nevertheless, administration officials conceded that important activities led by the WHO, including vaccination initiatives, needed to continue. Thus, it was yet unclear what would happen to those programs when American funding and participation ended. In fact, many aspects of the new policy toward the WHO remained unclear as administration officials could not answer questions from the agencies about its implementation and impact. According to a senior government official, the new directive "will require officials to divert their attention from pandemic response in order to review a list of their WHO-related activities and try to justify them on national security and public health safety grounds" (cited in Nature, 2020).

While President Trump announced the US withdrawal from the WHO, global health experts across the political spectrum admitted that the organization needed reform. They argued that the WHO did not have the muscle to enforce international health regulations or put pressure on member states. It was claimed that its decentralized structure gives the headquarters in Geneva limited power over regional offices, some of which have been dominated by politics and patronage (Maxmen, 2020).

It is worth noting that during the US response to the Ebola outbreak in West Africa in 2014, the Obama Administration's displeasure with the WHO-led American officials to bypass the agency and join forces instead with other nations and nongovernmental organizations (Maxmen, 2020).

According to officials of President Trump's Administration, the WHO's flawed record demonstrated the need for the United States to take the lead in response to health crises. According to a senior administration official,

As US leadership demonstrated in the Ebola and MERS outbreaks, our diplomatic and development efforts enable countries to develop tools for addressing infectious disease. Due to these efforts, we filled gaps created by the WHO's inaction to prevent, detect and respond to outbreaks immediately (cited in Rotella et al., 2020).

Ambassador Jimmy Kolker, a veteran health diplomat who represented the United States at WHO meetings until 2017, indicated that the calls for reform are legitimate, but he suggested that instead of leaving the organization, the United States should stay in as it has enough influence to make changes from within. Ambassador Kolker also disagreed with the allegations that China controls the WHO and its Director General, Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus. According to Ambassador Kolker,

In general, the WHO is deferential to member states. Yes, it should have been more aggressive in response to Chinese obstruction. Tedros surely realizes the public statements were too deferential to China. But the organization is not dominated by China. Its weaknesses reflect the challenges we have long faced in international collaboration on public health (cited in Rotella et al., 2020).

Following its decision to leave the WHO, the Trump Administration planned to fill the void left by its withdrawal with direct aid to foreign countries, creating a new entity based in the State Department to lead the response to outbreaks, according to interviews and a proposal prepared by the department. The US planned to spend about \$20 billion in 2020 on global public health. (About \$9 billion of that is emergency aid for COVID response) (Maxmen, 2020).

In the weeks after President Trump's Rose Garden declaration, the White House gave little direction on what to do next. Officials who dealt with the WHO knew that withdrawal is a cumbersome process requiring a year's notice, a multiagency review, and payment of unpaid dues (Nature, 2020). As a result, HHS Secretary Alex Azar instructed his department to continue cooperating with the organization (Rotella et al., 2020). The American ambassador in Geneva, Andrew Bremberg, kept negotiating with the WHO Director General on the reforms demanded by the president, including an independent inquiry into the WHO's response to the pandemic (Rotella et al., 2020). Dozens of scientists, doctors, and public health specialists detailed from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention kept working at their posts at the WHO's Geneva headquarters and in the field, fighting Ebola and other diseases in Africa and elsewhere (Nature, 2020).

At the same time, the Trump Administration made it clear there would be no backing down. At a meeting at the White House, a director of the National Security Council told diplomats and health officials that they must now justify any engagement with the WHO as being necessary for national security and public health safety (Rotella et al., 2020). In addition, the State Department has begun preparing formal paperwork to declare the official withdrawal of the United States from the World Health Organization.

President Trump Administration's "no-engagement" policy was a concrete step to curtail the relationship with WHO and the other actors involved in global health governance and it caused alarm and confusion. An administration official noted that "This is sending just unbelievable shock waves through the agencies," and warned that reduced cooperation with the WHO would have "profound and severe repercussions" (cited in Rotella et al., 2020).

### ***The Effects of US's Withdrawal from the World Health Organization***

Groups representing infectious disease doctors, pediatricians, and general physicians all protested President Trump's decision to withdraw from the WHO, arguing that it

would make it harder to fight the coronavirus pandemic. According to the American Academy of Pediatrics,

The Trump Administration's decision to withdraw from the WHO carries grave risks for the world's children during an unprecedented global health crisis. The decision to withdraw risks causing a surge in polio cases and an increase in deaths of children from malaria, and it will further delay life-saving vaccination campaigns. Withdrawing support from the WHO not only harms the global response against COVID-19 and prevents the United States from engaging the agency to enact meaningful reforms, but undermines the response to other major health threats impacting children. The American Academy of Pediatrics urges the administration to reconsider its position and continue to work with the WHO to combat COVID-19 and promote the health of children globally (cited in Fox et al., 2020).

American Medical Association President Dr. Patrice Harris argued that Trump Administration's decision "serves no logical purpose" and that

This senseless action will have significant, harmful repercussions now and far beyond this perilous moment, particularly as the WHO is leading worldwide vaccine development and drug trials to combat the pandemic. COVID-19 affects us all and does not respect borders; defeating it requires the entire world working together. In the strongest terms possible, the American Medical Association urges the President to reverse course and not abandon our country's leadership position in the global fight against COVID-19 (cited in Fox et al., 2020)

Dr. Thomas Frieden, the former head of CDC argued that

We helped create WHO. We are part of it. It is part of the world, and turning our back on WHO makes us and the world less safe. Now, China and every other country in the world will have a veto at WHO, and the US won't. This will make the US more vulnerable (cited in Fox et al., 2020)

Dr. Thomas File, President of Infectious Diseases Society of America (IDSA), claimed that

This pandemic has demonstrated that neither national boundaries nor political positions can protect us from the spread of an infectious disease. We will not succeed against this pandemic, or any future outbreak, unless we stand together, share information, and coordinate actions (cited in Fox et al., 2020).

To summarize, the most immediate potential impacts of the US withdrawal from the WHO included the following:

First, the move could, for the first-time cut the US government out of developing the seasonal influenza vaccine for the Southern Hemisphere, a process coordinated by the WHO in partnership with the United States (De Luce, 2020).

Second, US withdrawal from the WHO could impede access to an eventual COVID-19 vaccine if it is created overseas (De Luce, 2020).

Third, leaving the organization could also significantly blind the United States to health threats in remote foreign locales that, as the pandemic has shown, have the potential to make their way to the US shores. Experts also feared the impact on major initiatives to combat infectious diseases, such as a WHO-led program that is on the cusp of eradicating polio (De Luce, 2020).

Fourth, US withdrawal from the WHO in the middle of a pandemic was not only breathtakingly dangerous but also jeopardized many of the organization's programs



that were strongly supported financially and through expertise and consultation with the United States. In fact, the US cut in funding would affect childhood immunizations, polio eradication, and other initiatives in some of the most vulnerable parts of the world (De Luce, 2020).

Critics of President Trump's decision to withdraw from the WHO warned of potential widespread damage as the United States attempted to extricate itself from an international health infrastructure in which it was entrenched (Rotella et al., 2020). For example, the flu vaccine that Americans receive at drugstores and doctors' offices is based on work that the CDC and Food and Drug Administration conduct through the World Health Organization.

Specifically, since 2004, the US has helped build a global network of WHO flu centers, buying lab equipment and training scientists. The centers in more than 100 countries collect samples from sick people, isolate the viruses and search for any new viruses that could cause an epidemic or pandemic. The CDC houses one of five WHO Collaborating Centers that collect these virus samples, sequence the viral RNA, and analyze reams of data on flu cases around the world, while the FDA runs one of the four WHO regulatory labs that help vaccine makers determine the correct amount of antigen, which triggers the immune response, to include in vaccines (Rotella et al., 2020).

The United States and other WHO members meet twice a year to pick the dominant flu viruses that are included in vaccines. As a result of the Trump Administration's decision, the CDC could lose access to the data and virus samples that protect Americans from potentially deadly strains of flu from around the world. According to a health expert, "If we pull out of the World Health Organization, we're going to be flying blind in terms of influenza and other pandemic threats," and "It's going to be a lot harder to know what's going on" (cited in Rotella et al., 2020).

Moreover, the onslaught of the coronavirus has hurt immunization activities worldwide, causing a rise in measles and other diseases. American cooperation with the WHO was thus vital to fighting such threats. Consequently, the US decision would endanger a WHO-led program that had come tantalizingly close to the eradication of polio (De Luce, 2020).

Yet, there were fears that the Trump Administration's plan to bypass the WHO and address global health problems directly with foreign governments would run into trouble in the Middle East, South Asia, Africa, and other regions where Americans encounter hostility or have difficulty operating. As Ambassador Jimmy Kolker noted

People coming into countries in WHO shirts to work on polio or AIDS are less threatening. It is easier to get collaboration from a skeptical country or population through WHO. It facilitates access. It is fanciful to think that other nations will accept a U.S.-led health initiative as a substitute for the WHO. No one is looking for U.S.-based alternatives to WHO. Dead on arrival. There is no way they are going to be supported or even accepted (cited in Rotella et al., 2020)

In fact, the WHO has a history of bringing together ideological rivals. For example, William Foege, the CDC director under Presidents Ronald Reagan and Jimmy Carter, has credited WHO for uniting American scientists and their



counterparts from the Soviet Union during the Cold War to eradicate smallpox in a little more than a decade. "It's not a failed bureaucracy," Foege noted and added, "If you go there and see all they do every year, and they have a budget for the entire world that's smaller than many medical centers in this country" (cited in Rotella et al., 2020).

Finally, both US experts and politicians agreed that in the absence of the United States, China will gain control over the organization (Maxmen, 2020). For example, at a hearing of the US Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, Senator Chris Murphy noted that

There's one country that's desperate for the United States to leave the WHO, and that's China. They are going to fill this vacuum. They are going to put in the money that we have withdrawn, and even if we try to rejoin in 2021, it's going to be under fundamentally different terms because China will be much more influential because of our even temporary absence from it (cited in Rotella et al., 2020).

## Conclusions and Recommendations

Despite the lethality of the COVID-19 pandemic, this was not the first time that humanity has been confronted by such a challenge. Therefore, one would have expected that the international community would be better prepared to address the challenges posed by COVID-19. But this proved not to be the case. In contrast, the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated that despite its lethality, not all national governments consider it as national security issue. The example of President Trump's approach to public health is indicative. Therefore, the first conclusion and recommendation that can be drawn from the above analysis is that it is imperative that populist rhetoric and policies that undermine the well-being of humanity are avoided.

Individual state interests and the resulting conflict of interests compounded with the increasing de-investment in the field of global health affected the capacity of WHO to prepare and respond to a potential pandemic effectively. Moreover, the variation of state approaches to COVID-19 not only affected the function of the WHO and reduced its effectiveness in responding to the pandemic, but the organization itself was also blamed and framed as responsible for the mismanagement of the crisis.

The COVID-19 pandemic has also demonstrated the need for certain state actions if the international community is to be adequately prepared to meet the challenges of a new pandemic. First, it is imperative that governments adopt a comprehensive approach to security and view health issues as security issues that need to be taken seriously. Second, states should also adopt a common security approach to health to enable global and regional organizations to act accordingly. For example, it will be in the interest of the international community to strengthen WHO in its efforts to promote global health, keep the world safe, and serve the vulnerable. Member states should enable the organization to achieve its purpose and mission by addressing

human capital across the life-course, preventing noncommunicable diseases, promoting mental health, and strengthening antimicrobial resistance. And third, in addition to strengthening global health governance through their common security approach, states should also pursue cooperative security arrangements to address specific issues that might affect global health. Cooperative security does not have easy answers for the causes of a pandemic, but it may help provide a framework for the international community to organize effective responses to it. Indeed, it is seen to be the essential framework for preventing and containing such dangers in the future.

Due to the effects of interdependence, the goal of the international community should be to ensure that more and more people have universal health coverage, to protect more people from health emergencies, and provide a greater number of people with better health and well-being. Universal health coverage would require the WHO to focus on primary health care to improve access to quality essential services; work toward sustainable financing and financial protection; improve access to essential medicines and health products; train the health workforce and advise on labor policies; support people's participation in national health policies; and improve monitoring, data, and information.

Investing in and strengthening the WHO as the global health regime would enable the organization to prepare for emergencies by identifying, mitigating and managing risks; prevent emergencies and supporting the development of tools necessary during outbreaks; detect and respond to acute health emergencies; and support the delivery of essential health services in fragile settings. In engaging with these health-related issues, the WHO would also need to effectively address social determinants, promote intersectoral approaches to health, and prioritize health in all policies and healthy settings.

Finally, to achieve its goals, the WHO requires not only a set of reforms but also the presence of the United States within its membership. The United States has the capacity and the means necessary to provide leadership and funding for health-related programs that are essential for the progress and well-being of humanity.

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**Part VII**  
**L'étranger, Resentment, and the Truth**

# Trumpism and Putinism: Just Old Wine in New Bottles



**José Filipe Pinto**

**Abstract** Donald Trump and Vladimir Putin are plutopopulist who are often seen as the creators of a political model or theory. However, this vision represents a fallacy because both Trump and Putin are more the result than the cause of the political system. History proves that populism is not recent both in Russia and in the United States. Indeed, it had its birthplace in Russia in the middle of the nineteenth century, and the United States had its first populist experience in that century as well. Moreover, one of the most well-known features of Russian culture is the need for a messianic and charismatic leader whose decisions must be obeyed, while the melting pot of cultures existing in the United States favors the existence of a social gap, namely in periods of economic crisis, and the emergence of a populist leader trying to ride the dissatisfaction wave. This paper proves that Trumpism and Putinism do not represent new ideologies, despite using ideological elements which were already present in American and Russian societies and cultures before Trump and Putin have reached the power. Moreover, it explains the initial close relationship between Trump and Putin and its evolution.

**Keywords** Trump · Putin · Trumpism · Putinism · Populism, ideology · USA · Russia

## Introduction

Populism was born in Tsarist Russia in the middle of the nineteenth century, and, as Venturi (1960, p. 1) recognized, “Herzen was the true founder of Populism [...] inspired by his precocious attempt to bring Socialism to the Russia of Nicholas, the first.” Initially, Herzen’s creation was peaceful, aiming not to repeat in Russia the social problems occurring in Western Europe due to industrialization. However, after the emancipation of the serfs, in 1861, populists started using revolutionary

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violence. In the United States, after the abolition of slavery, there was not a similar attitude, and the first populist party, The People's Party of America, was formally organized only "in February 1892 in St Louis, Missouri." This party was created mainly due to "the nationwide economic depression of the 1870s and the longer-term structural problems within agriculture, [...] produced various social and political groupings (the Granger movement, the Greenbackers, the Farmers' Alliance) which co-existing with the growing trade unions merged into what became the first version of American populism"<sup>1</sup> because the political and economic system had created "two great classes – tramps and millionaire" (Dunne, 2016, p. 12). Thus, the social antagonism between poverty and wealth has provoked a fight opposing the people and the elite, and, in the same century, populism emerged both in Russia and in the United States, two of the three countries that, in the twenty-first century, are trying to define their areas of influence in the New World Order, as the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the fast American support to Zelensky have proved.

Both United States and Russia are breeding grounds for populism, despite American institutions being strong while Russian institutions are weak. On one side, "the specifics of the American model of capitalism are reflected in two characteristic phenomena," and "the first is reflected in the American economy" because "there are two contrasting areas that never intersect," i.e., "the world of big money, the life of which is reflected in financial exchanges, and the world of the real economy, where real goods and services are produced" (Dunne, 2016, p. 36). On the other side, the existence of a charismatic or almost messianic leader whose orders must be obeyed is a core element of Russian culture.

This chapter does not aim to analyze the evolution of populism in the United States and Russia. Instead, it reflects on two populist leaders of those countries: the former US President Donald Trump, and the actual Russian President Vladimir Putin. Two plutopopulists because, on the American side, "despite Trump's scatter-gun targeting of the betrayers of Lincoln's 'plain people' (the adopted term of the Populists) by the rich and infamous, he himself is universally known as a New York-based billionaire, property magnate, and media celebrity – a self-promoter over three decades (Dunne, 2016, pp. 16–17) while, on the Russian side, "in 2017, financier Bill Browder testified before the U.S. Senate Judiciary Committee and "claimed Vladimir Putin is worth \$200 billion" and he "was the 'richest man in the world' as a result of 'terrible crimes' his government committed," despite Putin's declarations of only earning "a salary of \$140,000 annually" and having "publicly disclosed assets of an 800-square foot apartment, a trailer, and three cars," staying "at a 1,600-square-foot apartment in Moscow."<sup>2</sup>

The chapter explains the relationship between the two leaders and the origin and main features of the so-called Trumpism and Putinism. Moreover, it shows that Trumpism and Putinism are not solid ideologies but only the result of the

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<sup>1</sup><https://sgp.fas.org/crs/row/IN10933.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup><https://thefederal.com/international/vladimir-putins-wealth-1-4bn-mansion-700-cars-58-aircraft-mega-yacht-and-more/>.

mobilization of nationalist cleavages and the consequence of the evolution of political and social realities. Thus, they could be identified before Trump and Putin become presidents, and they will continue after their presidential terms. The bottles are new, but the wine is old, such as the question of leadership.

King et al. (2009), pp. 914–915) identified “phylogenetic consistencies between human and non-human leadership” and explained that “the expansion of the human brain and the associated increase in human group size has created a unique selection environment for human leadership” counting on “at least five major transitions,” being the last one due to “the increase in social complexity of societies that took place after the agricultural revolution” because it “produced the need for more powerful and formal leaders to manage complex intra and intergroup relations — the chiefs, kings, presidents, and CEOs — who at best provide important public services and at worst abuse their position of power to dominate and exploit followers.” Populist leaders clearly match the latter position. Many centuries ago, the group followed the Big Man, the best hunter or warrior, the only one strong enough to assure the subsistence of its members. Nowadays, especially in periods of crisis, people choose to follow a charismatic leader without perceiving that charisma is not a divine gift but a kind of fraud once it does not correspond to an innate property and “it is our perception that gives a leader with charisma” because “nobody is born charismatic” (Roberts, 2004, p. 64). Obviously, the leader tries to cultivate an image of charisma and, as Adorno (1991) stated, “while appearing as a superman, the leader must at the same time work the miracle of appearing as an average person, just as Hitler posed as a composite of King-Kong and the suburban barber.”

Populist leaders usually promote the Dark Triad of Leadership. Paulhus & Williams (2002, p. 2) affirm that “among the socially aversive personalities [...] three have attracted the most empirical attention: Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy.” Most populist leaders are narcissistic because they are motivated “for the dominance.” They believe they are superior to others, and they tend “to over-emphasize their skills” (Finuras, 2018, p. 79). Moreover, their Machiavellianism allows them to manipulate others while their signs of psychopathy have no compunction at using heavy impulsivity and avoiding any repentance when they harm others. In this chapter, in several cases, Putin and Trump’s attitudes and decisions match the Dark Triad of Leadership.

## Defining the Concepts of Populism and Ideology

This chapter proves that Putin and Trump are plutopopulist leaders, and the so-called Trumpism and Putinism are not ideologies. Thus, it is necessary to analyze those concepts and explain their meaning in the chapter.

Starting with populism, Scott (2017, p. 20) states that the meaning of the word “is far from consensual, as populism is an ill-defined term or an all-embracing term that brings together very different political entities.” Postel (2019, p. 2) shares the same vision saying that “there are nearly as many formulas for defining the concept of



populism as there are books, papers, and treatises on the topic.” This is also Pappas’ opinion because he states that populism can be regarded as “an ideology (Laclau, 2005; Mudde 2004), style of politics (Knight 1998), specific discourse (Hawkins 2009) or the political strategy (Weyland 2001)” (Pappas, 2014, pp. 2–3).

It is noteworthy that much more meanings can be identified because there are several types of populism,<sup>3</sup> but in this chapter, I follow my own definition, i.e., “a way of articulating the discourse aiming at the fight for hegemony, mainly in the political dimension” (Pinto, 2017). This definition accepts that both the people and the elite are seen as homogenous, and the intermediary social elements, namely the mainstream political parties, are accused of representing the interests of the elite.

Concerning plutopopulism, it occurs when the nongovernmental elite decides that the right moment has arrived to conquer power. It is a top-down movement in which someone who is rich and belongs to the economic or military elite succeeds to present him or herself as “the voice of the underdogs, as it happened when ‘Trump presented himself in the Republican convention of 2016 as the «voice of the people»” (Urbinati, 2019, p. 223). Wolf (2017) defends that Trump’s Administration is a real example of this modality of populism stating that “Post-Reagan Republicans reached out to the base by campaigning on cultural issues while legislating for the upper 1 per cent,” and adding that plutopopulism “works by making the base ever angrier and more desperate.”<sup>4</sup> This is also Luce’s vision when he denounces Trump’s economic agenda as unfair because “the biggest winners will be on Wall Street, in the fossil fuel energy sector and defense” while the forgotten Americans’ grocery bills “would soar.”<sup>5</sup> However, Putin can also be presented as a plutopopulist example because “he flies in fighter jets and helicopters, leads a healthy life, and from time to time mingles with the people” (De Vries and Shekshnia, 2008, p. 236).

Regarding ideology, Eagleton (1991, p. 1) recognizes that “nobody has yet come up with a single adequate definition” and presents a long list of 16 meanings in

<sup>3</sup>In a paper recently accepted by ATINER, whose title is ‘Myths, Fallacies, and Realities of Populism: Towards a New Typology’, I propose a typology according to four criteria: the relationship of populist parties with the system; the way populist parties define the people and the elite inside the borders of their countries; the use of the web as the main or the sole platform for the populist message, and the importance of the borders as limit of the concept of people. Thus, I consider five types of populism: anti-establishment, socioeconomic, cultural or identitarian, digital or 2.0., and transnational populism.

<sup>4</sup>Wolf, M. (2017). Donald Trump proto-populism laid bare. Available at <https://www.ft.com/content/69fe4862-2f20-11e7-9555-23ef563ecf9a>.

<sup>5</sup>Luce, E. (2017). Donald Trump is creating a field day for the 1% <https://www.ft.com/content/7dec9a66-faa2-11e6-9516-2d969e0d3b65>.

<sup>6</sup>“(a) the process of production of meanings, signs and values in social life; (b) a body of ideas characteristic of a particular social group or class; (c) ideas which help to legitimate a dominant political power; (d) false ideas which help to legitimate a dominant political power; (e) systematically distorted communication; (f) that which offers a position for a subject; (g) forms of thought motivated by social interests; (h) identity thinking; (i) socially necessary illusion; (j) the conjuncture of discourse and power; (k) the medium in which conscious social actors make sense of their world; (l) action-oriented sets of beliefs; (m) the confusion of linguistic and

circulation.<sup>6</sup> However, he considered that all the definitions can be grouped in two of the mainstream traditions: “one central lineage, from Hegel and Marx to Georg Lukacs and some later Marxist thinkers, has been much preoccupied with ideas of true and false cognition, with ideology as illusion, distortion, and mystification; whereas an alternative tradition of thought has been less epistemological than sociological, concerned more with the function of ideas within social life than with their reality or unreality” (p. 3).

Santos (1977, p. 208) also considers the above-mentioned dichotomy referring that the term has been used with the meaning of: “process in false consciousness (Engels), wrong conception and complete abstraction of the History (Marx), distorted knowledge (K. Mannheim), false conscience (K. Korsch), conception of the world (A. Gramsci), element of the social coverage with mystified contents (Meynaud), mystified representation (H. Lefebvre), system of opinions (A. Schaff), system of representations (Althusser), set with relative coherence of representations (Poulantzas), and so on.” Furthermore, Bobbio et al. (1983) share the same opinion, defending that the term has been used with two completely different meanings: “one of them, the thin one, linked to the «genus, or the «species» diversely defined, of the systems of political beliefs: a set of ideas and values concerning to the public order and having the mission of guide the collective political behaviors.” The other one is the thick sense, whose origin is “Marx’s concept of ideology, seen as the false conscience of the domain relations between the classes.” In this chapter, I opt for the former meaning.

To sum up: “ideologies are imaginative maps drawing together facts that themselves may be disputed. They are collectively produced and collectively consumed, though the latter happens in unpredictable ways, and that collective nature makes them public property” and according to “political theorists the peculiarities of ideologies lie in the details of those curious, pliable, four-dimensional maps and in how they form, hone, promote and demolish the ideas, conceptualizations and group-affections at our disposal” (Freeden, 2006, p. 20).

As some scholars, namely Takis Pappas, consider populism as a thin ideology, it is noteworthy to define the concept. According to Freeden (1998, p. 750), “a thin-centered ideology is one that arbitrarily severs itself from wider ideational contexts, by the deliberate removal and replacement of concepts.” This arbitrary use leads to “a structural inability to offer complex ranges of argument, because many chains of ideas one would normally expect to find stretching from the general and abstract to the concrete and practical, from the core to the periphery, as well as in the reverse direction, are simply absent.” Thus, as “a thin-centered ideology is hence limited in ideational ambitions and scope,” it seems acceptable to classify populism as a thin ideology, but never as an ideology, i.e., a configuration “of political concepts – such as liberty, democracy, justice, and nationhood – in which particular interpretations of

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phenomenal reality; (n) semiotic closure; (o) the indispensable medium in which individuals live out their relations to a social structure; (p) the process whereby social life is converted to a natural reality” (Eagleton, 1991, pp. 1–2)

each constituent concept have been selected out of an indeterminate range of meanings they may signify” (Freeden, 1998, p. 149).

## The Bromance Between Trump and Putin

Probably, the best image for documenting the bromance between Trump and Putin is the mural created by the Lithuanian artist Mindaugas Bonanu showing them in a passionate embrace. However, as Kelly Grovier notes, the relationship “appears tinged with suspicion as both men keep their eyes cracked open.”<sup>7</sup> This is also my opinion because I consider that behind the compatibility of political temperaments, mutual distrust is hidden, explaining, for example, that Trump, despite being known to be “outspoken on issues [. . .] has been rather cautious since his inauguration in his pronouncements on the subject of Ukraine and the Ukraine-Russia conflict” (Dubovyk, 2019, p. 2).

Jenny Mathers affirms that the Trump-Putin “bromance” started before Trump became President. In her opinion, Donald Trump praised Putin “at least as early as 2008, when he compared Putin to then-US President George W. Bush and indicated that Putin was the better leader of the two.” Moreover, “throughout the election campaign, Trump frequently spoke admiringly of the Russian president, describing him as a strong leader who acted in the interests of his own country.” According to Mathers, “Putin is almost certainly the type of leader Trump would like to be.”<sup>8</sup>

Isikoff and Corn (2017), p. 1) agree about the first part of Mathers’ statement. However, they consider that the relationship between Trump and Putin is more recent as it comes back to November 2013, when Trump landed in Russia “to promote that evening’s extravaganza at Moscow’s Crocus City Hall: The Miss Universe pageant,” after “having spent decades trying – but failing – to develop high-end projects in Moscow,” namely “a glittering Trump Tower.” The previous failure explained Trump’s anxiety because he did not know if Putin would attend the Pageant and, from the moment, five months earlier, when he had announced that the Pageant would take place in Moscow, “he had seemed obsessed with the idea of meeting the Russian president” (p. 2).

Trump’s intention obliged him to “demonstrate his affinity for the nation’s authoritarian leader with flattering and fawning tweets and remarks that were part of a long stretch of comments suggesting an admiration for Trump” (pp. 2–3). Moreover, “Trump expressed his desire on Twitter to become Putin’s new best friend” (p. 9), and in an interview, he “could barely contain his praise for Russia’s

<sup>7</sup> Available at <https://www.bbc.com/culture/article/20160518-what-does-the-trumpputin-kiss-really-mean>.

<sup>8</sup> Mathers, J. ‘The Trump-Putin relationship: what does It mean and what should we expect from it?’. Available at <https://www.aber.ac.uk/en/media/departamental/interpol/images/Dr-Jeny-Mathers%2D%2D-Paper%2D%2D-The-Trump%2D%2D-Putin-Relationship.pdf>.

president” (p. 14) who, unfortunately, could not attend the Pageant due to “a Moscow traffic jam” (p. 14), after Putin had met the king and the queen of the Netherlands in the Kremlin.

This hiccup, however, did not stop Trump’s strategy of scouting for grand business opportunities in Russia, proving that Trump was a brand. Moreover, after Trump had become president, he would hold a summit with Putin in Helsinki, Finland, on July 16, 2018, but before that meeting, Trump had profited from Russian support to reach power. During the summit conference, Putin said he had told President Trump that “the Russian state has never interfered and is not going to interfere in U.S. domestic affairs, including election processes.” More problematic are Putin’s statements that “you can’t believe anybody” and that “one of the companies under U.S. indictment (run by a wealthy businessperson close to Putin) is a ‘private’ company that does not represent the Russian state,”<sup>9</sup> a clear sign of the official posttruth Russian rhetoric.

Indeed, the feeling was common because, on January 12, 2016, Ivan Krastev exposed his reasons for explaining why Putin, “the man who seeks to defeat America, is such an enthusiastic supporter of Donald J. Trump, the ‘brilliant and talented leader’ who promises to make America great again.”<sup>10</sup> According to Krastev’s view, “Mr. Putin’s predilection for Mr. Trump has nothing to do with the Kremlin’s traditional preference for Republicans.” Moreover, “it also can’t be explained by the fact that had Mr. Putin — a physically sound, aging, gun-loving and anti-gay conservative — been an American citizen, he would have fit the profile of a Trump supporter.” Krastev considers that Putin’s enthusiasm for Trump cannot be explained through “a function of tactical considerations: that the nutty billionaire would divide America and make it look ridiculous.” He defends that the main reason “is rooted in the fact that they both live in a soap-opera world run by emotions rather than interests,” putting the focus on the “Russian foreign policy sentimentalism,” i.e. “a tendency to view relationships between states as relations between leaders.”

At this point, I consider that it is noteworthy to remind that Trump is his own brand. Fuchs (2017, p. 51) defends the existence of a so-called Trumpology, but he considers that it “does not simply exist because of a single individual. Like any ideology, it requires hegemony. It requires those who admire Trump as brand and leader.” On another side, according to De Vries and Shekshnia (2008), p. 236), Putin can also be imagined as “the CEO of a company called Russia Inc” because he “not only dresses like the head of a modern global company, with his business suits and expensive, though unobtrusive, ties, he also acts like a chief executive officer (CEO).” Moreover, if Trump often uses demagogic and popular language while tweeting, discoursing in a rally, or answering journalists’ questions in a meeting, Putin also “speaks in simple terms the broad public can understand.”

The bromance did not come to an end after Trump’s defeat because “Russian President Vladimir Putin has accused the US of double standards for its treatment of

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<sup>9</sup><https://sgp.fas.org/crs/row/IN10933.pdf>.

<sup>10</sup> Available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/01/13/opinion/why-putin-loves-trump.html>.

the Capitol rioters,” saying that “it was wrong for the US to criticize crackdowns on anti-government protests overseas while prosecuting Americans with political demands.”<sup>11</sup> Meanwhile, Trump “called Russian President Vladimir Putin smart and criticized the U.S. response to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine.”<sup>12</sup>

To sum up, Putin and Trump’s unconventional “bromance,” according to Ashwin & Utrata (2020, pp. 16–17), and “leaving aside accusations of corruption,” points that they “appear to be united by nationalism, a disdain for the rule-based global order, and a particular approach to gender.” However, there are further elements uniting their way of making politics. The following points will show it.

## Putinism: A Populist Mentality

Gudkov (2011, p. 23) argues that “the regime conventionally known as ‘Putinism’ is a new phenomenon and has yet to be described in the political science literature” because, “although the current regime, in the words of Yuri Levada, is built out of ‘pieces,’ ‘debris,’ and ‘material’ of the old system, the actual set of institutions, their arrangement, and – most important – their function have changed.”

In my opinion, we cannot understand Putinism without considering Russian culture. Rodric Braithwaite, a former British ambassador to Moscow when the Soviet Union collapsed, is also aware of this reality when he states that “Putin’s views aren’t unique.” They are shared by most Russians and “what Putin says about the humiliation of the Soviet collapse, the enlargement of NATO, and the intimate historical link between Russian and Ukrainian history is not his own idea” because “millions of Russians think and feel just like he does.”<sup>13</sup> In other words, “after the chaotic Yeltsin years, the Russians welcomed Putin’s nationalistic rhetoric, his strong stand when dealing with foreign partners, his nostalgia for the old Soviet Union, and his determination to bring Russia back to greatness” (De Vries & Shekshnia, 2008, p. 239), as well as the rebounding of the Russian economy, “which had been struggling for almost a decade” allowing that “by 2008, Russians were richer than they had ever been in history” (De Vries & Shekshnia (2008, p. 237)). Indeed, “in tangible terms, nothing did more to boost Putin’s standing than the dramatic recovery of the national economy” (Colton, 2017, p. 10) because, before the rebounding of economy, “the Putin leadership in fact had relatively weak roots in the wider society and drew widely but superficially on public support” (White & Mcallister, 2008, p. 604).

I defend that Putinism is the result both of determinism and expansionism of the former Soviet Union and of the main features of Russian culture. Khapaeva (2016,

<sup>11</sup> Available at <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-57366668>.

<sup>12</sup> Available at <https://www.wsj.com/livecoverage/russia-ukraine-latest-news/card/trump-calls-putin-s-invasion-of-ukraine-smart-blames-biden-for-not-doing-enough-JicGb9xT5GnCZpQdiBjN>.

<sup>13</sup> Available at <https://fanlax.com/forum/viewtopic.php?t=435&start=2340>.

p. 3) also calls attention to these factors because for providing “a unifying picture of post-Soviet society” she mentions “the interdependence of Putin’s aggressive foreign policy, Soviet historical memory, and a specific post-Soviet version of the neo-medievalism as the Gothic Society.” Furthermore, she denounces that “the most visible signs of re-Stalinization are the newly emerging monuments to Stalin across Russia [...] over the past 15 years,” intentionally forgetting that Stalin was a “dictator who personally signed 40,000 death sentences and under whose rule more than 9 million innocent citizens were murdered during peacetime for political charges” (p. 4). However, she considers Putinism as an ideology arguing that “re-Stalinization and the Kremlin-sponsored ideology of the Eurasianism represent two interrelated trends of a complex ideological process.” Moreover, she adds that “Eurasianism combines Soviet denial of individuality with the idea of a state-dependent patriarchal society and Russian historical messianism,” glorifying “the reign of Ivan the Terrible and Stalin” (p. 1).

Eurasianism is an old project, and, nowadays, two names must be seen as its main ideologists: Vladislav Surkov, the Kremlin insider, an ideologist of sovereign democracy in the 2000s, and Alexander Dugin. According to Pynnöniemi (2019, p. 1) “Surkov’s vision of Russia after 2024 has nothing new in it.” Surkov replaces the illusion of democracy with the myth of a great leader and the brutal logic of power, because “everyone understands everything anyway.” Surkov considers the existence of three Eurasianist pillars: “the first pillar of the new state is the age-old Russian authoritarianism,” the second pillar “is traditional, too” and defends that “Russia’s role in the world is ‘that of a great and growing community of nations that gathers lands’”. Finally, the third pillar is “the greatest virtue of the Russian leader,” someone with “ability to hear and to understand the nation, to see all the way through it, through its entire depth,” despite the relation between the ‘deep nation’ and the leader being unidirectional.” Indeed, “the people have no role in the political realm, other than the constant performance of trust in the leader.”

Obviously, other scholars identify other different pillars. For example, Goméz (2019, p. 64) affirms that Putin “brought change and stability, with the development of an autocracy called ‘sovereign democracy,’ liberal in the economic domain, together with an exaltation of patriotism, as well as a more Russian cultural orientation.” However, for her, the new identity “has been sustained, on the one hand, in the Slavophilic thought and the contribution of the Orthodox Church, and the anti-occidentalism, on the other hand, the otherness of which Putin has served to strengthen the singularity of Russia.” This position is also shared by Pardo de Santyana (2017), p. 7), who identifies three pillars: “the Slavic identity and the consequent vocation for acting as a guardian of the whole Slavic world, the orthodox religion as the base of its culture and differentiating element versus the Occident and the Byzantine brand. A deep nationalism identified with its history.”

Respecting Alexander Dugin, Shekhovtsov (2017, p. 186) states that his neo-Eurasianism “can be defined as an ideology centered on the idea of building a totalitarian, Russia-dominated Eurasian Empire that would challenge and eventually defeat its eternal adversary represented by the United States and its Atlanticist allies,” starting with Ukraine because, for Dugin, Ukraine as a state, “makes no

geopolitical sense” as Ukraine “does not possess any peculiar cultural message of universal significance, or geographical uniqueness, or ethnic exceptionalism.”

Dugin (2012, p. 10) defends that “the majority of Russian people suffer their integration into global society as a loss of their own identity.” He considers that “the Russian population had almost entirely rejected the liberal ideology in the 1990s” and he believes that “a return to the illiberal political ideologies of the twentieth century, such as communism or fascism, is unlikely, as these ideologies have already failed and proven themselves unequal to the challenge of opposing liberalism, to say nothing of the moral costs of totalitarianism.” Thus, “in order to fill this political and ideological vacuum, Russia needs a new political idea [...] a Fourth Political Theory.” This new theory is the birth of Eurasianism because, as Rahim (2019) states, “for Dugin, Russia is the only country in the Eurasian belt, which is technologically, educationally and multiculturally superior than others, and thus can protect collective identities by giving birth to Eurasianism (Eurasian Union).”<sup>14</sup>

Fish (2017, p. 61) while presenting his idea about Putinism, explains that Putin is not alone because “as was the case in the Soviet Union before the reforms of Mikhail Gorbachev (1985–91), Russia is again ruled by a self-confident elite that claims to represent a superior alternative to liberal democracy.” Despite being self-confident, the elite needs Putin’s support, and its members can fall from Kremlin’s grace if they dare to criticize Putin’s decisions, as it has already happened to some kleptocrats. Gudkov (2011, p. 21) also calls attention to the elite moving around Putin, saying that Putinism is “a special type of posttotalitarian authoritarianism in which the political police wield power on behalf of the private interests of bureaucratic clans or corporations.” The clans and corporations have captured all the functions of the Russian political system. Thus, Putin’s regime, “after subordinating to itself the mass media, then parliament and the judicial system, has suppressed the functional differentiation of the institutional system and the separation of society from the state that the 1990s reforms initiated,” leading to a “a state where authority is still vested in personalities, not in institutions” (Applebaum, 2013, p. 1).

Taylor (2018, p. 2) also emphasizes that Putinism is a mentality held by both Putin himself and the ruling elites who support him. However, he refuses that Putinism can be labeled as “a full developed, all-encompassing ideology,” despite defending that “Putin also deserves his own ‘ism’ because there is a coherent set of political practices and especially an operating ‘code’ that has remained fairly consistent over time.” For him, Putinism is “more like ‘Thatcherism’ or ‘Reaganism’ than like ‘Marxism’”, and it can be identified as “a system of rule and a guiding mentality, a personality and a historical moment.” Katz (2019, p. 90) has analyzed Taylor’s book and concluded that “unlike Marxism-Leninism, which was an explicit ideology,” Putinism is “a mentality, or code, consisting of not just ideas (such as great-power statism, anti-Westernism, and anti-Americanism, and conservatism or anti-liberalism) but also habits (such as control, order, unity or anti-pluralism,

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<sup>14</sup>Rahim, S. (2019). Fourth political theory: the quest for Eurasianism. Available at <https://dailytimes.com.pk/359481/fourth-political-theory-the-quest-for-eurasianism/>.



loyalty, and hypermasculinity) and even emotions (including desiring respect but feeling humiliated by the West, resentment, and vulnerability or fear)."

Fish (2017, p. 62) also emphasizes the role of the personality, defining Putinism as "a form of autocracy that is conservative, populist, and personalistic," and it "broadly prioritizes the maintenance of the *status quo* while evincing hostility toward potential sources of instability." Moreover, "Putinism's populism overlaps with its conservatism in the form of crowd-pleasing efforts to resist what Russian leaders cast as the advance of decadent liberalism on such issues as gay rights and women's equality (pp. 61–62). Moreover, concerning freedom, Colton (2017, p.10) recognizes the existence of a paradox because, "even as the strongman/chief executive was held in high esteem, the regime he embodied little by little grew more intolerant of elite dissent, oppositional activity, and unrehearsed expressions of grassroots discontent." Russians are free just for repeating uncritically Putin's views. The Russian norm. In fact, Putin may be seen as "a return to the way Kremlin leaders have behaved for centuries. He is not an aberration, but a return to the Russian norm: a leader in alignment with Russian history, geography, and culture" (McFaul, 2018, p. 251).

## Trumpism: Inside and beyond Trump's Brand

Donald Trump can be presented as an example of a plutocratic leader. Someone who belongs to the elite but assumes himself as the voice of the left-behind or the underdogs. According to Mills (1956), "within America society, major national power now resides on the economic, the political, and the military domains" (p. 10), giving origin to three different elites, i.e., "the big three" (p. 11), or the powerful, "those who are able to realize their will" (p. 13). Trump's will has led him beyond his mark, and he moved from economic to political elite, but without forgetting that he is a businessman because, as Pareto (1919, p. 2041) recognized, "the one who moves from one group to another usually brings certain tendencies, certain feelings, certain skills that he has acquired in the group from which he comes." Thus, Trump can exemplify the existence of a top-bottom populism that occurs when part of the no-governmental elite wishes to assume control of the political power and needs "to appeal to the people" against the prevailing ideology" (Laclau, 2005, p. 205). In this case, "the leader needs to find strategies of appealing to the group that will put him both in charge and in the midst of its members, to be both of and above them." For example, Trump usually wore a red cap at his rallies because "with his red cap on, the glossy billionaire living in a gilt Manhattan apartment appears to have something in common with the rest of the country, who wear caps when they're actually at baseball games, when they're driving tractors through wheat fields, when they're barbecuing in their backyards" (Brock, 2016, p. 86).

Scholars have presented several reasons for explaining both 2016 Trump's victory and his 2022 defeat. For example, Manza and Crowley (2017a, 2017b),



p. 3) tested “the widely voiced hypothesis that a critical source of Trump’s support in the GOP primaries came from his appeal to working class and/or downwardly mobile and insecure middle-class voters responding to a ‘populist’ message” and concluded that “the view that Trump’s rise was fostered by his appeals to economically insecure voters is misplaced.” Moreover, they added that “in many respects, the most surprising outcome of the 2016 election was Trump’s seizure of the Republican nomination rather than his general election victory over Hillary Clinton (in the electoral college).” Arlie Hochschild (2016, p. 135) constructed a deep story about the Tea Party to represent “in metaphorical form the hopes, fears, pride, shame, resentment and anxiety in the lives” of those she talked with. A metaphor consisting of someone predominantly male, situated in the middle of “a long line leading up a hill” looking for the American Dream that is “on the other side of the hill, hidden” (p. 136). However, “the sun is hot and the line unmoving” or “moving backward” (p. 136) because there are “people cutting in line ahead” of the middle-class citizen, namely, “women, immigrants, refugees, public sectors workers” (p. 137), and the American citizen “become suspicious” and he feels betrayed when he discovers that the man “monitoring the line” is the President Barack Obama, but he is not “ensuring that the line is orderly and that access to the Dream is fair” (p. 139). On the contrary, he is helping the cutters.

This metaphor helps to understand the discontent of an increasing number of citizens. Since then, many of them were “compassionate,” but “at some point,” they decided that they “have to close the borders to human sympathy” (p. 139). This deep story circulated through American society and several sectors were very receptive to it, causing an electoral effect benefiting Donald Trump. As a Tea-Party member told her, “he didn’t want to vote for the menshevik or the bolshevik. So that left Ted Cruz,” and if Cruz didn’t win the Republican nomination, he would vote “for Donald Trump” (p. 242). Thence, Trump’s refrains or slogans, a mix of cultural and anti-establishment populism, even recognizing that, as Waśko-Owsiejczuk (2018, p. 86), quoting Tokarczyk (2006, pp. 19–32), “the use of populist slogans has deep roots in American politics, dating back to the 19th century, and they continue to be influential to this day.”

In a previous paper entitled “Donald Trump, a nationalist and populist leader,” I proved that during the 2017 electoral campaign, there was a close relationship between Trump’s main populist ideas and refrains (Pinto, 2018). Thus, the anti-establishment idea could be found in the slogan “drain the swamp,” while “lock her up” or “It’s crooked Hillary” pointed to Hillary Clinton, showing his anti-opposition, and pro-nationalist was present in the refrain “Make America Great Again.” During his presidential term, Trump continued to use “the rhetoric of persecution, pointing to immigration, liberal elitism, and people of color as the source of economic misfortune in rural communities” (Arnold, 2021, p. 8). Moreover, Trump failed to unify American society. Indeed, he “wanted to convey an argument against the division that he himself had fueled in the campaign,” but “that polarization would not leave the stage” and “the more ‘real Donald Trump,’ and especially through the medium of tweeter has represented an exclusionary politics toward his political adversaries and minority peoples” (Urbinati, 2019, p. 222). Finally, after refusing

to accept the electoral results, the January 6 insurrection, the worst damage to American democracy since 1812, proved that the plutopopulist President imagined a parallel reality hoping to capture the power.

Arnold (2021, p. 3) defends that “the insurrection did not come out of nowhere, nor was it unpredictable.” Indeed, the attack “was the culmination of the Trump era and a representation of the strength of the convictions that accompany Trumpism.” Moreover, he stated that “Trumpism is critical to understanding the modern era of polarized American politics,” and so, “Trump’s ability to energize a crowd, while an effective campaign tool, is not what made the insurrection happen.” The real origin was before the moment when Trump made his appearance in the political campaign.

It is noteworthy to add that the January 6 insurrection was already pointed out by Rapoport (2021, p. 912) as an example of the fifth wave of global terrorism, defending that “the January 6 attack was unique in its target and potential consequences. But the methods employed were common in the 5th wave where far-right demonstrations became common.”

Regarding Trumpism, it has been defined in different meanings. For example, Dimitrova (2017, p. 1) argues that “Trumpism is not a coherent set of policies, neither is it an ideology,” but just “a provocative, anti-politically-correct style and strategy of communication intricately linked to Trump’s narcissistic, egocentric and macho personality, his controversial reputation as a self-made real estate mogul and tough decision-maker, and his shocking behavior, nourished by his TV reality-show celebrity.” However, Fuchs (2017, p. 1) shares a different opinion about the question of ideology, despite accepting that “by Trump making news in the media, the media make Trump,” or, in other words, “the (pseudo-)critical mainstream media have helped making Trump and Trumpology by providing platforms for populist spectacles that sell as news and attract audiences.” He affirms that “the ideology of Trump (Trumpology) has played an important role not just in his business and brand strategies, but also in his political rise.” Moreover, it is noteworthy to emphasize that Fuchs agrees with Arnold, defending that Trumpology or Trump-style ideology, “is not the ideology of a single person, but rather a whole way of thought and life that consists of elements such as hyper-individualism, hard labor, leadership, the friend/enemy scheme, and Social Darwinism” (p. 48).

In contrast, Waško-Owsiejczuk (2018, p. 83) notes “the differences in position between the President and his closest advisors, and his seemingly frequently changing opinion on important international issues” and refuses to consider Trumpism as an ideology. In fact, it is difficult to take Trump seriously since his presidential announcement when he stated that he “would build a great wall” and he “would have Mexico paying for that wall” because nobody builds walls better than him. This statement helps to explain media reaction and that “his speech specifically was ridiculed as ‘unending, utterly baffling, often-wrong’ and a ‘rambling, hour-long stream-of consciousness’ that ‘strongly resembled performance art’” (Mercieca, 2020, p. 2). Moreover, during the presidential term, trivial lies; exaggerations and self-aggrandizing lies; lies to deceive the public; and egregious lies were a constant, being the fourth type “the most serious lies of Donald Trump” because he made “false statements that were demonstrably contrary to well-known facts.” Thus,

Trump's continued adherence to demonstrably false statements "undermined enlightenment epistemology and corroded the premises of liberal democracy" (Piffner, 2019, p. 17).

Returning to Dimitrova (2017, p. 2), she argues that Trumpism is defined as "a particular kind of American populism composed of a mishmash of overt patriotism, economic nationalism, along with a vague commitment to the middle class and an aggressive but indefinite foreign policy," showing that Trumpism, despite not being an ideology, uses elements belonging to ideologies, namely nationalism. For me, Trumpism is just a mix of anti-establishment and cultural populism.

## Putinism and Trumpism: Similarities and Differences

The photo of Vladimir Putin riding a horse while traveling in the mountains of the Siberian Tyva region, during one of his widely publicized athletic adventures, became viral. In December 2016, the journal *Baltic Worlds* manipulated Putin's naked torso image and published a picture of Putin and Trump riding the same horse. A picture pointing to the similarity of both populist leaders and the same can be said about "a photoshopped image of US President Donald Trump in which Trump appears eerily merged with his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin, such that Trump's blonde hair, wispy eyebrows and pursed lips merge with Putin's nose and blue eyes," in a "genuinely unsettling portrait [...] created, following the Helsinki Summit of 2018, by visual artist Nancy Burson" with the two presidents "transmogrify in order to become a single hybrid being."<sup>15</sup>

The fear of that hybrid being is worrying many Americans and it has been calling the attention of the scientific community. For example, McFaul (2018, p. 251) asked if Putin was the Russian norm or an aberration, but the same question should require response about Trump because Eltchaninoff (2018) identifies three characteristics of Putinism that also can be central to Trumpism: "a defense of the past, of traditional identity," against what Mr. Putin has called "the excesses of political correctness"; "the creation of troubles on the frontiers and borders of the country, and among its alliances and partners, cast as threats to the national identity that can only be solved by the leader" and "the creation of an authoritarian, explicitly anti-Western bloc" (Saunders, 2018).

Obviously, there are other pictures pointing to a different sense in the presidential relationship.

In my opinion, the main difference between Trumpism and Putinism comes from the American and Russian societies and their political systems. Indeed, in the United States, there is an effective separation of powers, despite presidentialism being the system of Government, because the checks and balances system works. Thus, "the misfortune of Trump is the fortune of American democracy; this fortune resides in

<sup>15</sup><https://www.degruyter.com/document/doi/10.3138/9781487536114-007/pdf>.

the Constitution of the United States, which is not only hard to be revised but moreover based on a federal system that adds to the institutional containment of the executive power” (Urbinati, 2019, p. 222). On the contrary, in Russia, there is no separation of powers, as the executive power controls both the legislative and the judicial powers. The best example is the recent constitutional amendment allowing Putin two more presidential terms proposed, in March 2020, by the “lawmaker Valentina Tereshkova, a lawmaker from Putin’s ruling party” while “Putin himself showed up in the parliament building and offered his backing for the idea.”<sup>16</sup> Moreover, before the latest constitutional amendment, Huskey (1999, p. 8) stated that “the provisions in the 1993 Constitution granting the Russian president the power to veto legislation altered fundamentally the relationship between executive and legislative authority,” and Partlett (2012, p. 113) has denounced that “the drafters of the 1993 Constitution never intended to place any structural constraints on the power of the Russian President” because “for them, a legitimate democratic constitution was one that concentrated power in a stable and energetic president.” In other words: due to American democracy, Trumpism was obliged to adapt itself to the rules of the political system and forced to follow them while, in an authoritarian Russia, Putinism can change the rules of the system according to the leader’s orders, proving a longstanding maxim: strong leader, weak institutions.

## Conclusion

Doug Saunders (2018) states that Trump and Putin “are strongmen, not thinkers.” Even considering that the word “strong” can lead to physical and political contests, this chapter accepts the quoted sentence. As they are not thinkers, they are not able to elaborate an ideology, and so, neither Trumpism nor Putinism deserves to be considered ideologies. They lack coherence, are contradictory at the time, and represent just political strategies. At best, they can be labeled as thin ideologies because they use ideological elements mainly belonging to nationalism due to their relationship with both national cultures.

Returning to the manipulated image showing Putin and Trump riding the same horse – whose name should be Populism – one notes that Putin continues his political horse-riding while American law had to knock a desperate Trump off the horse. As this chapter accepts that each politician has the right to his/her own “ism” but defends that some “isms” are deeper than others, Putinism is more profound than Trumpism because Putin’s political decisions go far beyond Trump’s ones, in both time and extent. Moreover, “in rebuttal of the theory of the decline of Putinism, there are many indicators to suggest, on the contrary, that praetorianism is enjoying a revival in Russia” (Raviot, 2018, p. 20).

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<sup>16</sup> Available at <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/vladimir-putin-president-russia-signs-law-allowing-2-more-presidential-terms/>.

Finally, the chapter shows that Putism and Trumpism, as modalities of populism, will go beyond Putin and Trump, with other designations – Kremlinocentrism, for instance, in the Russian case – but in the same sense. The bottles will change, but the wine is older and older.

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# Who Are You, Donald J. Trump?



Moshe Banai

**Abstract** The purpose of this chapter is to decipher President Donald J. Trump's grand objective to become a spin dictator, as reflected in his personality traits and ethical values. Moreover, the study unveils President Trump's patterns of leadership behaviors that support his efforts to accomplish this objective. These behaviors include his interpersonal relations, communication, decision-making, and negotiation styles. We argue that the same personality traits and ethical values that endowed President Trump with excellent communication and negotiation behaviors are the same personality traits and ethical values that impair his interpersonal relations and decision-making abilities. On the one hand, he is a spin master and a hardball negotiator, two qualities that brought him to power and sustained his leadership position domestically and internationally. On the other hand, President Trump's interpersonal relations are muddled by illusion of competence, lack of self-control, social alienation, cognitive distortion, demeaning of affection and cooperation, creating antagonism, external preoccupation, repression, superficial social relationship, distrustful anticipations, vindictive behavior, and weak intrapsychic controls. Since much of the President's upbringing and socialization processes are still unknown, because of his successful efforts to curtail his personal information, the true President Trump will only be revealed in the future. For the time being, the 45th President of the USA is still an enigma.

**Keywords** Donald Trump · Spin Dictator · Persona · Behavior · Lying and personal insults · Racial sentiments · Decision-making style · Divider-in-chief · Polarization in America · Identity · Perceptual and cognitive distortion · Enigma · Dictator 45th American President · Negotiation-commitment tactics

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## Introduction

Donald Trump is an enigma. Despite him being in the public domain for years, there is little first-hand personal information available about the 45th President of the USA. The purpose of this Piece is to integrate political behavior theory and organizational behavior theory to unveil President Trump's identity and describe and explain his leadership behavior. The study answers three questions: *What* is President Trump's grand objective?; *Why* has he developed this objective?; and *how* is he planning to accomplish this objective? The study begins with a general theory of political behavior that identifies President Trump's grand objective of becoming a dictator. It is followed by the formulations of propositions that delineate the motivation behind the objective, which is anchored in President Trump's personality traits and ethical value system. Last, we try to identify President Trump's patterns of leadership behavior that may bridge between his personality and ethical values and his target of becoming a dictator. These patterns of leadership behavior include President Trump's interpersonal relations, communication style, decision-making style, and negotiation style.

President Trump is a spin master and what we know about him is what he wants us to know. He keeps his secrets close to his chest, and personal information released about him could be obtained from his official government webpage and from the thousands of hours of video clips generated by his TV shows, official public appearances, and unofficial releases that were shared with the public by his opponents. Books he had published were based on his testimonies but written by professional writers; Twitter tweets were probably composed by him but edited by professional media experts; and other than his convoluted bolded signatures, presented to the public on the occasions of signing Executives Orders, we have no access to any of his writings and therefore do not have first-hand data, the main source of academic studies. It leaves no alternative but to conduct a literature survey and offer a model of President Trump's personality, values, and behaviors, as deduced from the analysis of secondary data. We begin by describing what we believe to be President Trump's grand objective of becoming a dictator.

## What? Becoming a Spin Dictator

The original term Spin Dictator was coined by Guriev and Treisman (2022) to describe leaders who are already controlling authoritarian countries. President Trump may have wished to become a spin dictator, but US Constitution, the US courts, and the American people have curtailed his efforts. Thus, while spin dictator is a term that could be used to describe a leader of an authoritarian state, Spin Autocrat is a more general term that could be used to describe the political behavior of leaders who wish to become dictators in their current democratic states.

Guriev and Treisman (2022) describe spin dictators as leaders who are constantly setting a media agenda that will serve them, and creating narratives that will dominate the discourse, even if they lack any factual basis and their connection to reality is often extremely loose. For that, the spin dictator handles both the “factual” part and its interpretive framing. He makes use of fake news but in an informed and balanced dose, so as not to damage credibility. As compared with President Trump’s charges of on-going media ‘fake news,’ it is a fact that he lies. PolitiFact (March , 2023) reported that Trump’s statements were true 35 times (3%); Mostly true—85 times (8%); Half true 120 (12%); Mostly False 191 (19%); False 358 (37%); and ‘Pants on Fire’ 77 times (18%).

President Trump reserves the real spins for the interpretation front, where he twists any fact to his advantage. For example, Trump attributed good economic indicators to his smart policies and blamed the previous leader (President Obama) for the negative performance. When this line of interpretation ran out of steam, he switched the blame to China.

A spin dictator centralizes power and rules for his own interests rather than the country’s citizens. He is corrupt and aims to spread corruption domestically and abroad, to gather allies and achieve his goals through manipulation. When Trump served as a president no charges were filed against him. Trump organization was convicted recently in tax fraud, and there are four more charges pending. President Trump assigned his lawyer and supporter Rudy Giuliani to meddle in Ukraine’s appointment and release of its Attorney General, for unclear reasons, some say regarding President’s Biden son’ service on a board of Burisma, a Ukrainian energy company ([www.finance.senate.gov](http://www.finance.senate.gov)., 2020). Altogether, President Trump and the Trump Organization have been involved in more than 4095 state and federal legal actions, in 47% of the cases as a defendant (AZ central, 2023).

Instead of eliminating or imprisoning political opponents and dissidents, as the traditional dictators do, the spin dictator exhausts his opponents in a variety of creative ways. When the situation is not good, spin dictators work overtime to convince others that any alternative leader would be worse than them. When competing with McCain for presidency and referring to McCain serving for 6 years as a prisoner of war in Vietnam, President Trump said “I like people who weren’t captured,” twisting logic to present McCain as an unworthy candidate for the position (Schreckinger, 2015).

Furthermore, the spin dictator maintains an enlightened image, allows some media outlets to criticize the government, and does not operate censorship, but at the same time, tries to control many media outlets, so censorship exists but is disguised. He does not have any clear and orderly ideology, only a desire to rule, in the name of which the public is sold multiple ideas from a multitude of teachings. By managing to distort the beliefs of the public, the spin dictator manipulates information and creates an image of a democratic and effective leader. This is how he manages to be truly popular and to create a support base for his monopoly of power.

The spin dictator controls the situation by silencing the opposition and by increasing support. Silencing is achieved through nonpolitical accusations, so that

the government can maintain an image of being pluralistic and inclusive. One example is President Trump trying to silence President Biden through efforts to criminally convict his son. President Trump tends to silence his opponents by publicly humiliating them, calling them and their parents ‘crooked,’ ‘little,’ ‘sleepy,’ ‘traitor,’ or ‘wacky,’ or who can forget ‘animal Assad’ or ‘little rocket man,’ just to name a few pejorative labels (Wikipedia, 2023a, 2023b).

Last, the ‘spin dictator’ makes constitutional changes by directly changing the constitution or sets of laws or by filling the Supreme Court with his supporters, which makes it easier for him in his next moves. In his single term, President Trump appointed 226 judges, well below the totals of recent two-term presidents, including Obama (320), George W. Bush (322) and Bill Clinton (367). But when it comes to the nation’s 13 federal appeals courts—which have the final word on most legal appeals around the country—President Trump’s influence is clear (Pew Center, 2021). Moreover, he appointed three new conservative supreme court justices, more than any US President in modern history, with the hope they would support him across the board, something that only partially occurred. He establishes his own TV network and embeds himself within existing supportive TV networks, avoiding the mediating function of journalists, simply speaking for himself. President Trump not only received unconditional support, including public validation of his lies, from Fox News but also created his own (failing) social media platform named “Social Truth.” One of the first changes President Trump introduced in the White House communication practices was to close the briefing room, where a communication director traditionally presented the president’s policies to the media.

To explain why President Trump set himself such a grand life objective, we have to revisit his personality traits and ethical values, some of which he has inherited from his family and which we do not attempt to decipher, and some which he has developed through a socialization process that took place in his early formative years. These topics are presented next.

## **Why? Personality and Ethics**

People are scratching their heads, trying to figure out Trump’s personality, values, and behaviors. On the one hand, no person could be elected to the highest position on Earth by being a fool. On the other hand, Trump’s statements, and behaviors, which are the best indicators of his state of mind, are confusing, contradictory, and mind-boggling. So, who is the 45th president of the USA?

Childhood education and training shape people’s lives. Yet, a literature search disclosed almost no first-hand testimonies by friends, classmates, family members and associates about President Trump’s upbringing and education. Donald Trump was born on June 14, 1946, as the fourth child of Fred Trump, a Bronx-born real estate developer whose parents were German immigrants, and Mary Anne MacLeod Trump, an immigrant from Scotland. At age 13, he was enrolled at the New York Military Academy; at the age of 18, he enrolled at Fordham University; and at the

age of 20, he transferred to the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania, graduating 2 years later with a BS in economics in 1968 (Wikipedia, 2023a, 2023b). In 2015, a year before Donald Trump assumed his presidency position, his lawyer, Michael Cohen, threatened Trump's colleges, high school, and the College Board with legal action if they released Trump's academic records. Why would a person take legal measures to hide his educational accomplishments in a private school, in a top New York private university, and in one of the best business schools in the world? Protecting his own and the Trump Organization information has been one of Trump's signifiers, which characterize his life activities.

In the absence of first-hand empirical research data, we relate to secondary data to describe President Trump's personality traits and ethical values. We survey information about his personality traits that has been compiled by researchers who analyzed the President's written and spoken verbal behaviors, and by aggregating experts' scorings in a process called a Delphi Method-based consensus (Dalkey & Helmer, 1963).

### ***Personality Traits***

In a study based on experts' scorings, Nai et al. (2019) found a common narrative that portrays President Trump as impetuous and quick to anger, thin-skinned, constantly lying, brazen, vulgar, and boasting a grandiose sense of self and of his accomplishments. They suggest the findings illustrate President Trump's off-the-charts personality and campaigning style, even when compared with other abrasive, narcissistic, and confrontational political figures.

Psychologists have offered the observation that President Trump has been suffering from a narcissistic personality disorder. For example, President Trump possesses a "mirror-hungry personality," and focuses on the glorious self, and is hungry for confirming and admiring responses to counteract his inner sense of worthlessness and lack of self-esteem (Bester, 2022). Available are studies that examine the effects of perceptions of leader adaptive and maladaptive narcissism on ratings of charisma and presidential leadership performance for President Trump by registered voters (e.g., Williams et al., 2020). However, we could not find a study that validated this observation empirically. No psychologist has had the opportunity to ask President Trump to complete a Narcissism test.

Griebie (2021) collected psycho-diagnosical data about President Trump's personality from biographical sources and media reports and synthesized them into a personality profile using the Millon Inventory of Diagnostic Criteria (Millon, 1986; Immelman, 2015). The study found President Trump's primary personality patterns to be:

***Ambitious/Self-Serving, Bordering on Exploitative*** Ambitious individuals are bold, competitive, and self-assured; they easily assume leadership roles, expect others to recognize their special qualities, and often act as though entitled.

***Dominant/Controlling, Bordering on Aggressive*** Dominant individuals enjoy the power to direct others and to evoke obedience and respect; they are tough and unsentimental and often make effective leaders.

***Outgoing/Gregarious, Bordering on Impulsive*** Outgoing individuals are drama attention-getters who thrive on being the center of social events, go out of their way to be popular with others, have confidence in their social abilities, tend to be impulsive and undisciplined, and become easily bored, especially when faced with repetitive or mundane tasks.

***Infused with Secondary Features of the Dauntless/Dissenting Pattern*** Dauntless individuals tend to flout tradition, dislike following routine, sometimes act impulsively and irresponsibly, and are inclined to elaborate on or shade the truth and skirt the law.

Indeed, even “before the start of his political career, Trump’s life . . . revolved around spectacle, and it is with the same state of mind that he ran his campaign. During his entire campaign, Trump always appeared to unapologetically stay true to himself, using it as an advantage to further his media reach. His overall behavior, radical assertions, and negative comments about his opponents . . .shocked the public, making him the center of attention exactly when he needed it” (Hella, 2021, p. 59).

The analysis of President Trump personality yields the observations that he is ambitious/self-serving, dominant/controlling, outgoing/gregarious, and infused with secondary features of the dauntless/dissenting pattern. No doubt these personality traits influence President Trump’s objective of becoming a dictator. However, the early-age socialization process also influences ethical values, that, in turn, help shape a person’s life objectives. President Trump’s ethical values are assessed next.

## ***Ethical Values***

There are many stakeholders in the political arena, and each expects to fulfill its objectives. Some of the objectives are universal, such as standard of living and quality of life, and some are conflicting with each other, such as whether, and how many, refugees should be allowed to enter the USA. When there is a conflict between stakeholders in objectives or in the policies of how to accomplish those objectives then a compromise is called for, one that should satisfy whom?

Several ethical approaches offer different views of how to balance conflicting economic and social objectives. They could be collapsed into ten main approaches:

***Self-Interest*** “Never take any action that is not in the long-term self-interests of yourself and the organization to which you belong” (e.g., Protagoras). There is no doubt President Trump tends to favor policies that enrich himself and his family. It started on the very first day of his presidency when he employed family members as his advisors, a situation that created conflict of interest. For example, Trump’s

daughter, Ivanka Trump, attended official state meeting with foreign dignitaries and used the opportunity to open a market access to China for her on-line products (Staff, 2022).

**Personal Virtue** “Never take any action that is not honest, open, and truthful, and which you would not be proud to see reported widely” (e.g., Plato; Aristotle). President Trump may falsely claim that he never regrets his actions. Yet, without taking responsibility to mistaken actions, and every president makes mistakes, President Trump changes the focus of his engagements, leaving the doubtful action in the shades, and ‘correcting’ it by taking another direction. Even before he was elected as president, he falsely claimed that Mexicans are “drug dealers, criminals, rapists.” Regardless of whether he believed or does not believe in his own statement, he did not repeat it, an indication of a change of course, with no apology.

**Religious Injunction** “Never take any action that is not kind, and that does not build a sense of all of us working together for a commonly accepted goal” (e.g., St. Augustine). Trump does not attend Church regularly, and there are no indications he is religious. In an interview he claimed that “Nobody has done more for Christianity or for evangelicals—or for religion itself—than I have, [doing] so many different things” (Khaled, 2021). This claim was made in reference to his efforts to weaken legislation of the US tax code, which bans nonprofits from supporting or opposing political candidates. The motivation behind his action was to allow non-for-profit organizations, such as churches, to donate money to his political campaigns.

**Government Requirements** “Never take any action that violates the law, for the law represents the minimal moral standards of our society” (e.g., Hobbes; Locke). President Trump tends to keep the law. He asks others to break the law for him, which on its own, is defined as criminal behavior. An example of breaking the law without admission is the case when a federal judge said that “Trump signed legal documents challenging the results of the 2020 election that included voter fraud claims he knew to be false” (Broadwater & Feuer, 2022). In his business deals Trump preferred to settle out of court than to admit guilt. An example is his \$25 million agreement to settle fraud claims arising from Trump University (Stempel, 2018).

**Utilitarian Benefits** “Never take any action that does not result in greater good than harm for the society of you are a part” (e.g., Bentham; Mill). It is difficult to make a judgment whether President Trump tried to balance all stakeholders’ expectations in his decisions and actions. Undoubtedly, even in extreme cases, such as erection of the Trump Wall on the Mexican border, there were American people who benefited. Farmers and others who live next to the border could enjoy some relief from the on-going need to deal with illegal immigrants. The construction companies that constructed the wall contributed to the US economy. The wall may have deterred some future immigrants from entering the USA illegally, therefore saving taxpayer money. More successfully or less successfully, President Trump is a patriot who saw the good of America (and himself) when he made his decisions.

**Universal Rules** Never take any action that you would not be willing to see others, faced with the same or a closely similar situation, also be encouraged to take” (e.g., Kant). President Trump, acts as if he above the law, and as a disruptor, sets new standards of behavior in domestic and global politics, thereby does not tend to conform to universal rules of ethics. “After news of the meeting, which offered clear evidence of, at the very least, a willingness to collude with Russia, the Trump defense on the Russia investigation shifted essentially from no collusion! to collusion isn’t illegal (Lizza, 2017).

**Individual Rights** “Never take any action that abridges the agreed upon rights of others” (e.g., Rousseau; Jefferson). Being raised as a privileged kid, who later managed to accumulate many treasures, it is unclear whether President Trump is at all aware of the existence of individuals, not alone individual rights. He spent his life detached from the world of poverty and misery, he deferred his military service so did not experience the American military diverse population, he was never concerned about his next meal, and he was never exposed to harms ways. The Center for American Progress (Schmitt, 2019) concluded that “the Trump administration’s policies are harming rights at home and abroad.”

**Economic Efficiency** “Always act to maximize profits subject to legal and market constraints and with full recognition of external costs” (e.g., Adam Smith; Milton Friedman). In his heart, President Trump is a businessman. He did not serve in office before assuming his presidency, and therefore did not benefit from political experience. It seems that President Trump tried his best in applying lessons he had learned in the real estate business to the political arena. He considered disassembling European NATO coalition because the member countries did not pay the 2% of their GDP, a share they committed to pay to defend Europe (Economist, 2019).

**Distributive Justice** “Never take any action in which the weakest among us are harmed in some way” (e.g., Rawls). There is no better example for Trumps lack of concern for the society’s weakest, then his administration actions to separate between illegal immigrant families and their children. In October 2021, up to 2100 children who were split up from their families near the US–Mexico border during the Trump administration may still be separated from their parents, according to a Department of Homeland Security ([www.cbsnews.com](http://www.cbsnews.com)). Based on the International Court’s definition, deportations, kidnapping and forced disappearances, unjust imprisonment and racial discrimination are considered crimes against humanity. The forceful separation of Hispanic and other parents and their children on the US–Mexico border fulfills the qualifications needed to be considered crimes against humanity.

**Contributing Liberty** “Never take any action that will interfere with the rights of others for self-development and self-fulfillment” (e.g., Nozick). President Trump’s disregard to White supremacists’ attacks on demonstrators in Charlottesville (Perry, 2018), and his upside down holding a copy of the Bible, while police force broke the back of demonstrators at Lafayette Square and next to the White House (Frazier, 2020), are good examples of his utter disregard to people’s liberty.



In conclusion, President Trump's ethical approach is assumed to be based on three principles: self-serving and economic efficiency and, to some extent, utilitarian benefits. It is unclear though how the President calculate utilitarian benefits. On August 11–12, 2017, white supremacists marched on Charlottesville, Virginia, carrying Confederate battle flags, deployed swastikas, other Nazi symbols, Ku Klux Klan paraphernalia, various white nationalist banners, and tiki torches in a visual display suggestive of the normalization of white supremacy in contemporary American politics. In a violent and tragic culmination of the event, the rally ended when Heather Heyer, age 32, was killed by a white supremacist who rammed his car into a crowd of peaceful protestors. In a press conference the President referred to both the supremacists and the demonstrators and said that “you also had people that were very fine people, on both sides” (Perry, 2018). This is a President Trump ‘utilitarian approach’ that comes to satisfy as many stakeholders as possible.

Assuming that President Trump's grand objective is of becoming a dictator, and assuming this objective is the result of his personality traits and ethical values, we pursue the development of a model that tries to answer the main question – who are you, President Trump? – by delineating how he is trying to achieve his objective. More precisely, the next sections describe President Trump's interpersonal relations, followed by his decision-making, communication, and negotiation styles.

## Interpersonal Relations

President Trump's interpersonal relations (Millon, 2011) are influenced by his personality traits of being highly ambitious (Kranish & Fisher, 2016), aggressive (Womick et al., 2019), outgoing (Immelman & Griebie, 2020), and dauntless (Wagner et al., 2022). These traits and their derivatives are described next.

***Ambitious*** The three self-perpetuating processes of highly ambitious personalities (Millon, 2011) are illusion of competence, lack of self-control, and social alienation.

***Illusion of Competence*** Ambitious personalities believe in their own superiority and consequently spend little time actively obtaining commensurate achievements. These individuals may recognize they lack definitive skills, which further immobilizes them as they strive to maintain their superior self-image. Maintaining a façade over a long period of time proves difficult and these individuals can become depressed or irritable (Millon, 2011, p. 414).

***Lack of Self-Control*** Highly ambitious individuals seem to scorn reality and thus lack common self-control. Narcissists, according to Millon, “are neither disposed to stick to objective facts nor to restrict their actions within the boundaries of social custom or cooperative living” (Millon, 2011, p. 415). Highly ambitious individuals' actions can quickly border on social deviance as they continue to experience false beliefs. Outside parties may become critical of the highly ambitious individual's



actions which leads to the individual retreating deeper into their construction of reality (Griebie, 2021).

***Social Alienation*** Highly ambitious personalities believe other people are less intelligent and untrustworthy, so when an outside source questions their intentions these individuals see no reason to consider the other person's opinions. Unable to understand reciprocity, these individuals struggle to maintain normal social relationships, which leads to further agitation and subsequently increased fantasizing (Griebie, 2021). "Thus, rather than question the correctness of their own beliefs, they assume that the views of others are at fault. Hence, the more disagreement they have with others, the more convinced they are of their own superiority and the more isolated and alienated they are likely to become" (Millon, 2011, p. 415).

### ***Aggressive***

The three self-perpetuating processes of highly aggressive personalities (Millon, 2011) are perceptual and cognitive distortions, demeaning of affection and cooperative behavior, and creating realistic antagonisms.

***Perceptual and Cognitive Distortions*** Highly dominant personalities have the persistent expectation that others will be devious or hostile, leading them repeatedly to distort others' incidental remarks or actions as signifying malicious intent. Minor slights may be magnified in their own mind as major insults. They may perceive threat where little or none exists and have difficulty changing their outlook and attitudes (Millon, 1986, p. 653). As a result, advisers may be reluctant to express their unvarnished opinion for fear of retaliation.

***Demeaning of Affection and Cooperative Behavior*** Highly dominant personalities devalue sentimentality, tendermindedness, and cooperativeness. They are "hard-headed realists" who tend to lack sympathy for the weak and "are often contemptuous of those who express compassion and concern for the underdog." By restraining positive feelings and repudiating cooperative behaviors, "these personalities provoke others to withdraw from them" (Millon, 1986, pp. 653–654).

***Creating Realistic Antagonisms*** Highly dominant personalities "evoke counter-hostility, not only as an incidental consequence of their behaviors and attitudes but because they intentionally provoke others into conflict." They "enjoy tangling with others to prove their strength and test their competencies and powers," which may prompt intense animosity in others (Millon, 1986, p. 654).

## ***Outgoing***

A politician's leadership style in office can be anticipated by examining the self-perpetuating process of highly outgoing personalities as outlined by Millon (2011), namely, external preoccupations, massive repression, and superficial social relationships.

***External Preoccupations*** Highly outgoing personalities show little capacity for internal reflection. They seem to “show little integration and few well-examined reflective processes that intervene between perception and action; behaviors are emitted before they have been connected and organized by the operation of memory and thought” (Millon, 2011, p. 367). Preoccupation with external events further solidifies the highly outgoing personality's dependence upon others as they form few solidified personal ideals.

***Massive Repression*** One consequence of “hyper-alertness to external stimuli” is the tendency of highly ambitious personalities to suppress their internal thoughts and emotions (Millon, 2011, p. 368). This tendency can exacerbate these individuals' co-dependency as they lack the ability to adequately learn from their mistakes and feel the full extent of their emotions.

***Superficial Social Relationships*** A second consequence of the highly outgoing personality's tendency to focus on external events is the occurrence of unsatisfying and short-lived relationships. Highly outgoing individuals tend to become easily bored. This trait in concert with their desire for acceptance and outside stimulation causes them to frequently seek out new friendships (Griebie, 2021). Highly outgoing individuals are adept at making friends and cultivating connections yet if they find themselves between relationships they may “engage in a frantic search for stimulation and approval or become dejected and forlorn” (Millon, 2011, p. 368).

## ***Dauntless***

A politician's leadership style in office can be anticipated by examining the three self-perpetuating processes of highly dauntless personalities as outlined by Millon (2011), namely, distrustful anticipations, vindictive interpersonal behavior, and weak intrapsychic controls.

***Distrustful Anticipations*** Highly dauntless personalities have persistent expectations of frustration and hostility. These personalities are deeply suspicious and actively seek to protect themselves from the cruelty and exploitation of others even when nothing suggests impending manipulation. According to Millon, “Unfortunately, these self-protective attitudes set into motion a vicious circle of suspiciousness and distrust, provoking others to react in a similarly cool and rejecting fashion” (Millon, 2011, 469).

***Vindictive Interpersonal Behavior*** Highly dauntless personalities derive pleasure from the mistreatment and misfortune of others. Convinced of their own mistreatment, these individuals seek to exploit and dominate others. They live in an isolated world with no genuine loyalty and consistently seek to intimate others though constant terrorization wins them few close friends and often mirrors back to these individuals' feelings of resentment and an environment of rejection (Millon, 2011, p. 469).

***Weak Intrapsychic Controls*** Highly dauntless personalities have difficulty controlling or justifying their threatening behavior: "As feelings surge forth, they are vented more or less directly; thus, we see the low tolerance, the impulsive rashness, the susceptibility to temptation, and the acting out of emotions so characteristic of this pattern" (Millon, 2011, p. 469). These individuals internally justify their deviant behavior by creating rationalizations centered on the values of toughness and justice. They proceed through life expecting cruelty and rejection and thus are prone to inflating even the most innocent remarks from others as having hostile intent (Griebie, 2021).

A study found that within the context of the 2016 US Primaries, voters were swayed by candidates' confidence, regardless of candidate competence (Ronay et al., 2019). A social lab experiment found that narcissists endorse policies and procedures that are associated with cultures with less collaboration and integrity, and that followers follow the culture in determining their own level of collaboration and integrity, suggesting that narcissistic leaders' behavior is amplified through culture (O'Reilly III et al., 2021). As earlier suggested, behavior exemplified by the president is amplified by his supporters: Republicans perceived three transgressive behaviors (sharing false information, nepotism, and abuse of power) as less unethical when committed by Donald Trump than when the same behaviors are viewed in isolation (Davies et al., 2022). In a study that compared President Trump's traits with those of 284 world leaders (Thiers & Wehner, 2022), the President was found to score significantly higher on Self-Confidence and Distrust and significantly lower on Task-Orientation.

Being highly ambitious, aggressive, outgoing, and dauntless, and exercising distribution of false information, applying nepotism, and abusing of power, signify autocratic leaders, and serve President Trump well in his efforts to become a dictator. The most significant characteristic of President Trump's leadership style is his spin mastership, or the tendency to spin true and false information as part of his communication behavior, the topic of the next section.

## Communication Style

Ahmadian et al. (2017) transcribed 27 speech segments and applied Pennebaker's Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count to identify four major communication tactics successfully employed by President Trump: (a) grandiosity, (b) use of first-person

pronouns, (c) great pitch dynamics, and (d) informal communication (including Twitter usage). President Trump's speeches were characterized by more positive emotional tones and less socially oriented words, and less words related to virtue, honesty, and achievement. Those characteristics led researchers to conclude that in his speeches, President Trump reflected coercive power (Körner et al., 2022). Similarly, President Trump uses less diverse vocabulary and simpler sentences. In campaign speeches, nonetheless, along with the change of circumstances, he sometimes employed a richer vocabulary and well-edited sentences. He includes relatively more central themes in his campaign speeches, with concentration on political themes, that may meet key interests of a large proportion of electorates (Wang & Liu, 2018).

President Trump utilizes user-generated content as sources of his tweets, half of his tweets are retweets of and replies to citizens, and their most popular content is others' endorsements or supportive quotes. While Trump actively retweets citizen supporters' tweets, 10.5% of his tweets are uncivil (Lee & Lim, 2016). Another study identified four general patterns of stylistic variation, which were interpreted as representing the degree of conversational, campaigning, engaged, and advisory discourses. The style of tweets shifts systematically depending on the communicative goals of President Trump and his team (Clarke & Grieve, 2019).

President Trump's communication style is simplistic (Lipman, 2018), and is based on four principles: First, *say exactly what you want to without regard for the truth*. The president delivers his desired narrative without letting the facts get in the way. Second, *distill it to a short, media-friendly sound bite*. The president is a brilliant marketer and a master media manager (or manipulator), always acutely conscious of the concise "core message." The president repeats the message often and eventually people believe it. Third, *recognize the sound bite will be amplified exponentially by 'friendly' media*. A sharp message is ready-made for massive amplification via Trump-friendly media and social media. Fourth, *never admit fault*. The President never looks back and never apologizes. He just moves forward into the next news cycle and forcefully.

President Trump's speeches are enhanced by the physical context of the events, the spatial infrastructure and organization of the buildings where the speeches are held, and the stage decoration and backdrop. Examples are the staircase of the Trump Tower in Manhattan, the colorful Being 676 airplane that was used as the backdrop for many of the President's election campaigns, and the symbolic Mount Rushmore, where President Trump has added his live portrait to the already existing US presidents carved-in-a-rock portraits. They reflect leadership, opulence, strength, and security, returning themes in his speeches.

Based on his own testimony, President Trump refuses to read long documents, even highly classified reports that are necessary for the execution of his job (Graham, 2018). He uses limited English vocabulary and, as far as we know, he does not command any foreign language (Stavans, 2017). He misreads words and phrases in his tele prompted speeches, and he is unable to cite one book he has ever read (Graham, 2018). In the absence of reading and learning, Trump has become

dependent on others, whose intellectual contributions he is unable to assess, to make life and death global decisions.

In summary, “One strong common factor of all of Trump’s speeches seems to be their extreme disorganization. His ideas appear to be mixed up, he sometimes doesn’t finish sentences, and he often comes back to previous ideas or subjects without any logical links” (Hella, 2021, p. 62). “He tends to put on issues such as job and homeland security, exterior threats and government responsibility, his goal could be to initiate a climate of fear, anger, and hatred toward whatever entity his supporters hold responsible for such issues. Surprisingly, however, what he would do to fix such issues or to at least improve the situation is barely discussed in his speeches” (p. 71). Yet President Trump’s communication style is extremely effective, a great quality for a spin dictator. In addition to the spin communication behavior President Trump employs to enhance his objective of becoming a dictator, he also uses a unique decision-making style, to which we refer to as a “Boxer Style.” The characteristics of this style are presented next.

## Decision-Making Style

One classification (Rowe & Mason, 1987) offers four decision-making styles:

*Analytical style* decision-making describes people who feel comfortable with ambiguity but are motivated to find the best or most comprehensive solution. People who use this style are comfortable with ambiguity and enjoy considering all options before deciding. They think of creative solutions and are willing to give most prospects a chance. They only move forward once they are as close to being certain as possible that that choice is best. President Trump’s refusal to read reports (Graham, 2018) does not indicate an analytical style of decision-making.

*Conceptual style* decision-making describes people who enjoy the ambiguity of open-ended options and are motivated to make an impact on the world. People who use this style have a desire to come up with holistic solutions. They feel comfortable in ambiguous situations, think big, and feel hopeful that the ideas will work out. President Trump does not tolerate ambiguity and open-ended options. He was forged by military training at an early age, and military people tend to see situations in black and white colors: Black means that I lose, and white means that I win. Nor analytical nor conceptual styles of decision-making would have urged President Trump to seek to solve the remanence of the Korean War by symbolically stepping over the DMZ line or by bragging about having love relationships with a Korean dictator (Baker & Crowley, 2019).

*Behavioral style* decision-making describes people who prefer structure and stability and are motivated to maintain harmony. People who use this style see relationships as their most important asset. They are likely to put the needs and opinions of family, friends, and colleagues above their own. They use the information they gather to come up with solutions that they believe others will respond well to. President Trump is a disruptive president (Prasad, 2021). He tends to break down

systems, from US government offices to international coalitions. One of the first significant move or President Trump was to abandon President Obama's Trans-Pacific Partnership agreement (Baker, 2017), and later, on the P + 1 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action about Iran's nuclear program (Lander, 2018). These actions do not characterize a person who is motivated to maintain harmony.

*Directive style* decision-making describes people who prefer structure and are motivated by the results their decisions will bring them. They are likely to make decisions quickly and move forward decidedly. They do not dwell on possibility and prefer to act. One of the dominant strengths of a person who applies this style is superb communication skills. This is President Trump's style. We refer to it as a "boxer," rather "Chess-player's" style. Boxers cannot afford the time to think – they must use their instincts to win the fight. Chess players can hardly become good boxers because they contemplate their moves. Stopping to think, and even if only for a second or two, means that your opponent gains one or 2 s to hit you hard. So, boxers train for months and years to become the best responders. With every punch they hit their rivals, they receive one back. They also train to block their opponent's attacks while trying to penetrate the opponent's defense. Through excruciating training, they develop the body's capacity to receive hit after hit without losing the match.

Donald Trump treats international politics as a boxing match. He employs his instincts to hit back his rivals as hard as possible, while trying to put in place some defense mechanisms to protect himself against the rivals' retaliation. He deployed high tariffs on China's export to the USA and China retaliated by imposing similar tariffs on US goods and services sold in China. Trump then selected what he believed were soft targets in China's economy to impose more taxes and, of course, China retaliated. Recently, President Trump has announced his next planned counterpunch: eliminating China's most favored nation (MFN) trade status and banning federal contracts for companies that outsource to China (Singman, 2023). This directive decision-making style may explain President Trump's negotiation style, presented next.

## **Negotiation Behavior**

Of the five available negotiation strategies, namely, avoidance, accommodation, collaboration, compromise, and competition (Lewicki et al., 2010), it seems that President Trump aims to play a win-lose game in every process of negotiation by presenting a high level of competitive behavior. When the strategy does not yield the expected results, he may leave it to his executives to reach a compromise. President Trump implements this distributive strategy by employing highball negotiation tactics, some of which are ethically questionable yet proven successful in some circumstances. Mnookin et al. (2000) identified ten hardball tactics:

***Extreme Demands are Followed up by Small, Slow Concessions*** This is a common hard-bargaining tactic in China, a country in which culture is oriented toward a long-time perspective (Hofstede & Minkov, 2010), the opposite of the USA, where ‘time is money.’ President Trump excellent strategy of extreme demand is not followed by slow-paced concessions because the President does not possess the patience needed to employ this tactic successfully. On the receiving side, Kochan (2019), who analyzed President Trump’s negotiation style in the case of the air-conditioned manufacturer Carrier, concluded that Trump’s negotiating style included settling for small initial concessions, if they were accompanied by “sufficient displays of deference that feed his ego.”

***Commitment Tactics*** You claim that your hands are tied because of other commitments or that you have only limited discretion to negotiate. Each country develops sets of political and economic agreements with various countries, and a commitment to one country may impair or limit a commitment to another country. This obstacle does not seem to stop President Trump from negating on agreements signed during his predecessors’ terms in office. Examples, such as negating on the Iran deal, have been presented in this essay. On the offensive side, in his book, *The Art of the Deal* (Trump & Schwartz, 1987), President Trump claims “I never get too attached to one deal or one approach...I keep a lot of balls in the air, because most deals fall out, no matter how promising they seem at first.” In the absence of commitment, President Trump never admits his hands are tied.

***Take-It-or-Leave-It*** An ultimatum may be used in the real estate business, but it is hardly used in international or domestic politics. Since there is no avenue for agreement after a rejected ultimatum, the only option left is the use of power, beginning with financial pressure in the way of unfavorable agreements and sanctions and ending in a threat of military action. President Donald Trump has sent a letter to the head of the World Health Organization threatening to pull US funding permanently over Covid-19 if there are no “substantive improvements” within a 30-day period (BBC News, 2020). Trump walkout of his predecessors’ agreements about the Trans-Pacific Partnership agreement (Baker, 2017), and on the P + 1 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action about Iran’s nuclear program (Lander, 2018).

***Inviting Unreciprocated Offers*** You push your counterpart to make an additional concession even before you have made a counteroffer. Experienced negotiators in both the international and the domestic arenas identify such a tactics easily and call it out for what it is – a demand. The powerful USA administrations have been using this hardball tactic internationally, and foreign nations caved in because of lack in alternatives. Many other countries do not possess the power to exercise this tactic against the USA. President Trump uses a variation of this tactics when he claims that his counterparts are treating him unfairly. For example, prior to his first debate with Clinton, Trump suggested that moderator Lester Holt might be a Democrat and claimed future moderator Anderson Cooper treats him “very unfairly at CNN” (Jackson, 2016).

***Trying to Make the Opponent Flinch*** Sometimes you may find that your opponent keeps making greater and greater demands, waiting for you to reach your breaking point and concede. President Trump has been using this strategy in trying to enforce NATO member countries to pay their agreed upon share of their military defense expenses. Similarly, Both President Trump administration and the current administration have been using this negotiation tactic against China.

***Personal Insults and Feather Ruffling*** Personal attacks can feed on your insecurities and make you vulnerable. This is a favorite President Trump tactic used both domestically and internationally.

***Bluffing, Puffing, and Lying*** Exaggerating and misrepresenting facts can throw you off guard. This is another President Trump's favorite.

***Threats and Warnings*** President Trump is a coercive negotiator. After assessing the opposing side, he uses leverage to threaten his counterparts' weaknesses, while using bravado to play up the advantages of reaching an agreement on his terms (Kogan, 2019). He threatened legal action, including to have Hillary Clinton jailed if he was elected. Being emotional, experiencing irritation, and blowing up, President Trump may act against the recommendations of research findings that a "strategy need not rely on communicating aggressive emotions to be effective; communicating a colder message along with the associated perception of a greater sense of confidence and control may be bludgeon enough" (Sinaceur et al., 2011, p. 1029).

***Belittling Your Alternatives*** The other party might try to make you cave in by belittling your alternatives. There is no knowledge of President Trump using this tactic in his negotiations with US administration officials or international leaders.

***Good Cop, Bad Cop*** When facing off with a two-negotiator team, you may find that one person is reasonable and the other is tough. Usually, the second in command, say the Minister responsible for foreign affairs plays the 'bad' cop. Her act is followed by the President who plays the 'good' cop. The bad cop makes unrealistic demands and then the good cop makes compromises. President Trump is not a collaborator but rather a soloist who reserves all the credit to himself. Kapoutsis and Volkema (2019) suggest that he plays both roles; first, he belittles an opponent and then praises him.

President Trump arrived at the political arena from the real estate industry, where negotiation is central to purchasing property. Each property is unique, and there are many owners and buyers against whom the dealer negotiates. Once the deal is struck, the process is over. Thus, the process is usually a one-time and one object event.

International economic and political negotiations involve many facets and are conducted with the same countries again and again. The tactic of 'extreme demands,' which is sometimes called 'a high ball tactic,' has been proven by academic literature to yield positive results when it is used in a one-time negotiation (Benton et al., 1972). However, tactics that may work in a one-time negotiation are not necessarily successful in a multi-cases negotiation process. While Americans may consider the



tactics ethically questionable, Chinese, Koreans, and other Far Eastern nationalities do not hesitate to employ this tactic (Kirkbride et al., 1991).

President Trump, who has been trained in the real estate business, has adopted this tactic in the complex international economic and political spheres. First, he cancels an agreement altogether, such as was the case in NAFTA, the TPP and the Iranian Nuclear deal, thereby, re-negotiating the deal from a zero point, erasing its history. Then he waits for his counterparts to come up with an offer that must be favorable to the USA. A new negotiation process starts with, apparently, an advantage to the USA. By that time President Trump is busy repeating the same style in another international negotiation case. He loses interest in the first deal and over time his delegates, who negotiate the deal in good faith, come with some results that are positive for both sides. Iranians/ Chinese/ Koreans do not care about stepping on the brink of a political and economic crisis, or even a military conflict. They know that the USA does not wish to get involved in a large-scale military conflict. They employ their own assets, such as proxies, nuclear potential, and alternative markets, in the negotiation process, and take their time. Asians are known for their ability to play on time. Signing a deal may take a month, a year, or even over a decade, such as was the case with the negotiation about stretching a gas pipeline from Russia to China (Koch-Weser & Murray, 2014). No nation would sign a contract that does not carry some benefits for that nation. Chinese President Xi Jinping has advised President Trump “One who tries to blow out other’s oil lamp will get his beard on fire.” Max Baucus, former US ambassador to China, rightly said: “Those who think the US has leverage do not fully understand China. China thinks long-term.” China is a one-party dictatorship after all, and the ruling party can do as they please for quite some time (Nasher, 2019). A hardball tactic that is advantageous in the real estate market may have limited efficacy in the global arena.

## Conclusion

This study describes President Trump’s grand objective of becoming a dictator, its origins in his personality and ethical values, and the patterns of leadership behaviors, such as interpersonal relations, communication style, decision-making style, and negotiation style, the President has been employing to accomplish this objective.

President Trump’s started his efforts to become a dictator by being elected to serve as a president of the USA, a democratic country. He has been using communication spins to disrupt the current system and to establish the new desirable autocratic political and social systems. These spins are mostly directed at his followers and potential voters and are accompanied by efforts to amend the legal system to meet his objectives, starting by staffing the Supreme Court with his disciples. This is how he has earned the title of a Spin Autocrat. Should he be successful in his efforts, he would certainly follow other autocratic world leaders, to become the Spin Dictator.

President Trump's possesses the qualifications required to become a Spin Dictator. He is ambitious and self-serving; he is dominant, bordering on being aggressive; he is outgoing and impulsive; and he is infused with secondary features of the dauntless and dissenting pattern. His ethical values match his personality traits and consist of self-serving economic principles, with a touch of utilitarianism (satisfying as many stakeholders as possible) that comes to serve his needs. President Trump developed leadership behaviors to bridge between his personality traits and ethical values and his grand plan to become a dictator. He forces his illusioned competence on his subordinates while ignoring their professional advice. As he lacks self-control and emotionally erupts to humiliate his subordinates, and as a socially alienated person, he does not show concern for others.

Because of his perceptual and cognitive distortions, he sees others as devious or hostile, and their reactions as insults. As a result, his advisers may be reluctant to express their unvarnished opinion. He restrains positive feelings and repudiates cooperative behaviors, creating antagonisms and provoking others to withdraw from him. He possesses little capacity for internal reflection, therefore dependent upon others to solidify personal ideals. He suppresses his internal thoughts and emotions and does not learn from mistakes, and develops superficial social relationships and becomes easily bored.

President Trump's decision-making is directive, uninhibited, and reflexive. This decision-making style, interwoven with exaggerated self-confidence and his strong egocentrism, self-preservation, and self-enrichment, result in a distributive negotiation style, characterized by a high level of deployment of hardball tactics. Despite this elaborative effort to understand President Trump's behavior, he remains an enigma. Only access to his very personal data and time perspective have the potential to reveal the real identity of the Forty Fifth President of the USA.

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# Odds and Ends: The Importance of the Political and the Social in Explaining Mortality and Contingency in the Era of Trump



Florette Cohen

**Abstract** It has been almost three years since the culmination of Donald Trump’s tumultuous presidency and we as a nation are still in pain. Despite the impeachments and indictments millions continuously support President Trump’s claim that the 2020 election was stolen and defend the justifiability of the January 6th storming of the Capitol. To that end, it is not too surprising that several recent polls show Trump and Biden virtually tied in a 2024 rematch. Social psychological research suggests that Trump’s support may be accounted for because of people’s inclination to embrace charismatic politicians in times of historical upheaval to mitigate existential terror. Consistent with this view, research conducted over the past 20 years has demonstrated that reminders of death increased support for a charismatic leader and influenced voter preferences on public policy and foreign affairs. This chapter critically reviews a line of research portraying Donald Trump as a charismatic leader. Research revealed that death reminders increased support for Donald Trump before the 2016 election, and again before 2020 presidential election. These results are consistent with previous research findings that people manage potentially paralyzing terror by identifying with leaders who foster a sense of being a valued part of a righteous and powerful tribe or nation.

**Keywords** Mortality salience · Social support · Social issues · Terror management theory · Politics · Donald Trump · USA · COVID

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Many thanks to the anonymous reviewers for their comments and to Dr. Adebawale Akande for his professorial editorial assistance. Portions of this chapter are presented in “Death: The Trump Card?,” originally published in *Why Irrational Politics Appeals: Understanding the Allure of Trump* (M. Fitzduff, ed., 2017).

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## Introduction

*It is [fear] that makes people so willing to follow brash, strong-looking demagogues with tight jaws and loud voices: those who focus their measured words and their sharpened eyes in the intensity of hate, and so seem most capable of cleansing the world of the vague, the weak, the uncertain, the evil. Ah, to give oneself over to their direction – what calm, what relief.—(Becker, 1971, p. 161)*

*Dictatorship naturally arises out of democracy, and the most aggravated form of tyranny and slavery out of the most extreme liberty.—(Plato)*

It has been almost 3 years since the culmination of Donald Trump's tumultuous presidency and we as a nation are still in pain. Despite riots, civil unrest, criminal charges, and legal battles, millions are still supporting President Trump's claim that the 2020 election was stolen and defending the justifiability of the January sixth storming of the Capitol (Montanaro, December 20, 2022). Worse yet a *USA Today* poll taken in July shows Trump and Biden virtually tied ([USAToday.com](https://www.usatoday.com)) in a 2024 rematch. What could psychologically account for a twice-impeached president having unprecedented support for another presidential election run? To his detractors, Mr. Trump is a vulgar, sadistic, vindictive, ego-maniacal, racist, misogynistic, xenophobic candidate who makes no pretense of coherence, consistency, or veracity – and is thereby unfit for public office (Barry, 2017; Duncan, 2017; Fuchs, 2017; Martinez, 2017; Procknow, 2017). To his supporters, Mr. Trump is a savvy, deal-making, bold, and heroic change agent who is un-beholden to special interests and unrestrained by political correctness.

Political analysts, commentators, and social scientists have presented a variety of cogent economic, sociological, and psychological accounts of Mr. Trump's political ascent. However, such explanations are incomplete without examining the role of unconscious death anxiety on human behavior in general and in forging a bond between charismatic leaders and their followers in particular. This chapter outlines an existential psychodynamic account of the allure of Donald Trump based on terror management theory (TMT; Greenberg et al., 1986; Solomon et al., 1991, 2015). An existential psychodynamic account of the allure of Donald Trump based on terror management theory is provided demonstrating that support for charismatic leaders, including Mr. Trump, is driven by death anxiety, and argues that these findings have portentous implications for democracy, regardless of one's political predilections.

## Terror Management Theory

TMT is derived from cultural anthropologist Ernest Becker (1971, 1973, 1975) efforts to explain the motivational underpinnings of human behavior. The theory starts with the assumption that although humans share with all forms of life a basic biological inclination toward self-preservation in the service of survival and reproduction, we are unique in our capacity for abstract and symbolic thought culminating

in the capacity for self-reflection (Deacon, 1997), mental time-travel (i.e., to ponder the past and anticipate the future; Varki & Brower, 2013), and to fabricate products of our imagination (e.g., helicopters and symphonies; Rank, 1978). These are all highly adaptive proficiencies; however, they also give rise to the terrifying realization that one's death is inescapable, can occur at any time for reasons that cannot always be foreseen or prevented, and that people are ultimately no more consequential or enduring than cucumbers or caterpillars.

Terror management theory posits that humans "manage" the potentially debilitating terror produced by the awareness of death (which originates in children as young as age 2 and often occurs in the absence of physical danger) through a dual-process theory of proximal and distal defense, which provides for two distinct defensive systems, one that deals with conscious problems of death and a second dealing with unconscious aspects of the problem of death (Pyszczynski et al., 1999). Conscious thoughts of death are defended against with proximal defenses. This process entails an active suppression of death-related thoughts or cognitive rationalizations that push the problem of death into the distant future. Conversely, highly accessible unconscious thoughts of death are defended against distal defenses, which defend against death by embracing *cultural worldviews*: humanly constructed beliefs about reality shared by people in groups that provide a sense that one is a person of *value* in a world of *meaning*.

Cultural worldviews provide meaning by offering an account of the origin of the universe (i.e., creation myths), prescriptions for appropriate conduct, and promises of literal and/or symbolic immortality to those who adhere to cultural edicts. Literal immortality entails persisting in perpetuity in some form, e.g., souls, heavens, reincarnations, afterlives, and ancestral stomping grounds central to most of the world's religions (Solomon et al., 2015). Symbolic immortality (Lifton, 1979) is a sense that a vestige of oneself will endure after one is gone, e.g., by having children, amassing prodigious fortunes, producing great works of art or science, or being part of a great tribe or nation. In addition to affording a sense that life has meaning, cultural worldviews enable individuals to perceive themselves as persons of value by meeting or exceeding standards associated with various social roles embedded in the culture, e.g., saving lives for a nurse, scoring goals for a soccer player, and making money for a hedge fund manager. *Self-esteem* results from the belief that one is a valuable member of a meaningful universe; and TMT posits that a primary function of cultural worldviews and self-esteem is to mitigate anxiety in general and about death in particular. People are, accordingly, highly motivated to maintain faith in their cultural worldviews and confidence in their self-worth; moreover, they respond defensively when their sense of meaning and/or value is undermined.

The majority of support for TMT (Pyszczynski et al., 2015; Pyszczynski et al., 2021) focuses on distal defenses which include research on the effects of self-esteem on anxiety, the effects of death reminders on faith in one's worldview and the pursuit of self-esteem, and the effects of threats to one's cultural worldview or self-esteem on the how readily death-related thoughts come to mind. Momentarily heightened, or dispositionally high, self-esteem reduces anxiety and physiological arousal in response to threat (e.g., watching gory death images or anticipating electrical shocks;



see Pyszczynski et al., 2004, for a review of this work). To investigate the effect of death reminders (mortality salience; MS), TMT researchers make mortality salient by having people write about death, view graphic depictions of death, be interviewed in front of a funeral parlor, or be subliminally exposed to the word “dead” or “death.” Reminders of death intensify cultural worldview defense and self-esteem striving. For example, Greenberg et al. (1990) found that following MS, Christian participants had more favorable reactions to fellow Christians and less favorable reactions to Jewish targets; Ben-Ari et al. (1999) found that Israeli soldiers who derived self-esteem from their driving prowess drove faster and more recklessly in a car simulator in response to an MS induction (see Burke et al., 2010, for a meta-analysis of MS studies).

Research on the effects of threats to the cultural worldview or self-esteem on the accessibility of death-related thoughts provides additional converging support for the theory. For example, Christian fundamentalists confronted with logical inconsistencies in the bible (Friedman & Rholes, 2007) and Americans asked to ponder undesired aspects of themselves (Ogilvie et al., 2008) used more death-related words in a word stem completion task (e.g., C O F F \_ \_ = coffin rather than coffee; G R \_ V E = grave rather than grove; see Hayes et al., 2010, for a meta-analysis of DTA research). Heightened death thought accessibility (DTA) in turn instigates cultural worldview defense and self-esteem striving (Pyszczynski et al., 1999; Hayes et al., 2015; Cohen et al., 2017a, 2017b).

## The Allure of Charismatic Leaders

Empirical research on charismatic leadership (Cohen et al., 2004; Cohen et al., 2017b) is built on the foundation that charismatic leaders have a “special magnetic quality that fills followers with awe and adoration” (Lipman-Blumen, 1996, p. 30) and can become dangerous and unstoppable forces in certain conditions. In the early part of the twentieth century, millions of people supported Hitler’s grand plan to purify the human race. The atrocities performed by his followers are often attributed to the Fuhrer’s ability to enter the public; it was as though they were under his spell.

Max Weber (1925/1968) proposed that followers’ attachment to, and enthusiasm for, charismatic leaders is amplified by psychological distress; similarly, Fromm (1941) avowed that loyalty to charismatic leaders results from a defensive need to feel one is a part of a larger whole, and surrendering one’s freedom to a larger-than-life leader can serve as a source of self-worth and meaning in life. Consequently, Lipman-Blumen (1996) observed that “charismatic leaders have a way of appearing in times of great distress. They usually espouse a decidedly radical vision that promises to resolve the crisis . . . a period of great threat and uncertainty” (p. 30). Becker (1973), following Redl (1942), argued that when mainstream worldviews are not serving people’s needs for psychological security, concerns about mortality impel people to devote their psychological resources to following charismatic

leaders who bolster their self-worth by making them feel like they are valued parts of something great.

To test the hypothesis that when mortality is salient, voters would favor charismatic candidates who make them feel important, needed, and secure. Cohen et al. (2004) presented participants with statements representing three hypothetical gubernatorial candidates who varied in leadership style after an MS or aversive control induction. The charismatic candidate’s statement asserted each person’s importance in a great nation, avowing that “you are not just an ordinary citizen, you are part of a special state and a special nation and if we work together we can make a difference.” The other candidates’ statements emphasized completing tasks effectively (task-oriented) or the need for leaders and followers to work together and accept mutual responsibility (relationship-oriented). In the control condition, the task-oriented candidate was preferred by the majority of participants, with just 4% of the respondents voting for the charismatic candidate; however, 31% of the people who were reminded of death before voting chose the charismatic candidate (see Fig. 1).

Considering both TMT and analyses of the psychological allure of charismatic leaders, the study predicted and found that an MS induction increased favorable evaluations of, and votes for, a charismatic political candidate; additionally, the MS induction produced more negative evaluations of, and fewer votes for, a political candidate with a more egalitarian relationship-oriented leadership style. The fact that intimations of mortality enhanced preferences for a charismatic leader and diminished regard for a relationship-oriented leader who encouraged constituents to assume responsibility for political outcomes is certainly antithetical to the ideal that voting behavior should be the result of rational choice based on an informed

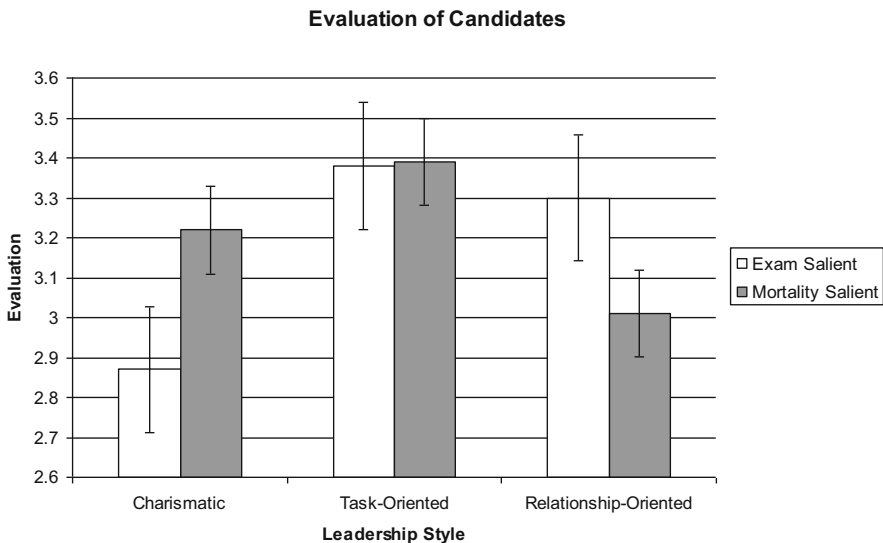


Fig. 1 Evaluation of candidates as a function of priming condition (Cohen et al., 2005)

understanding of the relevant issues. Free national elections are therefore no guarantee against totalitarian outcomes.

In accord with this view, Eric Hoffer, in *The True Believer* (Hoffer, 1951), reflecting on the rise of charismatic leaders in the twentieth century, including Hitler, Stalin, and Mussolini, proposed that the primary impetus for all populist movements is a critical mass of frustrated and disaffected citizens subject to grave economic and/or psychological insecurity “in desperate need of something . . . to live for” (p. 15). This produces unwavering dedication and loyalty to a leader who confidently espouses a cause that infuses their lives with a sense of “worth and meaning” (p. 15) and faith in the future via “identification; the process by which the individual ceases to be himself and becomes part of something eternal” (p. 63).

Charismatic leaders, Hoffer observed, need not be exceptionally intelligent, noble, or original. Rather, the primary qualifications “seem to be audacity and a joy in defiance; an iron will; a fanatical conviction that he is in possession of the one and only truth; faith in his destiny and luck; a capacity for passionate hatred; contempt for the present; a cunning estimate of human nature; a delight in symbols (spectacles and ceremonials). . . the arrogant gesture, the complete disregard of the opinion of others, the singlehanded defiance of the world. . . [and] some deliberate misrepresentation of facts” (p. 114).

Finally, Hoffer (as well as Becker, 1975) noted that mass movements require an external enemy to enable the charismatic leader to direct the rage and righteous indignation of the frustrated and disaffected followers toward a tangible scapegoat, an individual or group of individuals designated as an all-encompassing repository of evil that must be subdued or eradicated. To emerge as a charismatic leader one simply must appear at that perfect moment in time, that moment when the world seems to be coming to its end with the ideal message, the message that says “I’m here—follow me and you’ll live!” The emphases on existential fear over fact and emotion over reason have been the marks of charismatic leaders throughout history. At the turn of the century we watched George W. Bush, the most unlikely of leaders emerge as the ultimate charismatic leader.

## **Fatal Attraction: The American Presidency**

President George W. Bush’s political transformation after September 11, 2001, provides a relatively recent example of how intimations of mortality affect political preferences. The terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon on September 11, 2001, dramatically increased the salience of death-related concerns for most of the American people (Pyszczynski et al., 2003) as they witnessed potent images of death as the twin towers collapsed, the Pentagon blazed, and another plane headed toward the capital crashed in rural Pennsylvania. Beyond the literal carnage, three of the foremost symbols of Americans’ cultural worldview had been endangered or assaulted: the twin towers, the Pentagon, and the White House—representing U.S. economic, military, and governmental power, respectively. As

one might predict from the terror management perspective, the popularity of the then-American president, George W. Bush, increased dramatically in the days after the 9/11 terrorist attacks and remained relatively high well into 2004.

Interestingly prior to 9/11, President George W. Bush's popularity among the American people was tenuous at best, even among many of his Republican supporters. He had lost the popular vote in the 2000 election and won the presidency after a narrow victory in the Electoral College that was ultimately decided by the Supreme Court after a highly controversial near-draw in the critical electoral state of Florida.<sup>1</sup> A collection of national public opinion polls by PollingReport.com (2004; including Fox News, CNN/*USA Today*/Gallup Polls, and ABC News/*Washington Post* Polls) indicate that President Bush's approval ratings hovered around 50% in the weeks preceding the terrorist attacks. However, within a few weeks of declaring that the nation was at war and warning other nations to join the "crusade" to "rid the world of the evil-doers" or face, in Vice President Dick Cheney's words, the "full wrath of the United States" (Purdum, 2001), President Bush's approval ratings reached historically unprecedented heights among Democrats as well as Republicans (Jacobson, 2003). President Bush became a charismatic leader by declaring that God had chosen him to rid the world of evil at a historical moment when Americans were in the throes of existential terror. The country and the world at large watched while a seemingly uncharismatic, unpopular president transformed into exactly what was psychologically necessary at that moment in time—a leader who could shield and protect them from death's door by declaring himself a savior.

To demonstrate that President Bush's popularity and support for his policies in Iraq were influenced by intimations of mortality, Landau et al. (2004) presented participants with the following essay expressing a highly favorable opinion of the measures taken by President Bush about 9/11 and the Iraqi conflict:

It is essential that our citizens band together and support the President of the United States in his efforts to secure our great Nation against the dangers of terrorism. Personally, I endorse the actions of President Bush and the members of his administration who have taken bold action in Iraq. I appreciate our President's wisdom regarding the need to remove Saddam Hussein from power and his Homeland Security Policy is a source of great comfort to me. It annoys me when I hear other people complain that President Bush is using his war against terrorism as a cover for instituting policies that, in the long run, will be detrimental to this country. We need to stand behind our President and not be distracted by citizens who are less than patriotic. Ever since the attack on our country on September 11, 2001, Mr. Bush has been a source of strength and inspiration to us all. God bless him and God bless America.

Landau et al. (2004) predicted and found that while President Bush and his policies in Iraq were not highly regarded by participants in an aversive control condition, there was dramatically greater support for the President and his Iraq policies following an MS induction.

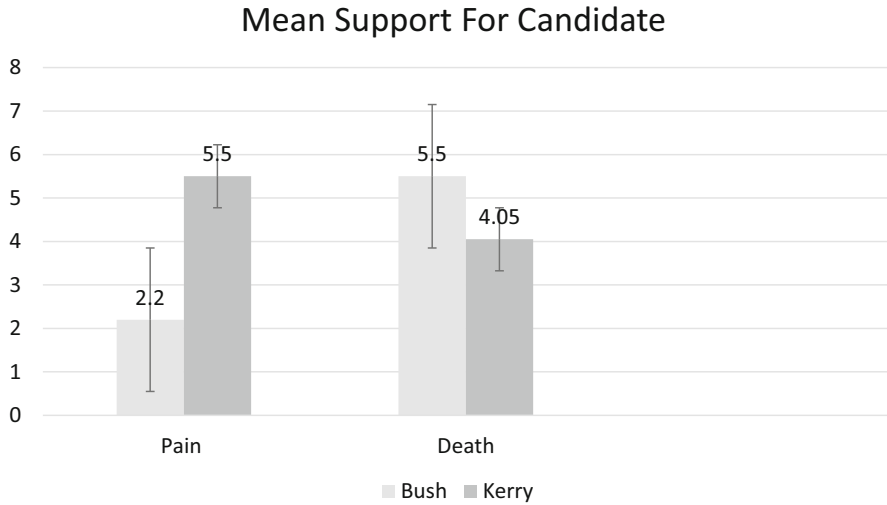
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<sup>1</sup>George W. Bush lost the popular vote to his rival Al Gore on November 8, 2000, and was not declared the winner of the presidential election until December 12, 2000, when the Supreme Court ended a contentious recount in Florida.

In a follow-up study, participants were exposed to subliminal terrorism primes (the numbers 911 or the letters WTC) or subliminal control primes (numbers and letters of equivalent familiarity), followed by a word stem completion task to assess the accessibility of implicit death-related thoughts. Results indicated greater levels of DTA for participants in the subliminal terrorism prime conditions; for Americans then, even subliminal reminders of the events of 9/11 aroused concerns about mortality. Accordingly, in a third study participants were randomly assigned to think about death (MS), the events of 9/11 (terrorism prime), or an aversive control topic before rating the President and his policies in Iraq; both MS and terrorism salience produced substantial increases in support for President Bush and his policies in Iraq.

Subsequent studies included a question directly comparing the effects of MS on the likelihood of voting for either President Bush or presidential candidate Kerry in the upcoming 2004 presidential election. Participants were instructed to “Think for a moment about President George W. Bush and then answer the following questions by circling the number that best approximates your feelings.” Four questions followed: “How favorably do you view George W. Bush?” “To what extent do you admire George W. Bush?” “To what extent do you have confidence in George W. Bush as a leader?” and “If you vote in the upcoming presidential election, how likely is it you will vote for George W. Bush?” In the evaluation of John Kerry’s condition, participants read identical instructions and responded to identical questions about presidential candidate (rather than President) John Kerry. The questions were followed by 9- point scales with endpoints marked *not at all favorably* and *extremely favorably* for the first question and *not at all* and *very much* for the remaining three questions. An examination of the interaction revealed that although John Kerry was significantly more highly regarded than George Bush in the intense pain control condition, George Bush’s evaluations increased in response to MS (across the midline of the scale), whereas John Kerry’s evaluations declined, such that Bush was evaluated significantly more positively than Kerry when mortality was salient (see Fig. 2).

Finally, in another study conducted five weeks before the 2004 presidential election, control participants reported they would be voting for Senator Kerry by a 4:1 margin; however, President Bush was favored by a 2.5:1 margin after an MS induction (Cohen et al., 2005). Cohen et al. (2005) argued that the 2004 presidential election was decisively influenced by subconscious defensive reactions to relentless reminders of the events of September 11, 2001, by Republican political strategists aided by the release of a video by Osama bin Laden the weekend before the election. Indeed, Senator Kerry came to the same conclusion when reflecting on the election on January 30, 2005, observing that “the attacks of Sept. 11 were the ‘central deciding thing’ in his contest with President Bush and that the release of an Osama bin Laden videotape the weekend before Election Day had effectively erased any hope he had of victory” (Nagourney, 2005).



**Fig. 2** Support for President George W. Bush and presidential candidate John Kerry as a function of priming condition (Landau et al., 2004)

## Death: The Trump Card

Support for presidential candidate Donald Trump increased in the aftermath of the 2015 terrorist attacks in Paris, France, and San Bernardino, California, similar to Americans' greater enthusiasm for President George W. Bush after the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on the Pentagon and World Trade Center. As previous research has shown turbulent political, economic, and psychological conditions are conducive to the rise of a charismatic leader who, in more prosperous economic and more stable historical circumstances, might be dismissed as unserious and incapable. Donald Trump entered the political arena at a time when his supporters—a majority of whom were white men without a college degree—were feeling economically and psychologically assaulted and abused (Thompson, 2016). They believed they were under attack by minorities and terrorists, and that political correctness divested them of their voice and their rights. Swelling diversity is perceived as a threat that increases discrimination against whites (Outten et al., 2012; Dover et al., 2016). The number of jobs available to them decreased as more and more occupations requires a college education. To his supporters, who were feeling increasingly unrepresented and underserved, Trump offered a way to “Make America Great Again” by emphasizing issues of importance to them. He appealed to those who felt that their country had nothing to offer them at a time when they were vulnerable to attacks by globalism, immigrants, and radical Islam, and provided them a position in a movement that afforded a sense of meaning, value, and hope.

As such the 2016 U.S. presidential election campaign occurred at a historical moment that is, from Weber's (1925/1968) perspective, ripe for the ascendance of a

charismatic leader, and Donald Trump has many characteristics of a (secular) charismatic leader, a powerful (i.e., rich) and self-assured public figure pledging to “Make America Great Again” and to keep U.S. citizens safe by stemming the tide of illegal immigrants from Mexico by building a wall at the border to keep out their “criminals” and “rapists,” “calling for a total and complete shutdown of Muslims entering the United States,” and bombing “the shit out of ISIS” (Engel, November 13, 2015).

Although Trump’s proposals were vague, riddled with contradictions, with no grounding in reality, they were based on anger and fear: fear of terrorism, fear of immigrants, fear of being taken advantage of economically, and fear of government inefficiency and indifference. While Trump never asked his supporters to contemplate their own deaths during rallies or interviews, subconscious fears of death did in fact increase support for Mr. Trump. Supporting research has shown that threatening cultural worldviews, cherished beliefs, or self-esteem increases death thought accessibility and that heightened DTA instigates cultural worldview defense and self-esteem striving. Moreover, in the aftermath of 9/11, research revealed that heightened DTA instigates the same defensive reactions that are provoked by a typical (i.e., explicit) mortality salience induction.

Recall that research conducted during the run-up to the 2004 presidential election, demonstrated that Americans had pervasive concerns about terrorism in the aftermath of the September 11 attack on the Pentagon and the World Trade Center. Pyszczynski et al. (2003) characterized 9/11 as a “real-life” mortality salience induction, conjuring up intimations of death, both literally (the thousands of people who perished on 9/11) and symbolically (via the threat to the American way of life posed by the destruction of the iconic symbols of U.S. military and economic power); and, Landau et al. (2004, Study 2) corroborated this notion empirically by demonstrating that subliminal exposure to the numbers “911” or the letters “WTC” increased American participants’ DTA. In a subsequent study (Landau et al., 2004, Study 3), participants were instructed to think about death (MS), the events of 9/11 (terrorism prime), or an aversive control topic before rating President Bush and his policies in Iraq; both mortality and 9/11 salience produced substantial increases in support for President Bush and his policies in Iraq. Additionally, Cohen et al. (2013) found that thinking of a mosque (a central icon of a threatening cultural worldview), rather than a direct attack on the American worldview per se, is sufficient to bring death thoughts closer to consciousness. The fact that thinking about a mosque specifically (as opposed to any religious institution such as a church or synagogue) being built in one’s neighborhood produced a comparable increase in DTA to thinking about one’s own eventual death shows that canonical symbols of opposing worldviews serve as an existential threat.

As part of a series of studies conducted before the 2016 presidential election people either wrote about their own deaths, immigrants moving into their neighborhood, or an aversive control condition (Cohen et al., 2017a). Again, thinking about immigrants moving into their neighborhoods increased DTA as much as thinking about their own deaths. Together, these studies suggest that Muslims (all of whom are assumed to be terrorists or aiding and abetting terrorists) and immigrants, who

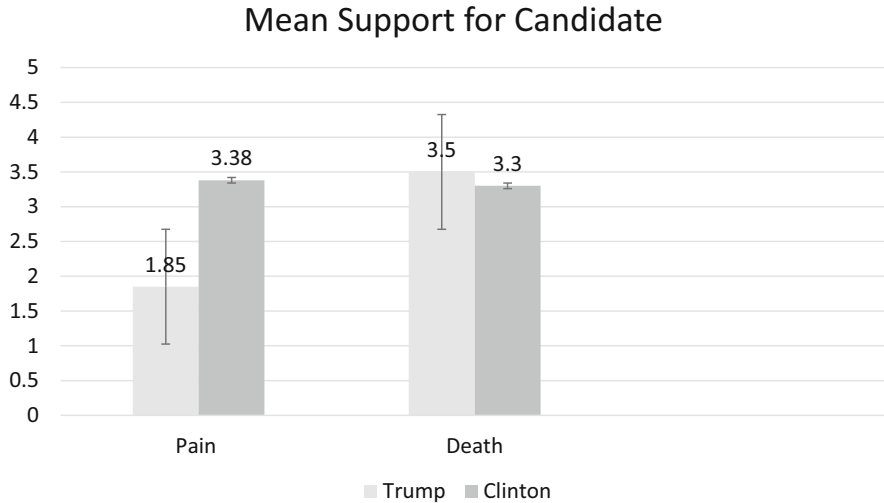
are often at the center of Mr. Trump's attacks, increase the accessibility of death thoughts and, at least subconsciously, threaten the American worldview.

For Mr. Trump's supporters, threatening shared cultural worldviews increases DTA and heightens insecurity, which in turn increases hostility toward outsiders and creates an ideal opportunity for a charismatic leader to provide a sense of meaning, value, and security (physical and psychological) to his followers. Discussions of terrorism (and of course actual terrorist attacks), illegal immigrants taking American jobs and receiving government assistance, liberals taking away guns or individual rights and making a statement such as "If we don't get tough [on terrorism], and we don't get smart – and fast – we're not going to have a country anymore – there will be nothing left" ([www.donaldjtrump.com](http://www.donaldjtrump.com)), all threaten American worldviews and reduce the personal sense of importance gained from belonging to a great nation, which is reputedly no longer great at all. This rhetoric also increases unconscious death thoughts, which contribute to increased support for Trump's candidacy for president.

Researchers examining the effect of death reminders on support for Mr. Trump (Cohen et al., 2017a) assigned participants to write about their own mortality or being in intense pain. Participants were then asked to report: How favorably do you view Donald Trump? To what extent do you admire Donald Trump? To what extent do you have confidence in Donald Trump as a leader? If you vote in the upcoming Presidential election, how likely is it you will vote for Donald Trump? Results indicated that participants asked to write about their own death had significantly more favorable impressions of, greater admiration for, increased confidence in, and a higher likelihood of voting for Mr. Trump than people who wrote about being in pain. Consistent with Landau et al.'s (2004) finding that MS increased support for President Bush, this effect was obtained regardless of participants' political orientation.

A follow-up study, undertaken as a conceptual replication of Landau et al. (2004, Study 4) had participants evaluate either Donald Trump or Hillary Clinton after a reminder of death or an aversive control topic. Participants were instructed to "Think for a moment about presidential candidate Donald Trump or Hillary Clinton and then answer the following questions by circling the number that best approximates your feelings." Four questions followed: "How favorably do you view Donald Trump or Hillary Clinton?" "To what extent do you admire Donald Trump or Hillary Clinton?" "To what extent do you have confidence in Donald Trump or Hillary Clinton as a leader?" and "If you vote in the upcoming presidential election, how likely is it you will vote for Donald Trump or Hillary Clinton?" In the evaluate Hillary Clinton's condition, participants read identical instructions and responded to identical questions about presidential candidate Hillary Clinton. Once again, consistent with Study 4 of Landau et al. (2004), participants in the aversive control condition rated Hillary Clinton significantly more favorably than Donald Trump. However, following an MS induction, support for Mr. Trump increased significantly (regardless of participants' political orientation) to the point where he was rated slightly





**Fig. 3** Support for President Donald Trump and presidential candidate Hillary Clinton as a function of priming condition (Cohen et al., 2017a)

more (albeit non-significantly) favorably than Mrs. Clinton; however. Support for Mrs. Clinton was unaffected by the MS induction (see Fig. 3).

The findings add to a substantial body of empirical research showing that political preferences can be substantially altered when existential concerns are aroused (for reviews of this literature, see Cohen & Solomon, 2011; Burke et al., 2013), and that a host of non-rational factors likely contributed to Mr. Trump's victory in the 2016 presidential election (see Fitzduff, 2017, for a review of this literature). These findings should also, however, be interpreted with some degree of caution. Although the mortality salience-induced boost to President Trump's popularity was obtained in two studies, the participants are hardly representative of the American electorate. Moreover, not all support for Mr. Trump is necessarily a defensive reaction to concerns about death. Although it is a matter of public record that Trump's 2016 election campaign was carefully crafted to emphasize the war on terrorism by (in part) demonizing Muslims and immigrants, the strategic use of fear to advance political agendas has a long history in American politics (all politics for that matter) and is by no means confined to the Republican Party (Cohen & Solomon, 2011). The 2020 presidential election which took place during the COVID-19 pandemic proved entirely different from the 2016 election.

## The Politics of Mortality: Election Results as a Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic

President Trump's 2016 victory was based at least in part on his supporter's feelings of America as a country in need of repair. Their sense of pride and purpose from being part of the American Dream, shifted to a sense of pride and purpose received from Mr. Trump's campaign to rebuild a severely damaged America. The pro-Trump movement became a new worldview, its supporters' self-esteem bolstered by belonging to it and supporting the sacred mission it promoted. Mr. Trump's supporters gained something to live for, as well as loyalty to Mr. Trump and his movement, and willingly abandoned logical and critical thought. Friendships and even marriages were dissolved thereby shedding those who expressed opposition and anger to President Trump and his policies (Luscombe, January 21, Luscombe, 2021). Dissenters sank into anger and despair further fueled by Trump's blatant corruption, apparent incompetence, purported mental instability, and tyrannical policies (Woodward, 2019). Trump's affinity for Russia's Vladimir Putin and North Korea's Kim Jong Un had pundits and laymen alike questioning whether Trump was aligning himself with dictators or as his supporters suggested was simply a master negotiator and peacemaker artfully skilled with the gift of flattery (Friedman, June 01, Friedman, 2019).

Despite Trump's reliance on attacking others, the lack of any real policies and effort to make factually accurate statements (indeed, according to PolitiFact, over 72% of Trump's statements are patently false and the *Washington Post* documented over 50,000 false statements made over his 4-year presidency), his supporters were able to immerse themselves in the movement and garner pride and hope in a shared vision. According to Hoffer, "All active mass movements strive. . .to interpose a fact-proof screen between the faithful and the realities of the world. They do this by claiming that the ultimate and absolute truth is already embodied in their doctrine and that there is no truth nor certitude outside of it. . .It is the true believer's ability to 'shut his eyes and stop his ears' to facts. . .which is the source of his unequalled fortitude and constancy. He cannot be frightened by danger nor disheartened by obstacles nor baffled by contradictions because he denies their existence" (Hoffer, 1951; p. 78).

Mr. Trump's political speeches have a general format that is similar in many ways to a good TMT study. First, worldview threat is induced by identifying villains: someone to be afraid of (immigrants), someone who is attacking America (Islamic terrorists), or someone to blame (immigrants, Muslims, politicians). This increases death through accessibility. He then tells his supporters that America is no longer great, which decreases collective self-esteem and the sense of personal value that is normally provided by patriotism. Mr. Trump then promises safety from all threats under his presidency and makes each person feel valuable by emphasizing the importance of each supporter, taking on the persona of the charismatic leader who is sought after when mortality is salient. Most notably, Mr. Trump exudes confidence and defiance, is full of anger and contempt, disregards others' opinions, and

makes claims that, although demonstrably untrue, feed the narrative that he promotes. Finally, Mr. Trump pounds home the message that together, he and his followers can Make America Great Again. As researchers who have studied this phenomenon extensively for decades, we would be hard-pressed to design a more effective campaign strategy based solely on TMT.

Unfortunately for President Trump the COVID-19 pandemic threw a wrench into the 2020 campaign. President Trump's re-election campaign proceeded in pretty much the same manner as the first—he burned through millions of dollars in campaign funds, dismissed the critiques of the masses, performed at stadiums to fans and he ran for re-election without structuring any policy or platform for a second term. But ultimately he could not escape COVID. He could not escape the death around him nor could he escape falling sick to the virus itself despite denying the fatality of the disease, by saying “Fake News Media is going full on Covid, Covid, Covid” (Bennet & Berenson, 2020). Like President Trump, millions of people were infected, and thousands of people were dying daily. Could Trump be the leader he professed to be and protect the population from death?

Recall that a primary function of cultural worldviews and self-esteem is to mitigate anxiety resulting from an **unconscious** death threats. What becomes of death threats that cannot be subdued and pushed into the unconscious? Terror management theory posits a dual-process model of defenses (Pyszczynski et al., 1999). Overt, conscious thoughts of death are defended against what is referred to as proximal defenses. Proximal defenses deal with **conscious** thoughts of death at the level at which the threat is interpreted. These defenses are highly rational and occur immediately after mortality is made salient and entail either active suppression of death-related thoughts or mental manipulations that literally push the problem of death into the distant future. Conversely, highly accessible unconscious thoughts of death are defended against distal defenses, which deal with unconscious, implicit knowledge of the inevitability of death at a level distal from that at which the threat is construed. These defenses are not rational or logical and do nothing to solve the actual problem of death—they simply defend against death by enabling the individual to construe himself or herself as a valuable person in a world of meaning. Research presented thus far dealt with distal defenses.

Recently, Pyszczynski et al. (2021) posited that many defense responses to the COVID-19 pandemic have been proximal in nature rather than distal. Simply put if one wanted to psychologically defend themselves against a deadly virus they could minimize the perception of the threat by arguing that the virus is not nearly as contagious or lethal as health experts claim it to be (Srikanth, 2020), or that it only threatens the elderly or those already at risk of dying from other diseases (Fox et al., 2020). However, the most common form of proximal defense against COVID-19 seemed to be avoiding infection altogether as suggested by the medical community (Altman, 2020). Most people practiced social distancing, increased sanitation practices such as hand washing and cleaning surfaces, and wore masks in public places. Household cleaners, disinfectants, hand sanitizers, and face masks flew off super-market shelves at a rate making it impossible for supply to meet demand (Smith, 2020).

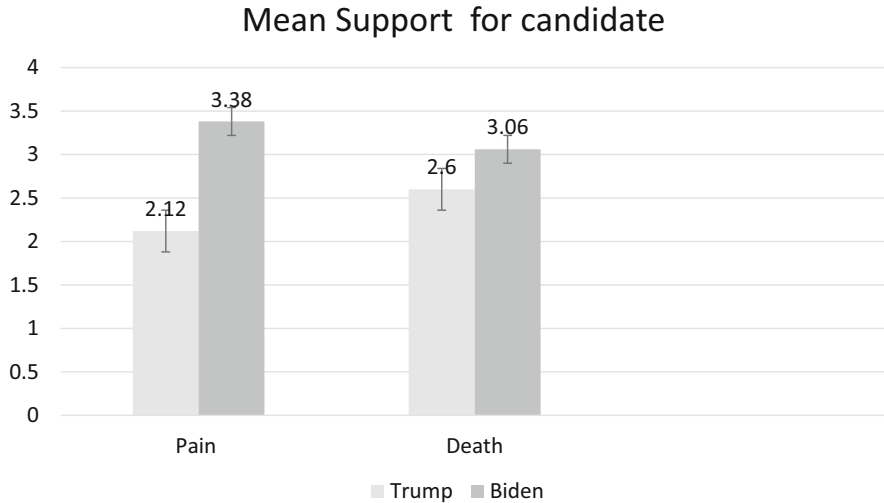
As previously presented most research in TMT suggests that distal defenses focused on affirming one's cultural worldview and maximizing self-esteem emerge when thoughts of death are highly accessible but not in focal attention; given the potential consequences of the virus and the enormous amount of attention the pandemic has attracted, this is likely to be the case for many people a great deal of the time. Research presented thus far has shown that mortality salience leads to a shift toward more conservative attitudes regardless of political orientation (Cohen et al., 2017a, 2017b; Landau et al., 2004). However, others show it leads to polarization, with conservatives endorsing more conservative attitudes and liberals endorsing more liberal ones (Kosloff et al., 2010). Given the state of polarization facing the nation with Biden supporters expressing a greater degree of proximal defenses (promoting infection avoidance, maintaining social distancing, wearing masks) and Trump supporters expressing a greater degree of distal defenses (COVID danger denial, economic reopening) a conceptual replication of Cohen et al. (2005, 2017a) was conducted as an on-line survey to demonstrate that President Trump's popularity and support for his policies were influenced by unconscious death fears. (It is noteworthy that the following experiment was a conceptual replication. The original Cohen et al. (2005) study presented excerpts regarding then-President Bush's handling of the war on terror. Therefore, it was fitting to use a parallel vignette of the current president's handling of the war on COVID.)

Eder et al. (2021) presented participants with either the following essay expressing a highly favorable opinion of the measures taken by President Trump with regard to the COVID-19 pandemic:

It is essential that our citizens band together and support President Donald Trump in his efforts to secure our great Nation against the dangers of Covid-19. Personally I endorse the policies of President Donald Trump who has advocated bold action in the fight against Covid-19. I appreciate President Donald Trump's wisdom regarding the need to expedite a vaccine and his policies enacted to prevent the spread of the virus including shutting the borders to prevent all immigrants from entering the country—all of which are a source of great comfort to me. It annoys me when I hear other people complain that President Donald Trump used his personal fight against the virus and recent hospitalization as a cover for reckless endangerment that, in the long run, will be detrimental to this country. We need to stand behind President Donald Trump and not be distracted by citizens who are less than patriotic. Ever since the beginning of the pandemic in Wuhan, China President Donald Trump has been a source of strength and inspiration to us all. God bless him and God bless America.

Or the following parallel essay expressing a highly favorable opinion of the platform by Presidential candidate Joe Biden with regard to the COVID-19 pandemic:

It is essential that our citizens band together and support Presidential Candidate Joe Biden in his efforts to secure a new direction for America and to protect against the dangers of Covid-19. Personally I endorse the policies of Presidential Candidate Joe Biden to provide sufficient personal protective equipment for all working to fight Covid-19 while at the same time working to protect high-risk vulnerable Americans. It annoys me when I hear other people complain that Presidential Candidate Joe Biden is "divorced from reality" regarding policies on the fight against Covid-19. We need to stand behind Presidential Candidate Joe Biden, especially in these times of crises and not be distracted by citizens who are less than patriotic. Ever since the beginning of the pandemic in Wuhan, China Presidential Candidate



**Fig. 4** Support for President Donald Trump and presidential candidate Jo Biden as a function of priming condition (Eder et al., 2021)

Joe Biden has been a source of strength and inspiration to us all. God bless him and God bless America.

As a measure of the dependent variables: Four questions assessing either Trump or Biden’s favorability followed. The questions were followed by 9-point scales with endpoints marked as *not at all favorable*. Eder et al. (2021) predicted and found that while President Trump and his COVID policies were not highly regarded by participants in an aversive control condition, there was significantly greater support for President Trump and his COVID policies following an MS induction. Support for President Joe Biden remained the same regardless of mortality salience (political orientation had no effect on the rating of either candidate; see Fig. 4). It is important to note however that even though the results of the latest study are consistent with previous research findings that people manage potentially paralyzing terror by identifying with leaders who foster a sense of being a valued part of a righteous and powerful tribe or nation, President Trump’s ratings remained lower than those of President Biden regardless of mortality salience. It would seem that protection from unconscious-related death was not sufficient to merit Trump’s rise when the very conscious threat from COVID was looming large. These experimental results mimicked the actual 2020 presidential election results, in which President Biden won both the popular and electoral votes.

As argued by Pyszczynski et al. (2021), “Proximally, we want to forestall death and feel safe from it in the short term. Distally, we want to maintain the view that life is meaningful and that we are valuable contributors to that meaningful life. The fundamental dilemma is that measures that keep us safe at the moment often interfere with our ability to find meaning and significance in our lives. Both are important psychological concerns and finding the right compromise to sufficiently meet both

needs is the great challenge every culture is facing.” It would seem that the Trump-Biden presidential race buttressed the tension between Joe Biden’s proximal defense campaign which promised to impose physical measures to keep us safe from contracting COVID and Donald Trump’s distal defense campaign which promised to reopen the economy and resume “normal” and meaningful life.

## Looking Forward to 2024

As of November 2022, most Americans have expressed a desire to return to normalcy. Polls show that Americans return to pre-COVID life reached a pandemic high. “Behaviorally, people are putting the pandemic behind them, and few see the current state of affairs as a crisis” (Ipsos.com, 2022). Indeed, airports are bustling with travelers, Black Friday shopping at brick-and-mortar stores topped a record 196.7 million shoppers (between Thanksgiving and Cyber Monday; Repko, 2022), and the Republican party regained control of the House of Representatives during the 2022 Mid-term elections (Walsh, 2022), emboldening Donald Trump’s 2024 bid for re-election. Worse yet a recent CNBC poll showed Trump beating his closest Republican challenger by a landslide in the primaries and virtually tied with Joe Biden in a 2024 general election rematch (Capoot, 2022). These poll results are especially chilling. In the time since the 2020 presidential election Donald Trump has refused to concede defeat to President Joe Biden, incited a riot on Capitol Hill, has been impeached twice, is under FBI investigation, and then to add insult to injury hosted a dinner at his Mar A Lago Resort with known anti-Semite Kanye West and White Supremacist and confirmed Holocaust denier Nick Fuentes a few days after announcing his White House bid (Wilkie, 2022; Carlson & Gomez, 2022). What could psychologically account for a twice-impeached president having unprecedented support for another presidential election run?

“This campaign will be about issues, vision and success, and we will not stop, we will not quit, until we’ve achieved the highest goals and made our country greater than it has ever been before,” Trump said. . . Instead of dwelling on his time in office, Trump’s speech Tuesday echoed his 2016 campaign speeches in many ways, painting a dystopian picture of America as a failing nation ravaged by violent crime during “a time of pain, hardship, anxiety and despair” (Wilkie, 2022). It would appear that Donald Trump’s political speeches reiterated a winning format: one that behaves as the model TMT study. Once again, he induced worldview threat by identifying villains: someone to be afraid of (violent criminals), thus increasing death thought accessibility. He then told his supporters that America is no longer great, thus decreasing collective self-esteem and the sense of personal value that is normally provided by patriotism. He then promised safety from all threats under his presidency by making each person feel valuable by emphasizing the importance of each supporter, taking on the persona of the charismatic leader who is sought after when mortality is salient. Trump rallies consistently identify villains, create threats

and propose simple cut-and-dry solutions. He promises to be the voice of the people—always fighting—always winning (Edwards III, 2019).

The fact that subtle, brief alterations of psychological conditions (i.e., asking people to think about terrorism, mosques, immigrants, or their own mortality) is sufficient to bring death thoughts more readily to mind and produce striking differences in political preferences—for charismatic leaders in general, President Bush post 9/11, and Donald Trump in 2016—strongly suggests that close elections could be decided as a result of non-rational terror management concerns. This is antithetical to democracy and surely not what the founding fathers intended when they conceived this great nation. History is replete with examples that free elections are no guarantee against totalitarian outcomes; indeed, Hitler was elected, and his economic policies and blatant anti-Semitism were applauded in the United States by the America First movement, which included Henry Ford and Charles Lindbergh. The current state of affairs would suggest that history is repeating itself (recall Hitler spent time in prison for inciting and participating in insurrection).

Indeed, a new populism seems to be emerging around the world driven by particular social and economic conditions such as public insecurity and resentment. Populists have risen from Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil to Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in Turkey, by pitting the masses against a common enemy. A recent analysis conducted by Howe and Covell (2021) suggests that this new populism developed in response to cultural worldview threats. Ordinary people felt their lives, their culture, and their livelihoods were disrupted by globalism and liberal governments turned to populist leaders. Those feeling unprotected by the current establishment turned to populist politicians (or what this essay has continuously defined as the charismatic leader) who offer protection against a common enemy. The new populism therefore provides backlash against immigration (especially non-whites and Muslims), promises of nationalism and sovereignty, and an alternative reaction against “political correctness” or what many refer to as woke culture. Populism seeks to bring back the greatness of the past and in so doing it is changing the future. Racism, anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, anti-Asian prejudice, and homophobia are all examples of prejudice rising around the world.

The best antidote to this state of affairs may be to monitor and take pains to resist all efforts by candidates to capitalize on hate-based fearmongering. Also important is to recognize that feeling safe is not the same as being safe. Affirming the virtuousness and power of our culture makes us feel more secure, but when such assertions involve the “collateral damage” of killing innocent Muslims abroad or discriminating against them at home, it is likely to provoke greater radicalization and hostility toward the United States and other Western targets. Moreover, illusory efforts to feel safer often erode the freedoms that we hold dear and are (quite rightfully) trying to protect.

As a culture, we should educate our children and encourage our citizens to understand candidate policy positions as well as important social and economic issues. Hopefully, such measures will embolden people to cast their votes based on the political qualifications of the candidates rather than on defensive reactions to mortal terror. This, however, is quite a bit to hope for considering that once such is a

leader is put in power he/she is often difficult to remove. The aim of this review was to understand how existential fears affect the rise of charismatic leaders. However, it is limited in its scope. Once in power these types of leaders often view themselves above the rule of law. They do as they please, often without repercussions. Donald Trump may have lost the 2020 presidential election but despite his current legal troubles, he has not left American politics. He still has allies in the House and Senate. Just days ago the newly elected Speaker of the House Kevin McCarthy credited Donald Trump for his support in the speaker's race, and Trump relished McCarthy's victory. It is difficult to believe that Trump continues to find support among Republicans; however, politics as we have seen is not always rational. Most people will defend their party worldviews to their deaths regardless of the evidence. Others, often reasonable people may sit and do nothing for fear of crossing party lines or losing an election themselves. It is my hope that logic and reason will prevail prompting people to vote with their heads rather than their hearts.

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**Part VIII**  
**Climate Change Denial and Populist**  
**Antiestablishment Attitude**

# The Role of Populism and Private Property Rights in President Trump's Decision to Withdraw from the Paris Agreement on Climate Change



Bernard D. Goldstein 

**Abstract** I consider the role of populism and of private property rights in President Trump's choice to withdraw the United States from the Paris Agreement on climate change. Despite Trump's campaign promise, the decision to withdraw was uncertain due to significant disagreement among his advisors, and the perceived but eventually rejected availability of an option permitting the United States to stay in the Paris Agreement while downsizing the commitments made by President Obama. Populist themes are evident in Trump's June 2017 speech announcing the US withdrawal, including repetitive statements of the need to defend against the machinations of countries which are unfairly taking advantage of the United States, his use of populist tropes such as acting for the people of Pittsburgh rather than the people of Paris, and that the rest of the world is laughing at us. Following significant disagreement among his advisors, the decision to withdraw was in large part due to an active alliance between Steve Bannon, a right-wing populist, and EPA Administrator Scott Pruitt, a staunch ally of major extractive industries exploiting natural resources - organizations that had historically been the target of American populism and progressivism. The legal implications of the Paris Agreement to the American coal industry was crucial to Trump's ultimate decision to withdraw. Two often overlooked factors of particular importance to American anti-environmentalism are the belief among right wing and rural Americans that modern environmentalism is a threat to constitutionally derived rights to control their private property without government interference; and the relatively greater insistence of Americans on individual freedom rather than collective security. Further, the anti-elitism central to both right and left-wing populism had been successfully extended to climate change science and scientists. I conclude that Trump's decision primarily was based on those factors that were most likely to validate him personally through reelection - keeping faith with both his right-wing populist voting base and his industry funding

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Many thanks to the anonymous reviewers for their comments and to Dr. Adebowale Akande for his professorial editorial assistance.

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base. In doing so he actively brought toward the mainstream the anti-environmentalist views of right-wing populists. Approaches that might lessen the voting strength of anti-environmental right-wing populists include recognizing and exploiting the unholy alliance between big industry and right-wing populists; focusing more attention on the significant environmental risks faced by populations that tend to vote for Trump or Trump-like candidates, such as farmers and military families; and respectful sensitivity to constitutionally-derived property rights and similar issues underlying American anti-environmentalism.

**Keywords** Paris climate agreement · Trump · Populism · Property rights · Climate change science · Environment · EU/US differences · Reparations

## Introduction

Withdrawing the United States from the Paris Agreement on climate change was a signal moment in Donald Trump's administration. Although withdrawal had been a campaign promise, following Trump's election, well-publicized disagreements among his senior appointees and advisers led to suspense about his decision. I will use Trump's speech announcing his decision to withdraw as a lens to further illustrate the policy issues, catering to both his populist and his industry-based support that were central to Trump's approach to climate change and related environmental issues.

As background, I will briefly discuss the loosely defined term populism. My focus will be on questions of the applicability of aspects of populism to Trump's decision on the Paris Agreement. I will point out, but not try to disentangle, the overlapping relations between conservationism, the earliest US environmental movement, with populism and progressivism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. I also will briefly explore differences between the United States and other developed countries in environmental policy which includes conservative American reverence for property rights. The property rights issue is a relatively overlooked central aspect of right-wing populist skepticism about actions related to climate change and more broadly to sustainability (Goldstein & Hudak, 2016). The greater support for individualism in American culture (Paarlberg, 2015) is also central to understanding why right-wing populism in the United States is a major impediment to dealing with the challenges of climate change.

## Populism—And Donald Trump

Populism has many definitions. The rise of right-wing populist parties, particularly in Europe and Latin America, and the election of Donald Trump in the United States, has led to a rapidly growing literature evaluating and dissecting the phenomenon,

including defining various subtypes of right-wing and left-wing populism, and consideration of the boundary between populism and economic issues as well as authoritarianism. (Berman, 2021; Huber et al., 2021; Finchelstein, 2017; Rajan, 2019). For the purposes of considering environmental issues, and consistent with the history of populism in the United States, I will focus on its rural aspects; on its relation to American exceptionalism; on its grounding in an us/them dualism which includes the belief that “them” secretly act to undermine the common good and the will of the people; and on its anti-elitism which in the case of climate change and sustainability extends to distrust of science and technology. To these, I will add the role of private property rights as being central to many of the current disagreements about environmental issues, including sustainability.

As the core definition of populism refers to the nominal good of reflecting the will of the people, there are many different and often competing perspectives that self-identify or have been identified by scholars as fitting under the populist blanket (Panizza, 2005; LaClau, 2005). Kazin (2017) has argued that the common element of otherwise very diverse populist organizations is belief in the need to combat an elite group. In considering the difference in populism between Bernie Sanders and Donald Trump, Kazin points out that both spoke strongly about the evils of the establishment and of government and big business elites (Kazin, 2017, xiii-xiv), but argues that the populism of Donald Trump has been narrower, being largely anti-immigrant and racist, while the populism of Sanders has been more inclusive and followed the liberal tradition.

Misguided populism has been attacked by Obama. In his last speech to the United Nations, he speaks about “crude populism” to explain the many neglected problems that have resulted in:

. . . alternative visions of the world have pressed forward both in the wealthiest countries and in the poorest: Religious fundamentalism; the politics of ethnicity, or tribe, or sect; aggressive nationalism; a crude populism sometimes from the far left, but more often from the far right which seeks to restore what they believe was a better, simpler age free of outside contamination.

We cannot dismiss these visions. They are powerful. They reflect dissatisfaction among too many of our citizens. (White House, 2016).

Obama’s criticism, although more muted, of extreme left-wing populism is also found. In his autobiography (Obama, 2020), he describes a liberal cable news attack on his mortgage relief plan as “half-baked populism.” The commentator’s arguments are said by Obama to have nothing to do with facts and instead are aimed at redefining what was fair, reassigning victimhood on those who did not deserve it, and conferring “that most precious of gifts: the conviction of innocence, as well as the righteous indignation that comes with it” (Obama, 2020, p. 274). “Fake populism” has also been a subject of a recent interaction between Senator Marco Rubio and the historian Sean Wilentz (Fea, 2022—see also Wilentz, 2008, foreword to a reprint of Richard Hofstadter’s book *The Paranoid Style in American Politics* (Hofstadter, 2008)).

There is no question that right-wing populists generally support Donald Trump. But is Trump himself a populist? Obviously, not all who display righteous

indignation and victimhood are populists. But righteous indignation is a fair characterization of Trump's description of adverse events throughout his career. These include his recent depiction of the FBI's "invasion" of his home as well as his response to New York Attorney General Letitia James charges of the Trump organization's alleged illegal hyperinflation of the value of the companies and the size of his personal apartment, in which he claimed that she was a "racist" on a "witch hunt" whose allegations of was purely political. Trump's indignant responses can be characterized as displaying victimhood consistent with Obama's description. But they may primarily represent his egotism as he appears to be more rankled by Attorney-General James exposing his gross exaggerations about his personal net value and the size of his apartment than he is by the threatened legal penalties (Robinson, 2022). This also is in keeping with Trump's routinely overstating the size of the crowds at his inauguration and his political rallies (Robinson, 2022).

Egotism is a central component of narcissism—both terms are frequently used to describe Trump (Kluger, 2015; see Yalch, 2021, for a review of this literature and a discussion of the extent to which narcissism also applies to those who supported Trump's reelection). It has been tempting to explore and write about whether there are major pathologies at work in Trump's decision processes. But I believe that evaluation of the psyche of leaders should be kept reasonably independent of value judgments about their actions and policies, e.g., irrespective of whether Napoleon was compensating for his small stature, his military abilities far exceeded those of his contemporaries.

Trump's sexism and machismo characteristics, including demeaning women and bragging of sexual predation (Finchelstein, 2017), have been compared to other male populist leaders such as Duterte of the Philippines, Chavez of Venezuela, Menem of Argentina, and Berlusconi of Italy. Virile masculinity, including the sexual subservience of females, was also a characteristic of Mussolini's prototypic fascist state arguably based on populism as well as a restoration of past glories (Bellassai, 2005). Robinson (2022) noted Trump's description of himself and his assets is frequently phrased in terms consistent with masculine virility. However, Bracewell (2021) in a study of QAnon, points out that while populism has often been considered in terms of masculine characteristics, there is a major role for femininity, including motherhood, which differs from the otherwise predominantly masculine populism of Trump's most avid supporters (e.g., the Proud Boys).

Trump also fits into right-wing populism in that he and his supporters focus on a past that is largely mythical in nature. It is a pure society whose virtues are believed to stem solely from a relatively homogenous population that is now being diluted by foreigners or unbelievers. His slogan, "Make America Great Again," whose MAGA initials now typify Trump supporters, is a call to revive the past and to combat those people and policies that have caused a perceived decline. Right-wing populism is not necessarily anti-immigrant, as long as the immigrants have the same ancestry and speak the same language. For example, Viktor Orban, the populist leader of Hungary, has offended other EU leaders by his refusal to accept his EU-determined share of non-European refugees, primarily from Syria. But Orban continues to encourage



immigration of those of Hungarian descent (Goździak, 2019), just as Trump's anti-immigrant policies are not focused on those of White European background.

## **The Role of Populism in Issues Related to the US Environment**

Debates early in the history of the United States between those who favored a stronger central government, such as Hamilton, or a weaker central government with more power to the states, such as Jefferson and Madison, have led the latter to be recast as populists. Jefferson was among the most frequent sources of quotations for late nineteenth-century populist orators (Goodwyn, 1978, p. 191). He is now frequently quoted by the websites of right-wing anti-environmental organizations (Goldstein & Hudak, 2016; Southern Poverty Law Center, 2014) as well as being adopted as a source of wisdom by a variety of populist viewpoints (see Kensmind, 2022, and Martin Larson's 1984 book *Jefferson: Magnificent Populist*. Larson was associated with Liberty Lobby, a defunct organization that now likely would be labeled alt-right).

Jefferson's anti-urban beliefs do not fit in well with modern environmental thinking. In a letter to Madison, he wrote that America "will remain virtuous for many centuries ... as long as there shall be vacant lands in any part of America" (Jefferson, 1787). This has led Jefferson to be labeled as the father of urban sprawl. Sprawl is a major contributor to American environmental problems by increasing the use of the automobile and causing loss of green space (Vazquez, 2006; Welch et al., 2004). Urban sprawl is also a distinguishing factor from many other developed countries that more aggressively protect their agricultural industry by limiting development beyond urban boundaries, as well as by trade barriers (Goldstein, 2019). Indicative of the difficulty of pinning down what is meant by populism is that Madison's concerns about mobocracy (Rosen, 2018) have also led him to be labeled as an anti-populist.

Historically, the populist movement as a political party began in the late nineteenth century at roughly the same time as the fossil fuel industry. Whether coincidental or not, the power of corporate entities over fossil fuels has been a persistent focus of the anger of populist movements (Bosworth, 2022, pp. 129–134). The conservation movement also received an impetus in the late nineteenth century from the relatively sudden disappearance of the passenger pigeon, a species which had once darkened the sky with its numbers (Yeoman, 2014).

The loose definition of populism arguably permits it to be applied to virtually any relatively new movement that develops broad popular support. One of the key elements of populism is a reaction against an elite perceived to be in overt or covert control. The US environmental movement is often historically grounded in the conservation movement which in many ways began as a reaction against the despoiling of the American West by timber, mining, and other oligarchical interests.

Theodore Roosevelt is often considered among the major environmentalists of his time for his role in the conservation of America's natural resources. Throughout his speeches and writings, and as President, he emphasized that national parks and other set-asides of federal land were to be kept in perpetuity for the American people and that these lands were to be protected from the depredations of the timber and mining industries. Theodore Roosevelt played a major role in the Progressive movement, in 1912 being nominated by the Progressive Bull Moose party for President. He came in second in the popular vote. The 1912 Progressive Party platform has a classic populist statement about an elite acting as an "invisible government":

Behind the ostensible government sits enthroned an invisible government owing no allegiance and acknowledging no responsibility to the people. To destroy this invisible government, to dissolve the unholy alliance between corrupt business and corrupt politics is the first task of the statesmanship of the day. (American Presidency Project, [n.d.](#))

While more elegantly phrased, it is little different than the "drain the swamp" rhetoric of Trump and his followers (Trump, [2020](#)).

The 1912 Progressive Party platform also contains a relatively long statement on conservation in which the opening paragraph reflects the party's belief in development of the nation's resources by and for the benefit of those working the land and for the general public—but not for large businesses.

The natural resources of the Nation must be promptly developed and generously used to supply the people's needs, but we cannot safely allow them to be wasted, exploited, monopolized or controlled against the general good. We heartily favor the policy of conservation, and we pledge our party to protect the National forests without hindering their legitimate use for the benefit of all the people. (American Presidency Project, [n.d.](#))

As a generalization, during this period, the progressive movement tended to believe in action by government to solve problems while populists tended to be against government intervention, relying instead on the aggregate actions of individuals to develop the country. (However, see Biegón, [2019](#), who states that populism has traditionally been seen as interventionist). The progressive movement was largely based on the myth and the substance of the frontier in American identity. This widely held belief was built on the work of the US historian Frederick Jackson Turner ([2007](#)), which followed on the 1890 US Census Bureau declaring the closing of the American Frontier (Nash, [1980](#)). Although its legitimacy as a description of America has been questioned, there appears to be little doubt that Turner's work influenced how Americans thought about themselves. Turner's frontier hypothesis also broke with previous American historians who grounded American history in European culture.

The belief that Americans were rugged individualists whose optimistic self-reliance led to confronting and overcoming obstacles, whether factually grounded or not, is still being played out as the nation confronts climate change and other environmental issues. Evidence that this remains a belief central to American exceptionalism includes Pew international surveys which contains a forced choice between "freedom to pursue life's goals without state interference" and "state guarantees that nobody is in need" (Samuelson, [2013](#)). The United States sticks

out as having the largest majority who make the individualist rather than the collectivist choice among the more than 20 countries in each survey. Paarlberg (2015) uses the PEW survey results to support his view of the dark side of American exceptionalism.

Fiorino (2022) has described how right-wing populism has permeated the Republican party in recent years, including questioning of climate science, opposition to local action to prevent the release of climate-altering agents, or to defend against its inevitable adverse effects, and unwillingness to support international agreements. In previous work, we traced how property rights had become a particular concern of the Republican party, beginning with its right wing and moving in recent years toward its center (Goldstein & Hudak, 2016). From 1980 to 2016 the issue of property rights was present in all of the Republican but none of the Democratic Party platforms. It began with language that built on Garrett Hardin's concept of the tragedy of the commons and which supported the value of private ownership as an antidote to overgrazing that occurs if all can have cost-free access to the same land (Hardin, 1968). However, by the 2012 Republican party platform the wording was more defensive, being concerned primarily with the "taking of property . . . by environmental regulations that destroy its value" (Republican Party Platform, 2016; Goldstein and Hudak, 2016).

During the 2016 presidential nomination process, six of the fifteen Republican candidates expressed concern about the defense of property rights (Goldstein & Hudak, 2016). However, this did not include Donald Trump, a property developer, who was attacked by other Republicans for his failure to take such a position (Verbruggen, 2011).

Left-wing populism often focuses on protecting the environment against large industry. The differences between left wing and right wing populism in environmental issues is exemplified by different interpretations of the defeat of the Keystone pipeline. This on again and off again project, which included White House determinations by every president from George W. Bush to Joe Biden, was to build a pipeline to move an extract of tar sands in Canada to refineries in Texas. It became a lightning rod for opposition by environmentalists who initially focused on global climate issues. The opposition was galvanized by the addition of the rights of Native Americans to the issue. It is now viewed as a success story for left-wing populist approaches for mobilization of the public (Ternes et al., 2020; Bosworth, 2022). However, a key to the defeat of the Keystone pipeline was a multimillion-dollar advertising campaign funded by billionaire environmental activist Tom Steyer that included using the right-wing populist approach of pointing out that the pipeline was supported by foreign governments (Eilperin, 2014; Bosworth, 2022). The advertisements depicted the Chinese and a Canadian mogul laughing at naïve Americans who believed that the issue was US energy independence and jobs rather than being built to help China obtain energy sources that would allow them to manufacture goods at the cost of American jobs (Bosworth, 2022). Ofstehage et al. (2022) have pointed out that opposition to Trump's border wall between Mexico and the United States "created or fortified broad-based alliances that intersected capitalist, ecological and racial interests."

Andreas Malm (2021), in his book *How to Blow Up a Pipeline*, asserts from the left that there is a need for a vanguard to attack the property of the capitalists who are responsible for climate change. His interpretation of past struggles to overthrow repressive regimes leads him to contend that populist movements begin with non-violent demonstrations and other expressions of concern but are only able to overcome repressive regimes when sufficient popular despair has developed. This justifies non-violent attacks on the property of those responsible for climate-changing gas emissions, and demonstrations in art museums to achieve popular recognition (Malm, 2021).

Notably, Malm recognizes the importance of temporal factors in the public response to climate change for which mitigation and adaptation beginning now will only have a major impact in the future. This contrasts with a classic populist revolutionary uprising, such as that perhaps beginning in Iran, which could lead a new government to rapidly overturn existing repressive elites. While immediate action on mitigation and adaptation of climate change is crucial for the long-range trajectory of climate change, its direction during the next few decades is inevitable. Sea levels will rise and hurricanes will be more damaging. Accordingly, the direct temporal consequences of any single action or set of actions on specific impacts are difficult to demonstrate. This delay between preventive actions and minimization of adverse impacts represents a classic public health problem, but unfortunately, public health expertise has only lately received the attention it warrants in confronting climate change (Goldstein & Greenberg, 2018).

As discussed above, populism is often seen in contrast to elitism. But this is not a consistent attribute when considering the environment. Mitchell (2013, p. 238) has pointed out an example of populism related to responding to climate change by Greenpeace, an arguably elitist environmental organization. Greenpeace has promoted each home having its power source as a means of decreasing the role of centralized power industries. In contrast, Robert F. Kennedy, Jr., who was applauded by environmentalists for his leadership in cleaning up the Hudson River has been an outspoken vaccine denier and outraged Greenpeace and other organizations for his eventually successful opposition to a wind farm that was arguably based on it interfering with the views from the Kennedy Compound on Cape Cod (Little, 2006).

Denial of the scientific basis for climate change has been accompanied by pinning the label of elitism on science and scientists as a means of ignoring the incontrovertible scientific evidence. Nichols has expressed the core issue as “citizens wanting to weigh in and have their opinions treated with deep respect and their preferences honored not on the strength of their arguments or the evidence they present but based on their feelings, emotions, and whatever stray information they may have picked up here or there along the way” (Nichols, 2017, p. 62). He quotes Hofstadter that “In the original American populist dream, the omniscience of the common man was fundamental and indispensable” (Nichols, 2017, p. 63).

Francis Collins, long-term head of the NIH and science advisor to President Biden, obviously shaken by COVID-19 communications failures, was quoted as saying “I’m deeply concerned that science trust has taken a significant downward turn, and that is really putting us in a very bad position for whatever is coming

up next: the next pandemic, polio, certainly climate change.” (Cooney, 2022). Collins last phrase “certainly climate change” reflects the belief among many in the scientific community that we still have much to learn about communicating climate change risks to the public. For example, consider the terms devised for distinguishing between the two major types of response to the threat of climate change: mitigation, which primarily consists of preventing the emissions of greenhouse gases, and adaptation, which focuses on secondary protection such as building higher levees and changing forest management practices. Both are high-sounding terms that convey little to the general public except the arrogance of scientists in not speaking at their level when asking them to act. It has also not helped that several climate scientists have voiced opinions that the gravity of climate change requires governance approaches that would violate democratic norms (Stehr, 2016; see Fiorino, 2018 for a broad discussion of this issue).

## **The White House Debate about Withdrawing from the Paris Agreement**

The Paris Agreement is the most recent of a series of agreements that began with the 1994 United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). By requiring each nation to set its own goals, the Paris Agreement’s policy approach differed from previous UNFCCC agreements, including the Kyoto Protocol, which were judged to have had insufficient impact on the looming effects of climate change. However, Coglianesse (2019) argues that management-based approaches are inherent problems in the Paris Agreement. Management-based approaches are policies that depend primarily upon voluntary bottom-up activities of the involved parties. While he acknowledges that this may have been the best option available to achieve the Paris Agreement, he points out that Management-Based Approaches are not all that successful in domestic uses. For the Paris Agreement, both pledging and achieving the pledged goals are dependent upon the local politics of each signatory to the agreement. The rise of nationalistic forms of populism threatens the long-term success of such a management approach (Coglianese, 2019). However, Victor (2017) in responding to Trump’s decision, argues that the process of pledge and review will likely lead to achieving climate goals through “experimentalist governance.”

Despite his campaign promise to do so, Trump’s decision to withdraw from the Paris Agreement was not a foregone conclusion. Senior White House officials were divided among those in favor of remaining in the agreement including his Secretary of State, Rex Tillerson, former CEO of Exxon-Mobil; Gary Cohn, the National Economic Council Director; and Trump’s daughter, Ivanka Kushner (Restuccia & Dawsey, 2017; Shear & Cardwell, 2017; Mutakani, 2017). Trump’s son-in-law, Jared Kushner, who along with Ivanka had formal roles as White House advisors, was described as in favor of remaining in the Paris Agreement as long as the legal

issues did not hamper meeting the Trump Administration's desires to ease environmental regulations (Shear & Cardwell, 2017). Those opposed to the Paris Agreement included EPA Administrator Scott Pruitt, a climate denier (Brumfiel, 2017); Steve Bannon, then a senior adviser to Trump and a self-described populist who came to the Trump administration from leadership of Breitbart, an Alt-Right populist web site (Schreckinger, 2020; Britannica, 2022) and, eventually, Don McGahn, the White House Counsel (Restuccia & Dawsey, 2017; Shear & Cardwell, 2017).

Bannon argued that to retain their votes Trump should keep faith with those who were responsible for his election, people who largely fit under the right or extreme right definitions of populism and whose belief in an oppressive elite had been stoked by Hillary Clinton's characterization of them as "deplorables" and by concern that their private property and way of life was at risk from environmentalists (Baram, 2017; Reuters staff, 2017). Scott Pruitt's arguments, as well as his actions at EPA (Goldstein, 2021), were primarily based on keeping faith with major extractive industries whose financial support and covert or overt involvement in Republican party politics had supported him throughout his career and would be vital to Trump's re-election campaign (Mayer, 2017; Reuters staff, 2017).

A compromise perhaps was possible. The Paris Agreement allows all participating countries to choose and then change their goals. However, the language in the Agreement seemingly permits only an enhancement of the goals, not a diminution (United Nations, 2016; Schwartz, 2017). But there is no enforcement mechanism, and following the Fukushima nuclear incident, Japan decreased its commitment (Nakanishi, 2020—includes an overview of how nations interact with the Paris Agreement). It was argued by those who favored staying in the Paris Agreement that Trump could have built on his repetitive arguments that Obama was neither a good negotiator nor had the American worker's interests at heart by simply staying in the Paris Agreement while downsizing America's official climate goals and decreasing its contribution to the climate fund intended to help support the climate-related efforts of developing nations. But the debate was decided in favor of leaving the agreement when the President's counsel, Don McGahn, provided the legal opinion that ratcheting down the US commitment would seriously hamper the Administration's ability to achieve its domestic objectives, including overturning Obama-era restrictions on coal use, by allowing environmentalists to bring lawsuits based on the Paris Agreement to which some courts would be sympathetic (Schwartz, 2017).

This explanation accounts for the brief language in Trump's speech.

And exiting the agreement protects the United States from future intrusions on the United States' sovereignty and massive future legal liability. Believe me, we have massive legal liability if we stay in. (The White House, 2017).

Reference to US sovereignty occurs three other times as well. While not specified in the speech, the Tea Party had earlier identified the United Nations as being desirous of using its initiative on sustainability, known as Agenda 21, to impair US sovereignty, and this view had gained traction in Republican controlled

legislatures and in the 2012 and 2016 Republican party platform (Frick et al., 2015; Goldstein and Hudak, 2016— and see below under Property Rights)

Jared Kushner's book (Kushner, 2022), which provides a detailed working of White House discussions on many issues, surprisingly appears to say nothing about the deliberations on the Paris Agreement or about climate change—although he is negative about Steve Bannon who he describes as disruptive. Perhaps pertinent is Kushner's description of Bannon's intense focus on Trump's campaign promises, of which leaving the Paris Agreement would have been included (Kushner, 2022, p. 72).

### *The White House Speech*

The core themes of the White House speech in which Trump announced withdrawal from the Paris Agreement are primarily covered in three successive paragraphs that are quoted below with my comments (The White House, 2017).

**First paragraph** “The Paris Agreement handicaps the US economy in order to win praise from the very foreign capitals and global activists that have long sought to gain wealth at our country's expense. They don't put America first. I do. And I always will.”

**My comments about the first paragraph:** By my count the theme that the Paris Agreement is a plot against the United States is repeated in various ways at least seven times in the speech. Trump's belief that the United States was getting a raw deal has been described as central to his decision (Restuccia & Dawsey, 2017). His combination of “foreign capitals” with “global activists” who “don't put America first,” while he does, is in keeping with the right-wing populist theme that globalism is promoted by liberals and by wealthy American globalists who are unfair to the general American public and secretly control the government.

**Second paragraph** “The same nations asking us to stay in the agreement are the countries that have collectively cost America trillions of dollars through tough trade practices and, in many cases, lax contributions to our critical military alliance. You see what's happening. It's pretty obvious to those that want to keep an open mind” (The White House, 2017).

**My comment about the second paragraph:** Trump puts climate change into the context of unfair trade practices—that climate change is just another form of taking advantage of America. He claims that under his administration new coal mines are about to open, but the United States will need to stop using its clean coal technology and not take advantage of ample coal resources while China and India are able to use coal. He is factually correct in that China and India are treated relatively favorably in the Paris Agreement. This is a longstanding issue. President Clinton never brought the Kyoto Accord to the US Senate for confirmation largely due to a “Sense of the Senate” resolution that had specifically stated that the Senate would not confirm any outcome that did not treat developing nations similarly to the United States. This resolution passed 95–0 including the vote of then-Senator John Kerry, who is now



President Biden's climate czar (US Congress, 1997). Without naming the EU, Trump includes it as being unfair to the United States in trade by citing countries with "lax" military contributions. This is a reference to the many NATO members who had not come close to meeting their 2% of GDP commitment to defense. This issue also was raised by Obama during a 2014 visit to Brussels after the Russian invasion of Crimea and had been raised by every other President since at least John Kennedy. Sorensen (1965, p. 563), in his biography of Kennedy, states that Kennedy "noted sarcastically that NATO members who complained about U.S. 'interference' in European security still expected the U.S. to bear the brunt of NATO military outlays while they failed to meet their quotas." In terms of trade practices, while a Gallup poll showed that in contrast to China, most Americans thought that the EU engaged in fair trade practices, this was not true for Republicans. Increasing Democrat/Republican polarization on this issue was found as compared to a similar 1993 poll (Newport, 2018). This may reflect unfair EU trade bans on US chicken, beef, and grain exports that primarily affect rural agricultural communities, and the experience of the Obama administration which left his trade representatives fuming about the EU's alleged failure to keep to a negotiated agreement on US beef exports (Goldstein, 2019; Office of the United States Trade Representative, 2016). At his 2014 visit to Brussels, Obama also asked the EU to make the same hard choices that the United States had made on shale gas and nuclear power to maintain energy independence. In retrospect, the EU's failure to do so likely facilitated Putin's decision to invade Ukraine.

**Third paragraph:** "At what point does America get demeaned? At what point do they start laughing at us, as a country? We want fair treatment for its citizens, and we want fair treatment for our taxpayers. We don't want other leaders and other countries laughing at us anymore. And they won't be. They won't be. I was elected to represent the citizens of Pittsburgh, not Paris" (The White House, 2017).

**My comments about the third paragraph:** That others, including the urban elite, are demeaning us and laughing at us is a common rallying point for right-wing populists which in the 2016 Presidential election was stoked by Hillary Clinton's comments about Trump's "basket of deplorables" (Cassidy, 2016). By citing Pittsburgh Trump is also claiming that he represents a city whose image is that of gritty steelworkers rather than a foreign city known as a playground for the elite. He repeats this theme when he ends his talk. "It is time to put Youngstown, Ohio; Detroit, Mich.; and Pittsburgh, Pa.; along with many many other locations in our country, before Paris, France. It is time to make America great again" (The White House, 2017).

Another part of the speech worthy of comment is his use of the word "love." on three occasions. Trump identifies with his supporters by saying he loves them, a tactic he often employs. The use of the word love is commonly associated with an implicit or explicit request for the hearer to reciprocate, and with some tension if the hearer does not. Using it with his supporters is a means to ratchet up their level of support.



## ***What Was Not in the Speech: An Attack on Climate Change Science***

Much to the surprise of those of us in the environmental science community, there was no argument raised against the existence of climate change or the validity of climate science. But neither was there a forthright statement supporting its reality. The prior Republican President, George W. Bush, a Texan who strongly supported the fossil fuel industry, in his 2008 State of the Union address not only spoke of the need to respond to global climate change, he also called for “an international agreement that has the potential to slow, stop, and eventually reverse the growth of greenhouse gases” (White House, 2008). I can personally attest that as far back as the Reagan administration, when from 1983 to 1985, I was the USEPA Assistant Administrator for Research and Development, EPA received funding to study what was then called global warming. Mr. Trump continues to raise doubts about climate change in various ways, while at the same time arguing that the United States leads the world in decreasing its climate-changing emissions (Worland, 2019; Jacobson, 2016; Joyella, 2022). In their White House speeches when withdrawing from the Paris Agreement, both Trump and Pruitt claimed that the United States was the leader in reducing climate emissions and other pollutants (The White House, 2017).

Marquardt et al. (2022), in comparing the policies of the populist leaders of the United States (Trump), Brazil (Bolsonaro), and Duterte (Philippines) points out that while there is convergence among them on populist anti-elitist and anti-globalist arguments, both Trump and Bolsonaro generally act to discredit the scientific basis for climate change while Duterte supports those climate science findings that bolster the argument for financial compensation from Global North. (However, it seems unlikely that Duterte would support the known role of population growth in contributing to climate change and other planetary stressors). Biegon (2019) points out two other aspects of Trump’s overall policies that arguably were involved in leaving the Paris Agreement: his desire to withdraw from transnational challenges such as poverty abroad, and to paint agreements made by Obama as “bad deals.”

### **The one citation to authority in the speech was on economics:**

Compliance with the terms of the Paris Accord and the onerous energy restrictions it has placed on the United States could cost America as much as 2.7 million lost jobs by 2025 according to the National Economic Research Associates. This includes 440,000 fewer manufacturing jobs — not what we need — believe me, this is not what we need — including automobile jobs and the further decimation of vital American industries on which countless communities rely.

The economics research organization (NERA) that was cited, stated that Trump’s speech “mischaracterizes the purpose of NERA’s analysis.” (NERA, 2017). Other economic analyses have reported that the costs of withdrawal from the Paris Agreement far outweighed the benefits of staying in the study (Arlota, 2020).

## Property Rights and the Environment

The role of property rights as an important component of opposition to federal and state environmental laws has been well documented by scholars of environmental policy (Andrews, 2012; Layzer, 2012, 2013). However, property rights as a causal issue in right-wing populism in the United States appear to be overlooked. This may be due to relevant property rights issues being almost totally restricted to the United States (Goldstein & Hudak, 2016). Not surprisingly, in view of the resurgence of right-wing populist parties, much of the literature on right-wing populism comes from Europe. However, I could not find the property rights issue in the many excellent studies of different forms or causes of populism in the ample recent US literature on the subject. As one example, the property rights issue is not mentioned by Berman, an American scholar on populism, in her recent extensive review “The Causes of Populism in the West” in the *Annual Review of Political Science* (Berman, 2021).

The relation of property rights to individual freedom is a longstanding issue in political science and philosophy. Diggins (2005) contrasts the writings of two philosophers active on policy issues related to individual freedom: Sidney Hook, a democratic socialist much concerned with the abuse of power by large industries, and Robert Nozick, a libertarian more concerned about limiting the power of the state. Property rights are a central component of this debate, with the extreme poles being the Marxian assertion that the collective ownership of property is a prerequisite for human freedom, while Libertarianism supports the private ownership of property as being central to individual freedom—for which the writings of the Austrian economist Friedrich Hayek has achieved guru status. Not surprisingly, libertarians often consider themselves to be populists and are divided among themselves on issues in much the same way as populists. Zwolinski (2013) claims that libertarians “are virtually defined by their commitment to both liberty and rights of private property.” Boyd (2018), an advocate of libertarianism, sees “libertarian populism” as being able to straddle today’s divisions because, for example, they are skeptical of both big government and big business, anti-globalist while in favor of free trade, and, pertinent to environmental issues, “they champion both environmental conservation and limited government” (Boyd, 2018).

The US Constitution and private property rights have been described as the two basic and distinctive foundations of US environmental policy and politics (Andrews, 2006). The impact of these two interacting factors is evident in the contemporary issue of drilling and hydrofracturing for shale gas. The United States is almost alone in providing the landowner, rather than the government, with title to all mineral wealth beneath the landowner’s property. Daintith (2010) noted that most British Commonwealth countries had moved away from the common law precedent of subsurface rights belonging to the property owner towards providing the government with control of subsurface rights. But that did not occur in the United States because of the “inconvenient” constitutional protection of property rights (Daintith, 2010). The ability of individual landowners to require compensation for shale gas drilling is

a major reason that drilling moved ahead in the United States but not the EU (Goldstein et al., 2015; Kriesky et al., 2013).

Hydrofracturing for shale gas also illustrates another distinction between the United States and the EU—the EU's adherence to the precautionary principle which gives preference to proving safety before action is taken. Although whether the EU is more precautionary overall than the United States has been contested (Wiener et al., 2011). Hydrofracturing was developed largely in the United States through a series of multiple “trial and error” advances using different technologies and different suites of chemicals. An EU-style precautionary approach would have required each step to be thoroughly reviewed and overseen by a permit process—and would have taken decades longer. Greenberg (2007, p. 177) has formulated the difference as precaution versus exuberance, which fits in well with the concept that the US preference for individual rights, while more riskier, provides more scope for technological innovation.

Studies showing differences among right-wing populist groups in seemingly similar countries in Western Europe and the Global South have noted the importance of contextual issues including economics (Marquardt & Lederer, 2022; Huber et al., 2021; Falkner & Plattner, 2019). A major difference in context among American states is due to different degrees of federal government ownership of land (e.g., approximately 30% in Montana and less than 1% in New York). Complicating this further in Western states are the different rules and goals of the different federal agencies involved - primarily the Bureau of Land Management; the National Park Service; the National Fish and Wildlife Service; and the National Forest Service (Hoover et al., 2021). For property rights issues, as well as for populists in Western states, “Washington” is the problem. In contrast, our study of those advocating Brexit, and of organizations of right-wing parties in the European Parliament, while finding many complaints about “Brussels,” did not find any related to private property rights (Goldstein & Hudak, 2016).

2016 property rights are part of the formulation “life, liberty and property” that appears in foundational US documents, including the US Constitution, but not those of the EU (Goldstein & Hudak, 2016). While far from the only issue affecting the response of right-wing populists to the concerns of environmentalists, it appears to be of increasing importance. Following his election, Trump's choice as head of his transition team for EPA, Myron Ebell, was a climate change denier. Ebell had been particularly concerned about the extent to which the Endangered Species Act affected the rights of private property owners who were found to have an endangered species on their property (Fountain, 2016). The rights of property owners have also been central to Republican attempts to overturn EPA's redefinition of the extent of federal coverage under the Clean Water Act to additional areas that are wet during only parts of the year. A congressional bill to that effect was vetoed by Obama with a declaration of the need to protect against water pollution. The response by Iowa Republican Senator Ernst was: “We all want clean water. This rule is not about clean water. Rather, it is about how much authority the federal government and unelected bureaucrats should have to regulate what is done on private land” (Ernst, 2016). Protection of private property, including its use as a rationale for opposition to the

United Nations Agenda 21 on sustainability, has appeared in various local and state actions in the US South and West (Celock, 2014, Frick et al., 2015; Terry 2014; Southern Poverty Law Center, 2014; Goldstein & Hudak, 2016).

Popular culture provides an example of how concern about property rights illustrates the differences between the interests of non-urban and urban Americans and between the West and the East. “Yellowstone” is by far the nation’s most-watched cable TV show, averaging over ten million viewers during its fourth season, even without streaming (Horton, 2021; Jurgensen, 2022). Viewership began almost totally in small-town markets rather than in major urban areas. It is centered on a family’s struggles to retain control of an exceptionally large ranch from competitors, Native Americans, and private developers. Horton (2021) points out that the central theme of “Yellowstone” disputes about property ownership (Zaydel, 2021), that the show resonates with those whose politics are conservative, that it has the least diverse viewership in America, that it includes the fantasy of victimhood, and that the show has been described as “anti-woke.” Horton (2021), as well as Vognar (2022), compare “Yellowstone” with a similar TV show “Succession,” which has far fewer viewers despite being pushed to major markets. “Succession” is a drama about a wealthy media business located in an urban area with much the same plot lines about family control of their business - but not involving private property. Moore, (2021) claims Yellowstone is not quite as conservative as others think but for cultural reasons is getting far less attention than it should from usual media outlets—again consistent with conservative views of their being under-represented in national media.

Finally, I will cite a description of a property-based issue by James McCarthy (2002, p1281), writing from a left-wing viewpoint.

Imagine a movement composed of members of rural communities, whose livelihoods have long depended on a wide variety of uses of the lands and natural resources surrounding their homes. The movement’s central complaint is that community members are losing access to and control over these lands and resources because of ever more vigorous pursuit of environmental goals by the resource conservation branches of the central government - a trend spurred on largely by the interventions of distant, highly bureaucratic, and professionalized environmental groups, virtually none of whose staff or members has ever been to the particular lands in question. Attempting to defend their access to and control over these lands, members of the protest movement ... proclaim their superior knowledge and understanding of local environments, assert the historical precedence and legitimacy of their uses, and argue that local users should have greater rights than nonlocal claimants. Finally, they suggest that conservation is merely a cover for increased state control and the assertion of class privilege in the region

McCarthy, writing in 2002, claims that political ecologists would then almost certainly assume that the description is of an issue in the global South, such as those which are central to case studies in Political Ecology, and that the protestors would be viewed sympathetically by academics, leftists, and environmentalists. Instead, he has described the Wise Use movement of the American West which was particularly active from 1988 to 1996 and was focused primarily on land use issues related to a large amount of Western intermountain state land that is federally owned. He states that the movement “had strong populist overtones” and “defined itself mainly in

opposition to the environmental movement, environmental regulations, and federal agencies governing land uses. All of which are portrayed as arrogant, ignorant outsiders intruding on local communities and denying them their livelihoods and right to self-determination” (McCarthy, 2002 pp 1283–1284; see also Layzer, 2012, 2013, pp. 390–392). His major point, however, likely would not be viewed sympathetically by right-wing populists as he argues that the anti-capitalist insights gained by political ecologists’ study of developing countries should also be applied to the “First World.”

Property rights do enter into the consideration of colonial settler activity, such as the dispossession of Native groups from their land as happened to Native Americans. Ofstehage et al. (2022) point out that the environmental justice movement can serve as a counterweight to settler colonial issues in the United States.

## Overview and Conclusions

It is tempting to conclude that in relation to the environment, Trump’s views are better described by the “isms” of narcissism and opportunism than they are by populism. However, to do so would require a comparative analysis with other populist leaders—or politicians in general. In many ways, Trump did not substantially differ from most other first-term American presidents for whom reelection is the ultimate validation of their policies and a major driving force in decision-making. Keeping faith with his right-wing populist supporters appears to have been among the major factors in Trump’s decision.

The term “Trumpism” has been applied to the broad range of policies that have characterized his activities and beliefs. In terms of the environment, there can be little question that Trump’s policies and personnel choices at EPA and other governmental agencies have mainstreamed anti-environmentalist views (Goldstein, 2021). But these policies are deeply rooted in longstanding American right-wing populist concerns about issues such as property rights and individual freedom versus collective responsibilities. Implicit in the term “Trumpism” is that these issues will go away if Trump and his most avid followers were to disappear from the political stage. They will not.

As the human and economic problems caused by climate change will inevitably increase, the extent of American responsibility and reparations for our past actions are issues that certainly will not go away. The EU is already moving toward establishing legal precedents that will allow the institution of trade barriers affecting those countries that do not limit actions that cause climate change (Petersmann, 2020), and Prime Minister Modi of India, among others, has called not only for funding to catch up to the West in decarbonization but also for reparations from the Global North for past and current expenses needed by India to respond to problems such as flooding caused by the Global North’s past contributions to persistent greenhouse gases. One can anticipate responses from the Global North that include the value to India from such outcomes as improved health care achieved through

economic growth supported by fossil fuels, and the causal role in global climate change of the far greater population growth of countries like India. It is also very possible that right-wing populism will again play a major role in the re-election of Donald Trump, or someone with similar negative views about the importance of an effective international agreement on climate change. American right-wing populism may even become stronger if the inevitable ensuing climate disasters affect the American economy while at the same time, left-wing populists increase demands for reparations from the United States for international approaches that can be interpreted as threatening loss of American jobs or sovereignty. Accordingly, the continued reinstatement of American full participation in the Paris agreement cannot be taken for granted. Those supporting the continuance of the United States in international governance related to climate change need to consider the lessons from Trump's withdrawal from the Paris Agreement.

Steve Bannon, a self-described populist, argued that to retain their votes Trump should keep faith with those whose votes were responsible for his election, people who largely fit under the right or extreme right definitions of populism and whose belief in an oppressive elite had been stoked by the type of denigration exemplified by Hillary Clinton's characterization of them as "deplorables," as well as by a belief that their private property and way of life was at risk from environmentalists. Scott Pruitt's arguments, as well as his actions at EPA, were primarily based on keeping faith with major extractive industries, such as the Koch brothers, whose financial support and covert or overt involvement in Republican party politics had supported him throughout his career and would be vital to Trump's re-election campaign (Mayer, 2016). This was in many ways an unholy alliance. Mayer (2016) characterized Trump's choice of Pruitt as a victory for the plutocrats over the populists and a contradiction to Trump's prior position against Republican megadonors. In essence, the choice of Pruitt was a loss for Bannon who had taken strong positions against the Republican establishment, including his willingness to take down Jeb Bush (Green, 2015). In contrast, Pruitt was a creature of the establishment. He worked closely with Senator James Inhofe of Oklahoma, a climate denier who has been one of the foremost supporters of the fossil fuel industry. At EPA Pruitt, and his successor Andrew Wheeler, a coal industry lobbyist, not only actively squelched climate change science and policies but also appointed senior Koch brothers employees to oversight positions (Goldstein, 2021; Snider, 2019).

Within the fossil fuel industry some, such as former Exxon CEO and Trump's initial Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, have realized that international frameworks dealing with climate change are inevitable and that it would be best to be at the table when the details are decided. Some of the chemical industry leaders have also endorsed working on climate issues (e.g., Andrew Liveris, former CEO of Dow Chemical (Liveris, 2021)). Similarly, it is not uncommon that local organizations concerned with property rights and property uses consistent with conservationism also are concerned about climate change (e.g., Montana Wild, n.d.). These areas of overlap and internal antagonism provide opportunities for developing new coalitions that can alter the calculus of those considering decisions related to local and global climate change.

Although climate change is generally not a high priority for Republican voters, a recent Pew Poll reports that 42% are concerned (Tyson et al., 2021). With acknowledgment and affirmation of the importance of their issues, such as property rights, they might be rallied to support US involvement in the Paris Agreement. However, this requires not just talking to those few who are committed environmentalists. For example, two groups who are particularly at risk from climate change, and who have generally supported right-wing populist politicians, are farmers who can expect climate-related challenges to agriculture, and the US military and their families who can expect the pressures of climate change to cause more wars that may lead to US intervention. Perhaps some of the effort now directed by environmental NGOs at enlisting people to save polar bears should be focused on those families involved in rural agriculture and US defense activities (Goldstein & Greenberg, 2018).

It seems reasonable to conclude that whether or not Donald Trump, an Eastern plutocrat, actually believes in populism, he certainly has taken advantage of right-wing populism. Without changes in effective communication to the electorate about climate change, Trump and other right-wing leaders can be expected to have sufficient popular support to continue to isolate and adversely affect the United States in the global struggles to respond to the inevitable effects of a rapidly changing climate.

The narrative contrasting the virtues of the rugged and independent Western male yeomanry who engage in hunting (Barcott, 2018) versus the effeminate Eastern urbanite who goes hiking or sailing is part of the present growing cultural and political divide. Approaches that might lessen the impact of this narrative on the voting strength of right-wing populists also include recognizing and exploiting the unholy alliance between big industry and right-wing populists, and respectful sensitivity to constitutionally-derived property rights and similar issues underlying American anti-environmentalism.

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**Part IX**  
**This Time Is Different**

# How America's Discontent Fuelled the Rise of Trump's Populism: Causes and Remedies from the Perspective of Michael Sandel



Donovan van der Haak  and Dries Deweer 

**Abstract** Since his rise in the political realm, Donald Trump has become inextricably linked to populism, being possibly the most well-known populist alive. It is therefore important to investigate what exactly led to the rise of this populist movement. Michael Sandel has been a renowned figure within political philosophy, but his particular contribution to the study of populism has received little attention so far.

We argue that this is an oversight. From the very early stages of his career to his latest work, Sandel provides valuable insights into the causes of the rise of populism and contributions to the search for remedies. The purpose of this chapter is to explain how Sandel can help us explain the rise of Trump's populism. In addition, we evaluate the proposed remedy that follows from his analysis. We argue that Sandel's earlier works incorporate aspects of the Durkheimian mass society thesis, as they emphasize how the public discontent with liberal individualism stimulates the populist sentiments that lead to the rise of Trump. Sandel's later works, however, are more similar to the Downsian economic thesis, as he therein focuses on the role of markets, meritocracy, and globalization processes. Examining Sandel's theory in light of these two theses will help us better understand a variety of aspects contributing to the popularity of Trump's populism. We end by analyzing how Sandel's Republican approach may serve as an alternative model that can address the needs of Trump supporters.

**Keywords** Michael Sandel · Durkheimian mass society thesis · Downsian economic theory · Procedural Republic · Meritocracy · Economic theory of democracy · Republicanism · Populism · USA · Donald Trump

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Many thanks to the anonymous reviewers for their comments and to Dr. Adebowale Akande for his professorial editorial assistance. Large parts of this chapter have been published in an earlier version by van der Haak, D. and D. Deweer. "Discontent with Procedural and Meritocratic Democracy. Sandel's Republican Contribution to Populism Studies." *Populism* 5 (2022), pp. 21–47

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## Introduction

Since his rise in the political realm, Donald Trump has become inextricably linked to populism, being possibly the most well-known populist alive. It is therefore important to investigate what exactly led to the rise of this populist movement. Over the past decades, Michael J. Sandel, best-selling public philosophy author and Anne T. and Robert M. Bass Professor of Government Theory at Harvard University has become a renowned figure when it comes to analyzing the state of politics within the United States. His particular contributions to the field of populism studies are, however, less well-known. In this chapter, we will argue that this is an oversight. From the very early stages of his career to his latest work, Sandel provides valuable insights into the causes of the rise of populism and contributions to the search for remedies. Considering his expertise in American politics, his works are of crucial importance to gain a better understanding of the rise of Trump's populism in particular. We will explain how Sandel's works may help us better understand what caused Trump's populist ascent, and evaluate particular remedies to populism. We claim that Sandel's theory on the causes of populism incorporates aspects from the Durkheimian<sup>1</sup> mass society thesis and Downsian<sup>2</sup> economic thesis.<sup>3</sup> Whereas Sandel's earlier works focus more on the former by emphasizing the public discontent with liberal individualism, Sandel's later works give more attention to the latter thesis by analyzing the role of markets, meritocracy, and globalization processes. Examining Sandel's theory in light of these two theses will help us better understand a variety of aspects contributing to the popularity of Trump's populism.

In Sect. 1, we begin by setting out two of the core theories on the causes of populism, namely, the Durkheimian mass society thesis and the Downsian economic thesis. Subsequently, in Sect. 2, we elaborate on how Sandel can help us understand how the discontent with liberal individualist procedural democracy may partially explain the rise of Trump's populism, aligning his analysis with the Durkheimian mass society thesis. Section 3 links Sandel's critique of meritocracy with Downs' economic thesis by stressing how mainstream parties have failed to protect citizens from the tyranny of merit. Lastly, we provide an overview of Sandel's civic humanism as a potential antidote to Trumpian populism in Sect. 4 and give our evaluation of his solution in Sect. 5.

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<sup>1</sup>Durkheim, E. *The Division of Labor in Society*, trans. W. D. Halls (New York: The Free Press, 1997).

<sup>2</sup>Downs, A. *An Economic Theory of Democracy* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1957).

<sup>3</sup>As identified by Hawkins, K., M. Read, and T. Pauwels. "Populism and Its Causes." In *The Oxford Handbook of Populism*, eds. C. R. Kaltwasser, P. Taggart, P. O. Espejo and P. Ostiguy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), pp. 267–286.



## Two Theories on the Causes of Populism

Before elaborating on Sandel's contribution to understanding the rise of Trump's populism, it is important to give a brief overview of some of the most prominent theories in the already existing literature on the causes of populism in general. Hawkins et al.<sup>4</sup> provide such an overview in *Populism and Its Causes*, distinguishing two crucially important theories on this topic: (1) Durkheimian mass society thesis and (2) Downsian economic thesis. Analyzing these models can help us gain a better understanding of Sandel's unique contribution to this debate. According to Hawkins et al.,<sup>5</sup> Durkheim's Mass Society Theory holds that a "collective consciousness," a set of values and norms that members of a society may share, is an essential component of what holds a society together. In an attempt to analyze modern societies and the rise of individualism, Durkheim argues that it is *solidarity* between individuals that constitutes societies. However, Kornhauser (as cited in Tindall et al.<sup>6</sup>) observes that the rise of industrialization processes and changes in the division of labor led to significant social changes. Societies became more atomized as power shifted toward more bureaucratic, "elitist" institutions, leaving many members of society alienated, disconnected, and normless, which Durkheim calls "anomie." Reasoning from a sociological perspective, Durkheim himself argued that the exact "form" of solidarity also differs per society, as some societies are more complex than others. Notwithstanding these specific attributes, the use of the broader "Durkheimian" Mass Society Theory<sup>7</sup> as described by Hawkins et al. has become of much more use within populism studies. Indeed, Mass Society Theory understood as such has been used by multiple authors to explain the rise of populism. Several theorists argue that modernization and globalization processes atomize workforces and disempower work unions, creating a weakness at the core of mass-based, civil societies.<sup>8</sup> As discontent grows and party identification weakens, populists play into individuals' needs for a source of identity by providing "the people" with a "popular" identity, thereby reconstituting the collective consciousness.<sup>9</sup> Often charismatic populists proclaim that the common people are a morally superior group that needs protection from a group of corrupt elites. As such, the thesis centralizes "threats to culture and feelings of identity loss" to explain the causes of populism.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>Ibid., 267–286.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., 269.

<sup>6</sup>Tindall, D. B., F. M. Kay, D. M. Zuberi and L. B. Kerri. "Urban and Community Studies". In *Encyclopedia of Violence, Peace, & Conflict*, ed. L. Kurtz (Cambridge: Academic Press, 2008), pp. 2224–2244.

<sup>7</sup>This broader thesis is not entirely identical to Durkheim's own theory, as it does not incorporate his specific idea of the evolution of societies and their subsequent forms of solidarity.

<sup>8</sup>Hawkins, K., M. Read, and T. Pauwels, *Populism and Its Causes*, p. 269.

<sup>9</sup>Laclau, E. *Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory: Capitalism, Fascism, Populism* (London: New Left Books, 1977).

<sup>10</sup>Hawkins, K., M. Read, and T. Pauwels, *Populism and Its Causes*, 269–270.

Hawkins et al.<sup>11</sup> claim that, although there is little empirical support for this theory, two variations of the theory remain influential. Firstly, Laclau attributes the rise of populism to the fact that (capitalist) industrialization generates a wide plurality of identities, contesting the working-class identity. Populists respond to this by claiming to represent “the people,” thereby putting forward an identity that may unite people against the current hegemony (i.e., the so-called “elite”).<sup>12</sup> Via an empty signifier in which citizens with diverse interests and perspectives can find themselves, the populist aims to address the multiplicity of new identities.<sup>13</sup> An example is Donald Trump’s famous slogan “Make America Great Again,” by which Trump refers to all unsatisfied, social demands in the chain of equivalence.<sup>14</sup> This chain of equivalence should be understood as “the logic of simplification and negativity used by hegemonic social formations to signify themselves, and is aimed at creating a horizon composed of separated antagonistic forces.”<sup>15</sup> In other words, this refers to how distinct demands reaggregate under the umbrella of the empty signifier, despite their differences, and are absorbed in one discourse on the basis of shared underlying feelings of frustration. Alternatively, media studies of populism argue that the success of populism is largely due to the fact that the development of media technology has made it easier to “reinforce the cognitive weaknesses and emotional vulnerability of the masses.”<sup>16</sup> Due to the rise of media such as the television, radio and nowadays social media, the capacity of politicians to personally connect with citizens has intensified immensely.<sup>17</sup> Subsequently, the often sensational rhetoric of populists helps them gain large amounts of attention, as commercially driven media companies gain more viewers, readers, and listeners by reporting on populists rather than mainstream politicians.

Conversely, Downs (as cited in Hawkins et al.<sup>18</sup>) reasons from an economic perspective, taking citizens to be primarily strategic decision-makers. Applying rational-choice theory to democratic politics, he argues citizens (voters and politicians alike) aim to maximize their material self-interest. Downs’ economic thesis has been used in different ways to explain the causes of populism. For example, Betz’

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 269–270.

<sup>12</sup> Laclau, E., *On Populist Reason* (London: Verso Books, 2005).

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 37.

<sup>14</sup> We do not suggest that Trump is an example of populism of the kind supported by Laclau (Ibid.; Mouffe (2018), *For a Left Populism*). Our point is only that Trumpism displays the populist logic of articulation that Laclau describes.

<sup>15</sup> Laclau, E. and Mouffe, C. *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (London: Verso Books, 2013), 144.

<sup>16</sup> Hawkins, K., M. Read, and T. Pauwels, *Populism and Its Causes*, 270.

<sup>17</sup> For more on the relationships between media, (populist) leaders, and citizens, see also: Kurt, W. and R. Madrid, *When Democracy Trumps Populism: European and Latin American Lessons for the United States* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019); Moffitt, B. and S. Tormey. “Rethinking Populism: Politics, Mediatisation and Political Style.” *Political Studies* 62 (2) (2013), pp. 381–397.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., pp. 270–273.

“globalization losers thesis” holds that globalization processes have failed to sufficiently take care of unskilled, unemployed, and uneducated citizens (i.e., globalization’s leftover “losers”).<sup>19</sup> Populist sentiments grew as a result of this group feeling underrepresented in politics and the unresponsiveness of mainstream parties. A different theory sees the weakness of (corrupt) democratic forms of governance as the main source of discontent, fuelling the populist’s success. Hawkins et al.<sup>20</sup> draw on several studies to show that corruption leads to general dissatisfaction with democracy’s functioning.<sup>21</sup> Additionally, they show that the deep inequalities and feelings of injustice, that emerge when authorities appear to be corrupt, stimulate anti-establishment sentiments.<sup>22</sup> Di Tella’s so-called “relative deprivation argument” centralizes the failure of elites to live up to the expectations of citizens as one of the key contributors of the success of populism.<sup>23</sup> From this view, the overall dissatisfaction with the performance of democratic governance leads citizens to support populist parties. Lastly, some studies that follow Downs’ economic approach focus on the institutions and party systems that shape the environments that allow populist parties to rise. For example, electoral systems with a relatively low threshold allow populists to rise more easily compared to majoritarian systems.<sup>24</sup> The extent to which there are electoral opportunities for populists to emerge impacts their success as well. If important issues are being insufficiently addressed by existing parties, or if there are high levels of electoral volatility, there are more opportunities for potential populist parties to thrive. Populists also occasionally distinguish themselves positively from other parties by being more flexible when it comes to defining their ideology and by having the capacity to promote (charismatic) leaders. When they are able to radiate a sense of competence and unity (e.g., by employing competent staff), their perceptions become more positive, making them a seemingly more trustworthy and credible option to support.<sup>25</sup> Donald Trump’s populism exhibits clear features of the Downsian economic perspective as well. For example, he played on existing anti-globalization sentiments by continuously reiterating that he would put “America

<sup>19</sup>Betz, H., *Radical Right-Wing Populism in Western Europe* (New York: St. Martins Press, 1994).

<sup>20</sup>Hawkins, K., M. Read, and T. Pauwels, *Populism and Its Causes*, 272.

<sup>21</sup>Kriesi, H. *The Transformation of European Social Democracy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

<sup>22</sup>De la Torre, C. *Populist Seduction in Latin America*, second ed. (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2010).

<sup>23</sup>Di Tella, T. “Populism and Reform in Latin America.” In *Obstacles to Change in Latin America*, ed. C. Véliz. (London: Oxford University Press, 1965), 47–74; Di Tella, T. “Populism into the Twenty-First Century.” *Government and Opposition* 32 (2) (1997), 187–200.

<sup>24</sup>Carter, E. *The Extreme Right in Western Europe* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005); Golder, M. “Explaining Variation in the Success of Extreme Right Parties in Western Europe.” *British Journal of Political Science* 36 (4) (2003), 432–466; Norris, P. *Radical Right: Voters and Parties in the Electoral Market* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Van Kessel, S. *Populist Parties in Europe: Agents of Discontent?* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

<sup>25</sup>Hawkins, K., M. Read, and T. Pauwels, *Populism and Its Causes*, 272–273.

first” and painted his democratic opponent Hillary Clinton as a corrupt establishment figure in order to gain more success in his campaign for the presidency in 2016.

Despite the fact that Hawkins et al. ultimately diverge from the Durkheimian and Downsian theories on populism, they nonetheless point out that both theories have merit and that they are even complementary to a certain extent.<sup>26</sup> Durkheimian mass society theory demonstrates clearly how diverse sets of normative, emotional and identity-related factors impact the lives and decision-making processes of citizens. It enriches Downsian economics by arguing that citizens and political elites are not solely driven by material self-interest. On the other hand, the Downsian economic argument creditably articulates how rational, contemplative, and self-interested citizens and politicians may nonetheless be driven by material concerns while making political choices.<sup>27</sup> As we have seen, Trump’s populist rhetoric contains aspects of both theories on populism and its causes. From the Durkheimian perspective, the rise of Trump can be explained by pointing at his capacity to articulate unsatisfied, social demands, returning a sense of community by referring to his fanbase as the “real people of the United States,” and by claiming to fight the current hegemony by saying he would “drain the swamp.” In addition, the sensational rhetoric typical of that of populists has gained him exceptional media coverage, helping toward his eventual victory in the presidential election of 2016. From the Downsian perspective, Trump’s anti-establishment and anti-globalization sentiments helped his success by giving a group of citizens the feeling that they finally found a leader that would put their interests first. Moreover, his continuous bragging about his success as a businessman served to exert a sense of trustworthiness as well. Where these existing strands already shine some light on the features of Trump’s success, we now turn to Sandel’s theory in order to discover more about the rise of his populism.

## The Procedural Republic and democracy’s Discontent

Michael Sandel’s earlier reflections on contemporary politics were mainly in line with the “mass society thesis” and of course not yet focussed on Trump’s populism as they were written in the late 1990s. Nonetheless, the insights Sandel provides in these works shine a light on the discontent with the “public philosophy” that guides the United States, a discontent that would remain and eventually fuelled the

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<sup>26</sup>Ibid., 274–276.

<sup>27</sup>Note that the Durkheimian and Downsian approaches are situated on another level than attempts at explaining populism by reference to the so-called “paradox of representation” (Pitkin, H., *The Concept of Representation* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1967)). The focus on representation itself leaves open whether it is identity-representation or interest-representation or both that is at stake. For an analysis of populism that focuses on representation, see Urbinati, N., *Me The People: How Populism Transforms Democracy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2019).

sentiments of Trump's voters as well.<sup>28</sup> A proper understanding of Sandel's critical analysis requires us to look at the development of Sandel's political thought throughout the final two decades of the twentieth century.

The first signs of what would become a full-blown criticism of the state of contemporary democracy were already present in Sandel's early work which focuses on John Rawls' influential liberal egalitarian theory of distributive justice. In *A Theory of Justice*, Rawls developed an account of *justice as fairness* that would come to replace utilitarianism as the dominant theoretical framework in Anglo-American political philosophy.<sup>29</sup> Sandel's communitarian criticism of liberal egalitarianism<sup>30</sup> focused on the assumption of "the priority of the right over the good."<sup>31</sup> Rawls assumed that the justification of principles of justice can and ought to be provided independently from particular convictions about the good life, whereas Sandel argued that any justification of individual rights is dependent on a moral judgment about the importance of the ends served by these rights.<sup>32</sup> He explained that Rawls' priority of the right was dependent on a radical individualist assumption of "unencumbered selves," individuals free to choose their own goals, unbound by any given attachments that would be constitutive of their identity. Despite the liberating idea behind it, Sandel argued that such a conception of personhood was both unconvincing and disempowering, as it leaves us without solid ground for making choices. Attachments that we discover as being constitutive of who we are, are a necessary precondition for non-arbitrary reflection about who we want to be.<sup>33</sup> Notably, Rawlsian liberals can acknowledge this important element of our moral experience in our private lives but must deny its role in our public lives in order to safeguard our independence and freedom in choosing our own goals. However, Sandel deplored the huge political drawback of this noble purpose of liberalism:

Liberalism teaches respect for the distance between self and ends, and when this distance is lost, we are submerged in a circumstance that ceases to be ours. But by seeking to secure this distance too completely, liberalism undermines its own insight. By putting the self beyond the reach of politics, it makes human agency an article of faith rather than an object of continuing attention and concern, a premise of politics rather than its precarious achievement. This misses the pathos of politics and also its most inspiring possibilities. It overlooks the danger that when politics goes badly, not only disappointments but also dislocations are

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<sup>28</sup>Sandel, M.J. *Democracy's Discontent. America in Search of a New Public Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1996).

<sup>29</sup>Rawls, J. *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1971).

<sup>30</sup>Sandel, M.J. *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982).

<sup>31</sup>Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, 27–34.

<sup>32</sup>Sandel, M.J. *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice*, second ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, Sandel 1998a, b, c), ix–xvi; Sandel, M.J. *Public Philosophy. Essays on Morality in Politics*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 252–260.

<sup>33</sup>Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice*, 175–181.

likely to result. And it forgets the possibility that when politics goes well, we can know a good in common that we cannot know alone.<sup>34</sup>

Hence, despite all good intentions, Rawls' banishing of constitutive attachments and moral convictions from the political sphere is a recipe for political discontent. It makes politics something detached from our deepest selves.

Soon after the publication of *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice*, Sandel made clear that his criticism of Rawls was not just a matter of academic infighting. He emphasized that the flaws of *justice as fairness* have a direct connection to the flaws of American democracy, as Rawls' liberal philosophy largely matched "the political philosophy implicit in our practices and institutions."<sup>35</sup> The dark shadow of communitarian politics from the past—when the idea of constitutive communities resulted in undeniable oppression—had driven democracy toward liberal individualism. Sandel thus recognized how the predicament of American democracy mirrored his criticism of Rawls' liberal individualist assumptions as being unconvincing and disempowering: citizens feel frustrated rather than liberated. This discontent was, according to Sandel, the result of the course of development of the modern welfare state, shifting from a "national republic" to a "procedural republic" (i.e., a public life animated by a rights-based liberal ethic).<sup>36</sup> The welfare state's original reliance on an idea of national common purpose was gradually replaced by a cold and distant bureaucracy of individual rights and entitlements. As such, citizens do not feel actively involved in setting the course, nor do they feel any special attachment to a huge societal project that nevertheless requires their contribution and sacrifice:

In our public life, we are more entangled, but less attached, than ever before. It is as though the unencumbered self presupposed by the liberal ethic had begun to come true – less liberated than disempowered, entangled in a network of obligations and involvements unassociated with any act of will, and yet unmediated by those common identifications or expansive self-definitions that would make them tolerable.<sup>37</sup>

Here, we already clearly recognize a particular description of political alienation in mass societies.

The link between Rawls' liberal individualism and American public philosophy became even clearer after Rawls developed his conception of "political liberalism." Inspired by the critical responses he received from Sandel and others, Rawls set out to disentangle his liberal vision for society from the metaphysical assumptions of selfhood and autonomy that made him vulnerable to communitarian criticism. Therefore, he developed a new foundation for the attributed priority of principles of justice over comprehensive conceptions of the good life. Instead of the "comprehensive liberalism" that characterized *A Theory of Justice*, he proposed the idea of

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<sup>34</sup>Ibid., 183.

<sup>35</sup>Sandel, M.J. "The Procedural Republic and the Unencumbered Self." *Political Theory* 12 (1) (1984), 81.

<sup>36</sup>Ibid., 93.

<sup>37</sup>Ibid., 94.

“political liberalism,” where the basic structure of liberal democratic society is seen as the object of an “overlapping consensus” between the given plurality of reasonable beliefs in society.<sup>38</sup> In a critical book review, Sandel acknowledged that this strategy enabled Rawls to avoid much of the earlier criticism, but only at the cost of new problems.<sup>39</sup> The most important problem, in light of our present situation, concerns the idea of public reason. Rawls emphasized that the overlapping consensus in his idea of political liberalism does not only concern the basic principles of justice, but also an agreement on how to engage in public debate on the implications of these principles, or, in other words, an agreement on what constitutes “public reason.” Political decision-making is then supposed to be based on considerations that every citizen can recognize as being reasonable, which excludes any reference to moral beliefs beyond the boundaries of the overlapping consensus.<sup>40</sup> Sandel denounced the ensuing impoverishment of public debate in theoretical terms. Furthermore, he underlined the extent to which Rawls’ theory was reflected in American democracy. He considered the poor state of American public debate—with its fundamentalist tendencies and penchant for sensation—as empirical evidence of the backlash of banning moral convictions from the political stage:

It cannot be said that the public philosophy of political liberalism is wholly responsible for these tendencies. But its vision of public reason is too spare to contain the moral energies of a vital democratic life. It thus creates a moral void that opens the way for the intolerant, the trivial, and other misguided moralisms.<sup>41</sup>

Although Sandel did not explicitly mention populism at the time, it is not difficult to classify populism among these “misguided moralisms” that rise due to political alienation in a democratic debate that does not reflect people’s moral convictions. This is especially the case when we interpret populism in moralistic terms, like Jan-Werner Müller does, in defining populism as “a particular *moralistic imagination of politics*, a way of perceiving the political world that sets a morally pure and fully unified – but [...] ultimately fictional – people against elites who are deemed corrupt or in some other way morally inferior.”<sup>42</sup>

Ultimately, Sandel’s reflections on the connection between liberal public philosophy and the pitiful state of democracy culminated in a more lengthy study, entitled *Democracy’s Discontent. America in Search of a Public Philosophy*. There, Sandel told the story of how American public philosophy gradually changed from republicanism to liberalism over the course of the twentieth century. American democracy

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<sup>38</sup> Rawls, *J. Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993).

<sup>39</sup> Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice*, second ed., 184–218.

<sup>40</sup> Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, 212–254.

<sup>41</sup> Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice*, second ed., 217.

<sup>42</sup> Müller (2017), *What is Populism?*, 19–20 (original italicization). Given the controversies about the many typologies of populism, we consider it beyond the scope of this contribution to situate Trumpism within this field of typologies. That being said, Müller’s conception of populism is what we primordially have in mind when labeling Trump a populist, unless we explicitly refer to other conceptions.



used to be based on the republican theory of freedom as self-government in a decentralized political and economic system, where citizens are educated and empowered to participate in the determination of the course of their communities.<sup>43</sup> Sandel described the erosion of this republican perspective to the benefit of the liberal philosophy of the procedural republic in terms of a two-pronged and conflicting evolution. On the one hand, the constitution was increasingly interpreted as a framework of “rights as trumps.”<sup>44</sup> This comes down to the aforementioned priority of the right over the good, meaning that people were no longer primarily seen as citizens in the republican sense, but as individual bearers of rights and entitlements that outweigh any notion of the common good. On the other hand, the construction of the modern welfare state swallowed the individual in the anonymous bureaucracy of big government and even bigger companies. This paradoxical conjunction of the atomization of autonomous individuals and the construction of a complicated web of dependency resulted in a toxic mix for American democracy, as the social bond of civic virtue and solidarity required to sustain the latter was subverted by the former.<sup>45</sup>

The populism-inducing discontent that Sandel identified as a consequence of the change of public philosophy takes two forms. First, there is a sense that “the moral fabric of community is unravelling around us.” Second, we experience a loss of control of our lives, both on the individual and the collective level.<sup>46</sup> The latter is created in part by the job insecurity that characterizes the globalized economy, but, more importantly, in Sandel’s eyes, there is an overall mismatch between the liberal self-image and our socio-economic environment, governed by institutions beyond our understanding and control.<sup>47</sup> Embracing the global economy and its market mechanism, the liberal (having become largely technocratic) leaves political discourse empty. The insistence on the idea that the individual is only bound by the ends and roles of their own choice implies that any (moral) boundaries external to the individual are denied. As political discourse lacks moral resonance, its philosophy not only erodes communities but even breeds fundamentalism as a result of the public’s need for larger meaning.<sup>48</sup> Within this context, populism is set to arise. The populist logic is attractive since it captures the current discontent, and on top of that offers a moral substitute in a political realm that lacks precisely this much-desired moral character. The populist offers the dissatisfied a scapegoat in the form of an evil “other” (the elites) as the embodiment of their discontent. Additionally, it provides citizens with communal identification, by making them part of “the people.”

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<sup>43</sup> Sandel, *Democracy’s Discontent*, 4–8, 25–28.

<sup>44</sup> To be clear, “Trump” does not refer to the person here. It refers metaphorically to the concept of a card that outranks any other card in the context of a card game. “Rights as trumps”, therefore, refers to the use of rights as something that outranks any other kind of consideration. *Ibid.*, 42.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 116–119.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 3, 294–297.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 323.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 322–323.



Populism promises to bring back a sense of power by claiming to fight the current system that imposes confusing structures upon the individual.<sup>49</sup> It is this charismatic capacity of the populist to map the ongoing discontent, a sort of politics of resentment, and the fact that they simultaneously provide an oversimplified but understandable solution, which explains the success of populism.<sup>50</sup>

Trump's success can be seen as a paradigmatic example of how the erosion of the American republican democracy and the ensuing discontent gives rise to populism. The discontent and aversion toward the liberal individualism that Sandel describes became distinctly visible in Trump's campaigns. For instance, in one of Trump's many rallies, his son, Donald Trump Jr., popularized the quote "make liberals cry again," clearly emphasizing their opposition toward liberalism.<sup>51</sup> Both before and after his election, Trump took advantage of the feelings of disempowerment existing in the United States, as the federal government had become increasingly distanced from certain groups of people. He vilified mainstream politicians and promised his following to fight this group of "elites" in order to return a sense of morality and lawfulness. In practice, he did so by fighting hard against (leftist) groups of protesters in the name of "returning law and order" and by returning conservative Christian values in matters like abortion. Also, the nativist dimension of Trump's political platform can be understood accordingly, in the sense that immigrants are another *other*, i.e. not the elite itself but those deemed to be protected by the elite and their ideology, at the expense of the people.<sup>52</sup> Sandel's critical analysis of the rise of liberal individualism thereby provides new insights into the rise of Trump's populist backlash. In identifying the consequences for democratic politics of the rise of liberal proceduralism at the expense of republican self-government, he developed a specific version of the *mass society thesis*.

## The Political Shadow of Meritocracy

In a short essay titled *Populism, liberalism, and democracy*, Sandel further explores how right-wing populists have been increasingly successful over the past decades, leading eventually toward the rise of Trump. In this work, Sandel ascribes much of

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<sup>49</sup>Müller, *What is Populism?*, 19–25.

<sup>50</sup>See also van der Haak, D. "An ameliorative approach to populism." *Azimuth – Philosophical Coordinates in Modern and Contemporary Age* IX (17) (2021), 167–176.

<sup>51</sup>Newman, J. "Let's make liberals cry again: Don Jr's message to supporters as he joins the rest of the President's family on the final reelection push." *Dailymail*, November 3, 2020, 1.

<sup>52</sup>For analysis of the nativist dimension in contemporary right-wing populism, see especially Moffitt, B. *Populism* (Cambridge: Polity, 2020); Mudde, C. *Populist radical right parties in Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Mudde, C. *The Far Right Today* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2019).

this success to the corrosive effects of meritocratic thinking.<sup>53</sup> He elaborates on these thoughts in his book *The Tyranny of Merit*.<sup>54</sup> In addition to frustrations about the technocratic way of conceiving the public good (as discussed in the previous section), this book focusses primarily on problems concerning the meritocratic way of defining winners and losers (a dichotomy often used in Trump's speeches). Sandel admits there are good things about merit.<sup>55</sup> Rewarding merit is efficient, for we are better off if workers are competent and meritorious, and it is, to a certain extent, fair (for example, it avoids discrimination against the most competent applicants for a vacancy). These reasons have steered the public debate to focus exclusively on the question of *how* we may create equal opportunities and achieve a perfect meritocracy.<sup>56</sup> However, Sandel argues that meritocracy will nonetheless leave us both morally and politically unsatisfied. Firstly, he claims that a perfect meritocracy would likely still constitute an *unjust* society.<sup>57</sup> As the meritocratic ideal allows citizens the mobility to move between different levels in society based on their merit, it justifies inequality. However, Sandel draws on Rawls to show that the talents that are often rewarded in society are never really "acquired," but that they are possessed (or not) due to sheer luck.<sup>58</sup> Additionally, the particular values and talents that societies and markets happen to value in a particular time are also morally arbitrary. As such, market-driven societies that greatly reward the talented based on "merit" do not necessarily constitute a just society.

Sandel's second objection to meritocracy holds that following the meritocratic ideal would not constitute a *good* society. The so-called "rhetoric of rising" (i.e., the idea that as long as you work hard and fair, you may achieve success) puts too much weight on personal responsibility in his view.<sup>59</sup> As a result of the logic of self-making and self-sufficiency, those who become successful come to see their success as a product solely of their own doing. From this perspective, the winners of society are deserving of great rewards as they reflect hard work and effort, whereas the poor and less fortunate are in such positions solely because of their own failures and laziness. Not only does this fracture the commonality between different groups in society, but it also leads to what Sandel calls "the tyranny of merit."<sup>60</sup> In such societies, the winners look down upon the losers with disdain, expressing attitudes of excessive pride and self-confidence (i.e., "meritocratic hubris"). Simultaneously, those who are left behind in society (e.g., the working class) are left in shame;

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<sup>53</sup> Sandel, M. J. "Populism, Liberalism, and Democracy." *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 44 (4) (2018), 353–359.

<sup>54</sup> Sandel, M. J. *The Tyranny of Merit. What's Become of the Common Good?* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2020).

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 129–134.

<sup>59</sup> Sandel, *The Tyranny of Merit*, 34.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

demoralized and humiliated, they see their lack of success as being the direct result of their own faults. Denying the role of luck that is involved in success, the groups that have suffered from increasing inequality are left with resentment, and reject the rhetoric of liberal elites who keep suggesting that they should just be smarter, work harder and get a better education. Approaching inequalities merely from a meritocratic perspective tears societies apart. It abates the idea that citizens from different levels of society share a common fate, reduces solidarity, and takes away the dignity of workers that are less valued by the market. Indeed, being less well-paid gives workers the indirect suggestion that their work is less valuable to the common good and thus less deserving of social recognition.<sup>61</sup> Sandel thereby shows that the attitudes of both winners and losers create both moral and political problems, interfering with human flourishing and our achieving of the common good.

Sandel himself takes these issues to provide us with valuable insights into the causes of populism, stating clearly: "The populist backlash of recent years has been a revolt against the tyranny of merit."<sup>62</sup> From his perspective, it is important to understand that, although Trump's success might be indicative of existing xenophobia, racism and hostility to multiculturalism among his fanbase, reducing his fanbase to having such attitudes is too simplistic. Instead, a large part of the rise of his populism took place among uneducated people that despise (leftist) credentialism (i.e., excessive reliance on and overemphasis of formal qualifications, such as academic degrees) and its rhetoric. The rhetoric of rising is primarily focused on answering to inequalities by giving people more opportunities through education. However, as mentioned before, this indirectly devaluates the role of the uneducated in contributing to the common good. The meritocratic hubris of those on top of the meritocratic hierarchy leaves the "losers" of society in shame and self-doubt, damaging any sense of community and mutual obligation that was left. As mainstream parties stigmatize populists, describing them merely as the result of the working class protecting their white privileges, the struggle of those disempowered to achieve social dignity remained to be articulated.<sup>63</sup>

Having lost faith in mainstream parties that have failed to stick up for those left behind, Trump was able to exploit the subsequent discontent of those who hate credentialist elites and their rhetoric that only the highly educated can make good decisions. As a result, Trump's margin among white people without a college degree in the 2016 election became the largest among any candidate in exit polls since 1980.<sup>64</sup> He was able to uniquely answer to feelings of disempowerment that arose due to rising inequalities. Playing into the politics of humiliation, Trump argued he would put "the people" first, returning social status to the losers of society. This is

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 198–199.

<sup>62</sup> Coman, J. "Michael Sandel: The populist backlash has been a revolt against the tyranny of merit." *The Guardian*, September 6, 2020, 1.

<sup>63</sup> Sandel, *The Tyranny of Merit*, 203.

<sup>64</sup> Tyson, A. and Maniam, S. "Behind Trump's victory: Divisions by race, gender, education." *Pew Research Center* (2016).

seen clearly in Trump's famous expression that he "loves the uneducated." Instead of returning social esteem and dignity by reinforcing the meritocratic logic, he focused on issues like "national sovereignty, identity, and pride" to return social recognition.<sup>65</sup> Trump's promise to make America great again was not a promise of placing those with merit on top of societies' hierarchy, but the uneducated that would vote for him. Although Sandel explains part of the success of populism as a reaction to meritocracy's toxicity, he notes that populists and their adherents do not reject meritocracy, but that they think society is already meritocratic as it is. They accept the meritocratic status quo, and seek to find something else; not only higher wages or better jobs (i.e., distributive justice), but social recognition, esteem, dignity, and an opportunity to contribute to the common good (i.e., contributive justice).<sup>66</sup> This explains exactly why Trump was able to maintain his republican free market convictions in which meritorious citizens can rise to the top, whilst at the same time exploiting the build-up aversion toward primarily leftist, credentialist elites. Although he repeatedly drew on the distinction between "winners" versus "losers," he cleverly redefined these terms, attaching much less merit to credentials less favored by his fanbase, such as education. Instead, voting for Trump would be enough to become a winner. "You are going to win so much, you are going to get tired of winning," he stated when predicting the results of his upcoming term as president. Losers would become defined as enemies of the state (and often more specifically Trump's party), such as liberals, voters, and politicians of the Democratic Party and IS terrorists.

Sandel's conception of the tyranny of merit provides interesting content to the Downsian economic thesis on the causes of Trump's populism mentioned before. Sandel clearly shows that those who vote for Trump feel left behind by globalization processes. As the toxic, meritocratic logic inevitably leaves a group of "losers" in society, any promise for better education and more equal opportunities does not constitute an interesting solution for those left behind. This captures Betz' aforementioned "globalization losers thesis," which holds that globalization processes fail to sufficiently address the needs of unskilled, unemployed, and uneducated citizens. Moreover, Sandel insists that mainstream, centrist politicians like Hillary Clinton or Joe Biden are often insufficiently able to articulate what citizens really want (e.g., social esteem and the opportunity to contribute to the common good). The unresponsiveness of these parties, together with the distrust toward the technocratic elites, partially explains why the support for populism grows. Similar to Sandel's explanation, Di Tella's "relative deprivation argument" also mentions an elite group that fails to satisfy the expectations of those citizens that subsequently vote populist. Sandel enriches Di Tella's argument by demonstrating that rising inequalities should be seen in the light of the toxicity of meritocracy. The subsequent, economically strategic behavior of voters becomes visible in their clear response to the rhetoric of rising. As the meritocratic logic fails to represent their economic interests

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<sup>65</sup>Ibid., 71.

<sup>66</sup>Ibid., 211–212

sufficiently, voting for populist leaders who promise to put their economic interests first (no matter what) becomes most advantageous to them. On the side of political elites, the Downsian strategy becomes apparent in the way politicians exploit such issues for political gain. One example is Trump's nationalist promise to put "America First," no matter who is most meritorious. But it also becomes apparent in his negligence of creating unity, as he first and foremost promises to protect the interests of "the real people," i.e., his voters.

Although Sandel focuses more on these Downsian economic theses in his later works, he keeps addressing points related to the Durkheimian mass society thesis as well. For instance, he draws implicitly on emotional and identity-related factors that may induce populism by stressing the shame and humiliation existent among the losers of meritocracy. In addition, he maintains that populism rises when a clear sense of community and solidarity among different groups of society has vanished, providing us with a very specific explanation as to why the circumstances in today's society have led us to anomie, the disconnection, alienation, and normlessness of citizens. Where Durkheim argues that solidarity between individuals constitutes societies, Sandel reiterates that it is exactly this solidarity that is lost due to the toxicity of meritocratic thinking.

## What to Do about Trump?

Whether it concerns his "Durkheimian" cause or his "Downsian" cause, in both cases Sandel points to an intermediary factor to explain the ensuing rise of populism. The disempowerment and moral void of the procedural or technocratic republic and the effects of meritocracy on social recognition both undermine republican democracy. In its turn, the absence of republican self-government causes the populist backlash, as the moralistic opposition between the people and an immoral elite presents itself as a way out of the moral void and the plea for a return of power to the real people is an easy answer to the sense of disempowerment and disregard. This common intermediary indicates how to respond to Trump. By providing a substitute solution that captures the discontent of people, we can fight the cause of Trump's rise at its core rather than continuously having to deal with populism's symptoms. So Sandel argues that, if we want to steer clear of populism, we need to reinvigorate republican self-government: "[T]he republican tradition, with its emphasis on community and self-government, may offer a corrective to our impoverished civic life."<sup>67</sup>

Sandel mainly refers to republicanism as the public philosophy of the American Founding Fathers (and not the political party that Trump is part of), but it is an ancient political theory that dates back to Athenian democracy and the Aristotelian ethical perspective on active citizenship as a necessary and prime element of human

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<sup>67</sup> Sandel, *Democracy's Discontent*, 6.

flourishing.<sup>68</sup> In comparison to liberalism, republicanism interprets liberty as the ability to effectively participate in the government of one's community rather than as the absence of interference. This also implies that, in contrast to the liberal state, the government is not entirely neutral toward individual preferences. Given the conception of freedom as self-government, actively stimulating civic virtue is a public concern.<sup>69</sup> Sandel provides at least some clues about what reviving the republication tradition in contemporary societies would imply:

Recalling the republican conception of freedom as self-rule may prompt us to pose questions we have forgotten to ask: What economic arrangements are hospitable to self-government? How might our political discourse engage rather than avoid the moral and religious convictions people bring to the public realm? And how might the public life of a pluralist society cultivate in citizens the expansive self-understandings that civic engagement requires?<sup>70</sup>

The first element of Sandel's response to populism is what he calls "the political economy of citizenship."<sup>71</sup> To establish such a political economy of citizenship, economic and political institutions must be assessed for their capacity to promote the moral qualities that self-government requires. For instance, to generate the ability to cope with global market forces, Sandel argues for a combination of decentralization and federalism, i.e. more power to local or subnational communities, whilst simultaneously strengthening transnational structures, such as the European Union.<sup>72</sup> He also mentions more concrete policy measures, such as the establishment of community development corporations, which gives citizens a voice in the economic development of their neighborhoods,<sup>73</sup> or new priorities in urban development, providing high-quality public spaces that stimulate people to come together.<sup>74</sup> Another important element of Sandel's political economy of citizenship concerns reframing the debate about economic inequality. He argues it is better not to restrict the case against inequality to arguments about fairness. At least as important is the impact of inequality on the "spirit of friendship" that constitutes our sense of the common good.<sup>75</sup> This is also the main concern in his recent reflections on meritocracy, both in economic terms and in terms of education. Inequality leads to hubris and humiliation according to Sandel, which in turn leads to a polarized civic life:

Among those who land on top, it induces anxiety, a debilitating perfectionism, and a meritocratic hubris that struggles to conceal a fragile self-esteem. Among those it leaves behind, it imposes a demoralizing, even humiliating sense of failure.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>68</sup>Sandel, M.J. *Justice. What's the Right Thing to Do?* (London: Penguin Books, 2010), 184–207.

<sup>69</sup>Sandel, *Democracy's Discontent*, 4–6.

<sup>70</sup>*Ibid.*, 6–7.

<sup>71</sup>*Ibid.*, 121–315.

<sup>72</sup>*Ibid.*, 338–349.

<sup>73</sup>*Ibid.*, 303–304, 333–334.

<sup>74</sup>*Ibid.*, 335–336.

<sup>75</sup>*Ibid.*, 329–333.

<sup>76</sup>Sandel, *The Tyranny of Merit*, 183.

It is exactly this polarized civic life that has existed for a longer time, but which became especially visible since Trump's announcement to run for president. To face these issues, Sandel claims we should fight inequality, not only to increase fairness but, more fundamentally, to enable citizens to feel that they share a collective destiny.

The other element of Sandel's plan to counter populism, apart from the political economy of citizenship, is to bring moral discourse back to the political debate: "To reinvigorate democratic politics, we need to find our way to a morally more robust public discourse, one that takes seriously the corrosive effect of meritocratic striving on the social bonds that constitute our common life."<sup>77</sup> Instead, politics should reflect people's identities by addressing the issues that really matter to them, like their aversion of meritocratic hubris and growing income inequality. In addressing these issues, it should not shy away from taking on a moral character, one that can cultivate a shared collective identity.<sup>78</sup> Although the Democratic Party has aimed to present itself as the "morally superior" party in the United States, it has only done so by articulating the moral deficiencies of Trump and his voters. Think for example of Hillary Clinton describing half of the supporters of her opponent as a racist, sexist, homophobic, xenophobic, and Islamophobic "basket of deplorables."<sup>79</sup> However, an important condition for its success is the reconstruction of a new narrative with which *all* people can resonate. Patriotism and national pride should be more explicitly articulated, based on an ethic of social solidarity and mutual obligation. But how do we integrate morality into politics without falling into the trap of adopting a similar moralistic and exclusive attitude as Trump? By placing plurality and civil dialogue about the common good at the heart of politics. As Sandel puts it: "[T]he civic conception of freedom does not render disagreement unnecessary. It offers a way of conducting political argument, not transcending it."<sup>80</sup> Citizens can gather in smaller groups, connecting progressive public purposes with moral and spiritual argument, cultivating them into active citizens. As a result, we may accommodate a system that fights the threat against democratic inclusivity by promoting an inherently inclusive alternative to populism.

## An Evaluation

As we have seen, Michael Sandel's theories on populism provide great contributions to a better understanding of the rise of Trump. His original interpretation of the Durkheimian causes of populism explained how (Rawlsian) liberal proceduralism

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 31.

<sup>78</sup> Sandel, *Justice*, 208–269.

<sup>79</sup> Reilly, K. "Read Hillary Clinton's 'Basket of Deplorables' Remarks on Trump Supporters." *Time*, January 22, 2017. <https://time.com/4486502/hillary-clinton-basket-of-deplorables-transcript/>

<sup>80</sup> Sandel, *Democracy's Discontent*, 320.

damaged republican self-government. His earlier works show how citizens subsequently become morally dissatisfied and feel as if they lack control over their lives, which shows interesting overlaps with the mass society thesis. Trump's populism rose within the context of liberal proceduralism, answering to the moral discontent and sense of disempowerment among his republican voter base. Later, Sandel more explicitly incorporates aspects of the Downsian economic thesis by stressing how globalization processes have left unskilled, unemployed, and uneducated citizens behind, which subsequently constituted a large part of the demography of Trump's voter base. As the Democratic Party failed to sufficiently respond to citizens' needs, drawing repetitively on the meritocratic focus on education and the rhetoric of rising, Trump soon became popular under those who felt underarticulated. Indeed, as the rhetoric of mainstream parties fails to satisfy the economic interests of those left behind, it became in the strategic interest of the meritocratic "losers" to vote for Trump, who embraced the uneducated, unskilled, and unemployed, promising to put this group and their economic interests first.

Sandel's perspective on the causes of populism provides us with a particular suggestion for how to deal with Trumpian populism. The erosion of self-government that constitutes a common intermediary factor incentivizes us to investigate the option of revitalizing republican democracy by reintegrating the political economy of citizenship and moral discourse in democratic politics. Sandel's republicanism aims to stimulate self-government through invigorating civic virtues. It returns a sense of control by inspiring people to become active and conscientious citizens, establishing self-governance. The idea that this would at once tackle both sides (the Downsian and Durkheimian) of what causes populism to thrive makes Sandel's suggestion very attractive.

However, the plea for a return to republicanism is not without its own problems. First, we would like to mention a potential preliminary objection. In contrast to the assumption that populist attitudes shift dynamically over time, some authors see populism as being endemic to democracy and argue for the so-called "gatekeeping hypothesis."<sup>81</sup> This hypothesis holds that the primary way to battle populism is to enforce institutional barriers that protect democracy by limiting the potential misuse of power by policymakers and elites, who may succumb under popular pressure. This view goes against the primary focus of Sandel's republicanism, which emphasizes the importance of invigorating civic virtues and stimulating citizen participation. Although this chapter does not aim to protect Sandel's republicanism from all potential objections, there are extensive theoretical and empirical arguments to be found in the literature that support Sandel's focus on citizen participation.<sup>82</sup> Moreover, this focus is also confirmed in empirical studies. For instance, in a study of

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<sup>81</sup>Levitsky, S. and D. Ziblatt. *How Democracies Die* (New York: Broadway Books, 2018); Mounk, Y. *The People vs. Democracy: Why Our Freedom is in Danger and How to Save It* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2018); Rosenbluth, F. and I. Shapiro. *Responsible parties: Saving democracy from itself* (Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2018).

<sup>82</sup>Held, D. *Models of Democracy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007); Pateman, C. *Participation and Democratic Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970).



policy performance in Latin America, Rhodes-Purdy found that a lack of participatory access was the primary contributor to relatively weak regime support among citizens.<sup>83</sup>

Turning to the particularity of the plea for republicanism, Sandel himself is the first to admit that both the feasibility and desirability of this project are questionable. First, it is often regarded as misguided nostalgia, in the sense that it would be impossible to replicate the dynamic of the ancient Athenian or eighteenth-century American democracy on the scale of contemporary politics in a globalized world. Sandel replies that the hope for self-government in the current context rests on the dispersion of power. Self-government is, then, not necessarily an illusion, but it requires “a politics that plays itself out in a multiplicity of settings, from neighborhoods, to nations, to the world as a whole” and “citizens who can abide the ambiguity associated with divided sovereignty, who can think and act as multiply situated selves.”<sup>84</sup> Second, republicanism is accused of being coercive because it relies on the imposition of civic virtue. Sandel replies to this concern that civic education is to be seen as a matter of “persuasion” and “habituation” rather than forceful imposition. Moreover, what is being cultivated is a concern for the common good, not a particular interpretation of the common good.<sup>85</sup>

If we are convinced by Sandel's rebuttal of the previous concerns, some additional problems remain. First, Sandel may well claim that it is only a concern for the common good that is being promoted, whatever interpretation we then may give to it, but that is not entirely true. Sandel explains that there is a distinction between “strong” republicanism and “moderate” republicanism.<sup>86</sup> In the former version, civic virtue and political participation are considered intrinsically good, while the latter restricts itself to emphasizing its instrumental value to protect the socio-political framework for an individual to be able to choose and pursue his or her own values in life. Because of his reliance on the Aristotelean idea of political action as part of human flourishing, Sandel himself is to be situated in the strong branch of republicanism.<sup>87</sup> Therefore, it is not only a concern for the common good that is being promoted, but also the intrinsic value of civic virtue. This leaves Sandel vulnerable to the criticism that his view relies on an ethico-political background consensus that simply does not exist in contemporary pluralist societies.<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>83</sup>Rhodes-Purdy, M. *Regime Support Beyond the Balance Sheet: Participation and Policy Performance in Latin America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

<sup>84</sup>Sandel, *Democracy's Discontent*, 350.

<sup>85</sup>*Ibid.*, 317–321.

<sup>86</sup>*Ibid.*, 25–28. This distinction is also referred to as “civic humanism” versus “civic republicanism” or “neo-Athenian republicanism” versus “neo-Roman republicanism”. Cf. Laborde, C. and J.W. Maynor, eds. *Republicanism and Political Theory* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008).

<sup>87</sup>Sandel clearly expresses his preference for the strong version in his “Reply to Critics” in *Debating Democracy's Discontent: Essays on Politics, Law and Public Philosophy*, eds. A. Allen and M. Regan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, Sandel 1998a, b, c), 325–326.

<sup>88</sup>Habermas, J. “Three Normative Models of Democracy.” *Constellations* 1 (1) (1994), 1–10; Roonchik, D. “Aristotle's Topological Politics. Michael Sandel's Civic Republicanism.” In *On*

In light of these problems with Sandel's strong republicanism, it is tempting to turn instead to moderate (instrumental) republican theories, such as Philip Pettit's republican theory of democracy.<sup>89</sup> However, doing so undermines Sandel's argument against the liberal public philosophy. Several critics have pointed out that the difference between liberal democratic theory and moderate, instrumental versions of contemporary republicanism is negligible.<sup>90</sup> Nothing prevents liberals from promoting civic virtues, they argue, as long as the motivation for doing so is to make people comply with the demands of justice, rather than the claim that civic virtues are intrinsically valuable. Then it can remain fully compatible with the priority of the right over the good. In fact, the literature about civic education within the liberal tradition is quite extensive.<sup>91</sup> Therefore, the lack of concern for the common good can be addressed from within the liberal framework and contemporary civic republicanism can be interpreted as an important subset of liberal theory rather than a competing theoretical framework. Relatedly, one could also say that Sandel aims at a distinct version of liberalism, with a very narrow interpretation of state neutrality, which is at odds with many current versions of liberalism that cannot be said to cause democracy's discontent in the same way or to the same extent, or that might at the very least be able to adapt to the concerns he raises.

The latter not only confirms that Sandel's plea is to be interpreted as a plea for *strong* republicanism if it is to be consistent, but it also highlights the key argument. His point is not that liberalism is incapable of incorporating civic virtue. He only notes that the prevailing liberal political philosophy fails to do so sufficiently. Moreover, he emphasizes that this can hardly be considered a surprise. Liberal civic virtue is possible, but only as a second-order concern. We can propose all kinds of amendments to liberal proceduralism in order to add a sense of community and concern for the common good, but they will always remain afterthoughts in

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*Civic Republicanism. Ancient Lessons for Global Politics*, eds. G.C. Kellow and N. Leddy (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2016), 41–58.

<sup>89</sup>Pettit, P. *On the People's Terms. A Republican Theory and Model of Democracy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012). Other versions of instrumental republicanism include Maynor, J.W. *Republicanism in the Modern World* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2003); Costa, V. "Neo-Republicanism, Freedom as Non-Domination, and Citizen Virtue." *Politics, Philosophy, and Economics* 8 (2009), 401–19; Lovett, F. *A General Theory of Domination and Justice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

<sup>90</sup>Kymlicka, W. "Liberal Egalitarianism and Civic Republicanism: Friends or Enemies?" in *Debating Democracy's Discontent: Essays on Politics, Law and Public Philosophy*, eds. A. Allen and M. Regan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 131–148; Patten, A. "The Republican Critique of Liberalism." *British Journal of Political Science* 26 (1) (1996), 25–44; Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, 205–206.

<sup>91</sup>See for example Gutmann, A. *Democratic Education (revised edition)* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999); Kymlicka, *Politics in the Vernacular. Nationalism, Multiculturalism and Citizenship*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 293–316; Macedo S. *Liberal Virtues: Citizenship, Virtue, and Community in Liberal Constitutionalism* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1990). For an overview of the debate within liberal democratic theory, see Neufeld, B. "Political Liberalism and Citizenship Education." *Philosophy Compass* 8 (9) (2013), 781–797.

uneven competition with the core concern of the philosophy, which is about neutral adjudication of individual rights.<sup>92</sup> Even if successful theoretical engineering of that sort would be conceivable, Sandel challenges us to consider whether it would not be more efficient and more effective to abandon the kernel that causes the problem in the first place and to highlight the importance of individual rights within the concern for the common good rather than the other way around.

Ultimately, whether Michael Sandel helps us counter the popularity of Trumpian populism, and populism in general, hinges on two open questions. If we accept that what Sandel calls “moderate” republicanism is indistinguishable from more sophisticated variants of liberal proceduralism, his contribution rests first and foremost on the question of whether stronger republicanism is theoretically viable after all. An extensive examination of neo-Aristotelean republicanism exceeds the scope of this chapter, but we do wish to emphasize that confirmation of its current obsolescence does not answer that question completely. We can still entertain the possibility of a third way, in the form of a republican theory of democracy that is neither reducible to an amended liberal proceduralism nor reliant on an Aristotelian commitment to the intrinsic value of political action. An example of this would be personalist republicanism, as it can be found in the political philosophy of Paul Ricoeur.<sup>93</sup>

A final but major concern about Sandel's republican project is its lack of concreteness. He gives some examples of policy measures that fit what he has in mind, but, nevertheless, the project is more wishful thinking than a clear blueprint.<sup>94</sup> That brings us to the second major open question. It remains to be seen whether stronger republicanism is distinguishable in practice from populist moralist and exclusionary appeals to community values. Some of Sandel's critics have emphasized that his republican arguments are echoed by “civic fundamentalists”<sup>95</sup> with a

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<sup>92</sup>Sandel, “Reply to Critics”, 328–330.

<sup>93</sup>Ricoeur's political philosophy is built on the core tenet of contemporary republicanism: freedom as the absence of domination, the idea of a mixed constitution, and active citizenship. However, the personalist view of mankind distinguishes this philosophy from what Sandel describes as moderate and strong republicanism. Active citizenship has no intrinsic value in personalist thinking. Its importance relies on the danger of political conditions for the realization of our positive freedom being compromised. Therefore, like moderate republicanism, the personalist political philosophy can also be understood as an instrumental republicanism. Again the personalist anthropology makes an important difference because it is able to link civic virtue to an underlying ethical pursuit for what Ricoeur describes as “the good life with and for others in just institutions.” (Ricoeur, P. *Oneself as Another*, trans. K. Blamey (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992).) This ethical foundation is incompatible with liberal proceduralism. Deweer, D. *Ricoeur's Personalist Republicanism. On Personhood and Citizenship*. Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2017).

<sup>94</sup>Cf. Orwin, C. “The Encumbered American Self” in *Debating Democracy's Discontent: Essays on Politics, Law and Public Philosophy*, eds. A. Allen and M. Regan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 86–91.

<sup>95</sup>Rosenblum, N.L. “Fusion Republicanism” in *Debating Democracy's Discontent: Essays on Politics, Law and Public Philosophy*, eds. A. Allen and M. Regan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 273–288.

narrow minded “yearning for identity between individual and nation.”<sup>96</sup> Trumpism could be cited as a prime contemporary example of this appeal to self-government of the “worthy” citizens as opposed to others deemed unworthy, notably the elite and immigrants. We mentioned before that Sandel is confident his republican project can steer clear of those dangerous waters by emphasizing plurality and the need for open and bottom-up dialogue about the common good. But a concrete plan about how this inclusivity is to be established and safeguarded in practice largely remains to be developed.<sup>97</sup>

## Conclusion

The remaining open questions should not discourage researchers and activists from picking up the baton and investigating how far Sandel’s approach can help us better understand the rise of Trump’s populism and potential remedies to it. Rather than clear-cut conclusions, an alternative research program is what Sandel contributes to populism studies. He concludes that “the hope of our time rests [. . .] with those who can summon the conviction and restraint to make sense of our condition and repair the civic life on which democracy depends.”<sup>98</sup> Although his proposals for republicanism as an alternative to populism will not simply nullify the populists’ success, his reflections may help us address some of the aforementioned key issues that mainstream liberal procedural defenders of democracy have neglected for too long.

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<sup>96</sup>Connolly, W.E. “Civic Republicanism and Civic Pluralism: The Silent Struggle of Michael Sandel” in *Debating Democracy’s Discontent: Essays on Politics, Law and Public Philosophy*, eds. A. Allen and M. Regan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 205–211.

<sup>97</sup>See also Taylor, C. “Living with Difference” in *Debating Democracy’s Discontent: Essays on Politics, Law and Public Philosophy*, eds. A. Allen and M. Regan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 212–226.

<sup>98</sup>Sandel, *Democracy’s Discontent*, 351.

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