#Nationalism: the ethno-nationalist populism of Donald Trump's Twitter communication

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Abstract

In this article, we explore the ethno-nationalist populism of Donald Trump's Twitter communication during the 2016 presidential campaign. We draw on insights from ethno-symbolism – a perspective within nationalism studies – to analyse all 5,515 tweets sent by Trump during the campaign. We find that ethno-nationalist and populist themes were by far the most important component of Trump's tweets, and that these themes built upon long-standing myths and symbols of an ethnic conception of American identity. In sum, Trump's tweets depicted a virtuous white majority being threatened by several groups of immoral outsiders, who were identified by their foreignness, their religion, and their self-interestedness. The struggle against these groups was framed as a mission to restore America to a mythical golden age – to "Make America Great Again."

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"It's called a nationalist. And I say, really, we're not supposed to use that word. You know what I am? I am a nationalist, OK? I am a nationalist."
Donald Trump, Speech in Houston, Texas, October 22, 2018

Introduction

Across the West, leaders and political parties who combine ethno-nationalism and populism – an ideology referred to here as "ethno-nationalist populism" (Bonikowski 2017) – have been increasingly successful. Donald Trump's victory in the 2016 American presidential election stands out as the most visible example of this phenomenon. In this article, we seek to unpack the precise ethno-nationalist and populist content of Trump's political communication during the 2016 campaign and its relationship to long-standing ethnic conceptions of American national identity. To do so, we use insights from "ethno-symbolism" (Smith 2009) to analyse all 5,515 tweets sent from Trump's Twitter account during the campaign.

Trump's tweets during the 2016 presidential election drew overwhelmingly upon ethno-nationalist and populist themes. This may seem obvious to anyone familiar with Trump's campaign. However, a close reading of all his tweets using our theoretical lens goes beyond anecdotal accounts to uncover the *process* and *content* of Trump's ethno-nationalist populism. Trump's tweets sought to construct a moral binary between an "in-group" and an "out-group." He consistently depicted a virtuous white majority that was under threat by several groups of immoral outsiders. In the process of creating this binary, the content of Trump's communication was structured by – and restructured – long-standing ethnic myths and symbols of American identity. His campaign began by drawing from this ethno-cultural content to identify the in-group as the "silent majority" and its "forgotten men and women." Over time, he expanded the parameters of this group to a

slightly more ambiguous "movement." The immoral outsiders that threatened this in-group were identified by their foreignness (migrants, particularly Mexicans), their religion (Muslims), and by their willingness to work against the majority (elites, particularly Hilary Clinton). The struggle against these groups was framed as an historical mission to restore America to a mythical golden age (Make America Great Again).

Our analysis helps us understand one of the more puzzling aspects of Trump's victory in 2016: how was it that a billionaire New Yorker garnered such widespread support from white Americans (Edison Research 2016), particularly working class, rural, white Americans (NBC 2016)? In our view, Trump's use of long-standing ethnic myths and symbols of American identity was an important component of his success. However, understanding why Trump won in 2016 is not straightforward. Shifting voter preferences and polarization of the electorate, economic conditions, antipathy with government, political structures (the importance of key states and counties, and the electoral college) and his opponent (her gender and political history) were all potential factors in Trump winning the White House. Our argument here is that by also considering the process and content of Trump's ethno-nationalist populism, we can contribute to understanding his success.

From a 'thin' to 'thick' account of ethno-nationalist populism

The relationship between populism and ethno-nationalism today is clear: resurgent populist and far-right movements across the West have embraced ethno-nationalist ideas. At its very broadest, populism is an ideology that venerates ordinary people and vilifies elites (Bonikowski 2017:184). As is often noted, the relatively 'thin' nature of populism requires attachment to a 'thick' ideology like socialism or nationalism to give it substance

(Mudde 2004; Stanley 2008). Today, ethno-nationalism – a form of nationalism that privileges ethnic myths and symbols of common heritage and culture (Zubrzycki 2002: 276) – is playing a key role in this regard. When these two ideologies are combined, ethno-nationalism infuses populism with the substance to define the 'people' through ethnic and cultural markers (and, in so doing also identify outsiders).

Despite the importance of ethno-nationalism in contemporary populist movements, it tends to be underexamined by scholars of populism. While there is a vast and varied debate among these scholars, socio-economic changes, such as growing income inequality and migration, are among the leading explanations for the rise of today's populist leaders and parties (Betz 1998; Ivarsflaten 2008:5-9; Mudde 2010; Vlandas and Halikiopoulou, 2019). In addition, advents in communication technologies and the rise of social media are seen to have created new opportunities and platforms for nationalists and populists to spread their messages (Engesser et al. 2017; Gerbaudo 2018).

The findings of this literature are significant, shedding light on the structural conditions driving the resurgence of ethno-nationalist populism. However, they say less about the *content* of these ideologies: why certain myths and symbols become prominent, where they come from, why they reverberate, or why they vary across countries. As others have pointed out, the underlying issue here is that structuralist explanations are ultimately "contentless" (Abromeit 2017; Halikiopoulou et al. 2013: 111).

Scholars investigating the discursive strategies of ethno-nationalist populists have more to say in this regard (Moffit 2016; Moffit and Tormey 2014; Jagers and Walgrave 2007; Wodak 2015). However, this work tends to be quite 'thin.' It often focuses on identifying discursive *strategies* that are broadly shared across movements, rather than

focusing on how the *content* of ethno-nationalist populist discourses vary across time and space. In short, this literature downplays the 'thick' aspects of ethno-nationalist populism. As a result, it can miss what makes this ideology meaningful and, therefore, why it reverberates (c.f. Bonikowski 2017).

To address these questions requires greater attention to the specifically ethno-nationalist content of ethno-nationalist populism. Further, this content needs to be examined through a lens that is sensitive to historical and spatial variance. Ethno-symbolism, the approach applied here, is well-suited to carry out such analysis.

Pioneered by Anthony D. Smith, ethno-symbolism is primarily associated with debates on the origins of nations and nationalism. Central to the perspective is the significance of 'core', or 'dominant', ethnic communities (Smith 1986). Dominant ethnic communities are ethnic groups that culturally dominate a nation-state. As a result, their particular ethnic myths, symbols, and traditions will often be intertwined with an overarching national identity (see Kaufmann 2004a). As a result, dominant ethnic groups tend to view the nation-state as 'belonging' to them (Kaufmann 2004b: 4). Indeed, ethno-nationalism among dominant ethnic communities tends to be driven by anxiety over perceived threats to their status within the state (Hutchinson 2005: 115-53). Moreover, it is precisely because the nation-state reflects the cultural content of dominant ethnic communities that ethno-nationalist movements on their behalf can resonate so strongly (Smith 2009: 31-33).

Despite arguing for the cultural significance of dominant ethnic communities, ethno-symbolists nevertheless acknowledge that the content of their cultures can change. Ethno-symbolists point to both exogenous and endogenous factors in this process. With

regard to exogenous factors, interactions with other groups are particularly powerful drivers of change. The role of external groups here builds on Fredrik Barth's (1969) seminal work, which finds that ethnic identities are constructed through a relational process with other ethnic groups. From this perspective, ethno-cultural content functions primarily as boundary markers, distinguishing the in-group from the out-group (Smith 2009: 23-24).

However, while ethno-symbolists emphasize the role of external "others" in triggering the creation of new cultural content, they suggest that this process is shaped and constrained by endogenous factors – namely, the presence of existing cultural content. This content comprises a collection of ethnic identity markers (myths, symbols, traditions, norms, values, etc.). Once this ethno-cultural content has been institutionalized in a community it can be carried through time and, as such, take on a degree of independence in historical processes (Hutchinson 2005). In other words, this institutionalized ethno-cultural content can endogenously help shape the emergence of new cultural content. This occurs through a process of 're-invention', whereby existing culture is adapted to new contexts (Smith 2009: 35-38). Thus, to summarize, ethno-cultural content is established and develops through a two-way process: 1) relations with external 'others' trigger the creation of new cultural content, which 2) occurs by looking inward, and adapting existing content to the new context.

These insights on the significance of dominant ethnic communities in the ethno-cultural content of national communities, and the process by which that content emerges and changes, provide a foundation for research into the "thick" content of today's ethno-nationalist populism. In particular, these insights provide a framework for understanding

the processes of boundary making, where this content comes from, why it varies across time and space, and why it resonates.

Methodology

We use the insights from ethno-symbolism to analyse how Trump engaged with and employed the ethno-cultural content of American identity during the 2016 presidential election campaign, focusing on his Twitter activity. To do so, we created a new coding framework based on five mytho-symbolic categories of ethnic identity, drawing primarily on the work of Smith (1986: 21-41). These five categories and their meanings are explained below:

- People – how the ethnic community is represented. It can include references to shared practices, norms, beliefs, and values, as well as imagined shared biological characteristics.
- Homeland – how the ethnic community's imagined homeland is represented.
- History – how the ethnic community's history is represented. It typically includes references to a "golden age."
- Religion – how the ethnic community's relationship to religion is represented. This often includes references to the community being a "chosen people."
- Ethos – how the ethnic community's uniqueness is represented. This can include references to a community's 'mission' or 'destiny' in the world.

Together, these categories serve to define the key components of an ethnic community. The categories are not necessarily discrete; many myths and symbols will overlap several categories. We included a separate category for religion, rather than subsume it within the category "people," because of its near universality in ethnic conceptions of identity. 'Ethos' is a somewhat ambiguous category. It is true that all the categories included here partly speak to an ethnic community's uniqueness. However, we found that there are often ways in which an ethnic community represents its uniqueness as a set of ideals and principles that do not fit within the other categories.

We use these five categories as a framework to code all 5,515 tweets sent from Trump's Twitter account (@realDonaldTrump) between June 15, 2015 (the day prior to announcing his presidential campaign) and January 20, 2017 (the day of his inauguration).[1] The tweets were drawn from a public archive.[2] Our approach differs slightly from much recent work on Twitter and political mobilization, which examines word frequencies and strings, hashtags, likes, and retweets across large numbers of tweets. In contrast, we personally read *each* of Trump's tweets, using computer software (NVivo) to assist with coding.

Our coding framework focused on identifying the extent to which tweets drew upon existing ethno-cultural content across the five categories noted above. To identify correspondence between a tweet and these categories we searched for words and phrases, sensitive to their context, that evoked these historically-situated ideas.[3] We identified the use of ethnic myths and symbols both through a top-down approach of searching for specific key words in the corpus of tweets and a bottom-up process of reading each tweet in sequence and manually applying codes through NVivo. Our interpretive approach does introduce an element of subjectivity. However, the scope of the study (including all tweets over the campaign period) and the transparency of the coding framework help address these limitations. Our aim is to balance a breadth of coverage with a depth that takes seriously the content of each individual message and its context.

There is already a considerable body of work on Trump's tweets (e.g. Ahmadian, Azarshahi, and Paulhus 2017; Enli 2017; Kreis 2017; Lee and Lim 2016; Saul 2017). Some of these studies explore themes close to this paper. Kreis (2017) shows how Trump's tweets reinforce an image of a homogenous people threatened by a dangerous other. Saul (2017)

explores how they often employ racial 'fig leaves.' Our research contributes to this literature by providing the first systematic analysis of the ethno-cultural content of Trump's tweets.

The ethnic conception of American identity

In order to situate Trump's discourse within a historical and cultural context, we must first outline the origins and content of an ethnic conception of American identity. The longstanding, conventional view of American national identity is that it is grounded in liberal principles rather than ethnicity. Indeed, America has been portrayed as an archetypal "civic" nation (Greenfeld 1992; Kohn 1957). In recent decades, this interpretation of American identity has been challenged by the view that there are actually multiple, contested "traditions" or "streams" of American identity, and that one of these is decidedly ethnic (see Gerstle 2001; Lieven 2004; Kaufmann 2004c; Smith 1997; Trautsch 2016).

The ethnic conception of American identity originated in the eighteenth century, among the dominant group of the time: white, British-origin, Protestant settlers – whom we refer to collectively as "Anglo-Americans." By the eighteenth century, Anglo-Americans were a distinct *ethnic* community (Kaufmann 2004c). Because Anglo-Americans were so dominant, their culture became intertwined with an emergent American national identity, to become its "hidden" ideology (Smith 1997). As a result of this process, Anglo-Americans viewed themselves simply as un-hyphenated Americans, rather than as a distinct ethnic group.

The formation of Anglo-American identity occurred through a relational process with external "others," in which the endogenous cultural content that the settlers brought with them from Britain was reaffirmed and reconstructed through their relations with the

communities they encountered in the "new world." The key markers of ethnic identity that emerged from this process were: *whiteness* (in contrast to Indigenous communities and black slaves), *Protestantism*, and the *English language* (both of which contrasted with the French and Spanish). A relational process also occurred with metropolitan British. To distinguish themselves from the British, the Anglo-Americans did not disavow their ethno-cultural inheritance. Rather, they emphasized that they were a better representative of that culture – freed from the "yolk" of Norman dominance in England, it was among the Anglo-Americans that "true" Protestantism and Anglo-Saxon conceptions of liberty would flourish (see Horsman 1981; Kaufmann 2004c; Lieven 2004; Smith-Rosenberg 2010; Smith 1997).

These symbols were combined with powerful myths: Anglo-Americans framed their new homeland as a sacred territory granted to them by divine providence (a "New Israel"). This fuelled a perceived debt to God to defend and spread Protestantism. It also located America as a special site where the "unique" Anglo-Saxon virtues of egalitarianism, democracy and liberty were to flourish. The rapid growth of the cities during this period also gave rise to a powerful nostalgic myth of an American "golden age." This mythical golden age was imagined as a time when America was a simpler, mainly rural country, during which the best of its virtues flourished (Kaufmann 2004c). As we discuss in subsequent sections, this myth has tended to re-emerge in periods of heightened anxiety over immigration.

From the nineteenth century until the middle of the twentieth century, the liberal and ethnic conceptions of America struggled for predominance. The latter typically gained the upper hand during periods of heightened anxiety over perceived threats to the

dominance of Anglo-America, when ethno-nationalist discourse would move to the centre of politics. For example, this occurred in the 19th century "Know-Nothing" movement and in the 20th century "Grange" movement, both of which opposed migration from non-British/Protestant sources. In order to defend the ethno-cultural character of America, these movements successfully secured immigration reforms. In doing so, they returned Anglo-American identity to ascendancy (Smith 1997).

Different symbols of Anglo-America became prominent depending on which community was being opposed, and were expressed according to an in-group/out-group binary structure. Thus, opposition to Irish Catholic immigration during the mid-nineteenth century was expressed as a defence of America's Protestantism (Burkey 1978). Later in the century, Protestantism was also a prominent symbol in the opposition to immigrants from eastern and southern Europe (who tended to be Catholic or Orthodox), as was the English language (in opposition to the languages spoken by the immigrants), and even whiteness (in opposition to the ostensible non-whiteness of the immigrants) (Jacobson 1998).

These binaries were not value-free; they were imbued with a moral discourse that emphasized the virtues of (Anglo) America versus the immorality of the immigrants. They also tended to be combined with the myth of the golden age. As such, the immigrants were represented as the cause of America's imagined decline. This provided a programme for action: it was through the exclusion of these immoral groups that America's decline would be halted, and its golden age restored (Kaufmann 2004c).

These recurring phases of ethno-nationalism speak to the enduring power of the Anglo-American conception of America. They suggest that its cultural content remained

embedded in the institutions of American society, even when the liberal conception of America seemed to predominate. As a result, it could be called upon as an affective, mobilizing cultural resource during times of perceived threat.

Much has been made of the ideological transformation that began in the 1960s, with a seeming inexorable rise of the liberal conception of America and concomitant decline of the ethnic conception (e.g. Arieli 1984). However, recent research suggests that the rise of the liberal stream of identity did not result in the dissolution of the ethnic conception. Rather, the cultural content of the ethnic stream became less overtly visible and was reconstructed to reflect the incorporation of non-WASP, European-origin, Americans. While this meant that many symbolic boundaries were broadened, it did not mean their significance declined. Thus, whiteness was broadened to encompass eastern and southern Europeans, but it remained an important symbolic boundary excluding Americans of colour (Roediger 1999; Jardina 2019). Similarly, religion remained in place as an important symbol, but references to Protestantism were largely replaced by references to Christianity. Interestingly, the English language – spoken with an "American" accent by native born Americans – endured as an important symbol, as did the myth of a golden age set in rural America, now reconceived as the "heartland" (Kaufmann 2004c, 2018).

The persistence of this ethno-cultural content, despite undergoing change and facing the ascendance of the liberal conception of Americanness, suggests that a core ethnic group remained in place – even if it was now more properly defined as a "white" majority, rather than an "Anglo," or "WASP," majority. As we demonstrate below, this persistence helps explain the content and resonance of Donald Trump's discourse.

Donald Trump's ethno-nationalist populism

Donald Trump's brand of ethno-nationalist populism regularly and unambiguously evokes cultural content associated with the dominant "white" conception of American identity. For example, in his 2017 Columbus Day proclamation, Trump stressed the importance of historic European migration as the catalyst for America's greatness: "the permanent arrival of Europeans to the Americas was a transformative event … and set the stage for the development of our great Nation." Indeed, he regularly evokes myths that cast the white majority as a virtuous, but embattled, protagonist of American history (Trump, July 23, 2019). In doing so, he particularly emphasises rural Americans as the catalysts of America's golden age; they are the 'founders' of the nation, who won independence, and 'tamed' the continent (@realDonaldTrump March 20, 2018). Trump represents himself as a member and leader of the white majority, outright stating he is a 'nationalist' (Trump, October 22, 2018), pointing to his Christian or Protestant roots (July 18, 2015) and regularly retweeting when people call him a "real" or "true" American (January, 7, 2015; May 17, 2016). Most infamously, he defended the "very fine people" at the August 2017 –alongside the importance of maintaining confederate war monuments, because taking them down would be "changing history…changing culture" (Holan 2019).

However, at times, Trump is ambiguous about who are "real" Americans. It is not always clear that this "in-group" is defined by symbolic markers of white identity (i.e. born in America, native English speaker, European background, and Christian; see January 18, 2018).In part, this likely reflects the fact that explicitly racialized political communication remains somewhat outside the bounds of what is Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville acceptable. Hence, Trump's tendency to use coded language to speak to white Americans via racial "fig leaves" (Saul 2017). Ambiguity in the definition of the "in-group" is also a

conscious strategy; given the diversity of America's electorate, Trump needs to secure support beyond white America. As he has said on multiple occasions, it is "easy" for him to be politically correct and "presidential," but it is not in his electoral interests (Trump, March 10, 2018). Thus, we can see a degree of ambiguity in how Trump refers to ethnic minorities, particularly African Americans. For example, despite his regular derogatory descriptions of cities with large African American populations as "infested" with crime, drugs and rodents (January 14, 2017; July 27, 2019; July 31, 2019), Trump also explicitly courts African Americans by claiming he is improving their fortunes and has their strong support (September 8, 2015; August 11, 2018; October 26, 2018).

Despite ambiguity in how Trump refers to the "in-group," it is nevertheless possible to infer from his references to the "out-group" that Trump's "real" Americans are native-born, European-origin, Christians. For example, his political brand was established by leading the "birther movement," which claimed President Obama was foreign-born and a Muslim (Krieg 2016). Trump kicked off his presidential campaign by saying Mexicans were rapists and drug dealers. He maintains that Muslims in the US celebrated 9/11 (June 13, 2016). Most recently, he has told congresswomen of colour to "go back" to where they came from (July 14, 2019).

These pronouncements are not aberrations or occasional utterances. They comprise an ethno-nationalist ideology that is built upon long-standing ethnic myths and symbols of American identity. This ethno-nationalism is a defining feature of Trump's political communication. Making such a claim, however, requires a systematic account of Trump's political communication over a sustained period. This is what we do here: through an analysis of *all* of Trump's tweets in the 2016 campaign, we uncover his process of

boundary-making, the content of his ethno-nationalist populism and its relationship to existing ethnic conceptions of American identity.

The 2016 Presidential Campaign

During the campaign, Trump engaged with ethno-nationalist themes more than any other topic. His tweets evoked long-established ethnic myths and symbols nearly 2000 times (36 per cent of the time). These messages largely relied upon ethnic conceptions of the American people (886 times), history (708 times), and religion (259 times). He combined this ethno-cultural content with populist themes, for example attacking the "establishment" just under 550 times (10 per cent), or attacking opponents, for example tweeting about Hillary Clinton just over 500 times (9 per cent). By combining ethno-nationalism and populism, he tended to frame his opponents and the establishment as enemies of the people, working against the interests of his in-group. Thus, Trump would tweet about how an opponent was not defending the interests of "true" Americans because they are ostensibly "soft" on illegal immigration or Islamic terrorism (June 28, 2015; November 15, 2015). The centrality of these themes to Trump's political communication come into sharper relief when considering how rarely he engaged with more conventional public policy issues that were salient in the 2016 election: among his 5,515 tweets, he referenced healthcare 59 times, taxes 32 times, education 13 times, and the Supreme Court 12 times.

These patterns illustrate the extent to which Trump's campaign was built upon ethno-nationalist and populist foundations. Applying our framework helps further unpack these elements to show the process he adopted – and the content he drew upon. At a foundational level, Trump's campaign focused on creating a moral binary between a

virtuous in-group and several immoral out-groups (see Table One). The in-group was represented by the dominant ethnic group (i.e. his "silent majority," a "movement" of "deplorables" and "forgotten men and women"). Trump contrasted this in-group with a series of threatening outsiders that were depicted as dangerous, immoral, and foreign (particularly illegal Mexican "criminals" and Muslim "terrorists"). As we discuss below, elites and the establishment were also associated with this out-group as threats to the in-group's interests.

Table One: Establishing In- and Out-Groups through Negative and Positive Framing of Ethnicity and Religion in Tweets [about here]

This process of boundary-making drew from ethnic myths and symbols to reinforce the authenticity of the white majority as "true" Americans, while excluding "foreign" groups. However, Table One also shows that this process was at times somewhat ambiguous. For example, as we noted above, Trump regularly portrayed cities with large African American populations as "infested" with crime; but he also paired these messages with promises to improve the fortunes of African Americans. Similarly, though to a lesser degree, he would counter his tweets about dangerous "illegal" migrants crossing from Mexico with statements that Hispanics support him and his policies. These more ambiguous representations of African Americans and Hispanics were in stark contrast with Trump's representation of Muslims, which was wholly negative.

To better understand the nuance of this process, and to go beyond merely uncovering Trump's boundary-making techniques, it is necessary to also pay close attention to the content of his tweets. A close reading of Trump's tweets over the course of

his presidential run shows how he drew from historically rooted ethnic myths and symbols of America, and the role they played at three different stages of his campaign.[4]

Early primaries

In the early primaries, from June 2015 through fall 2015, Trump's Twitter activity consistently drew from ethnic myths and symbols to establish boundaries between two groups: he framed Mexican migrants as dangerous "others," while reinforcing that the dominant (white) ethnic group was under threat and needed to mobilize to recapture the state. He started his entire campaign with a speech that, only nine paragraphs in, claimed Mexico was sending rapists and drugs to the United States. This theme was repeated early and often: he would claim drug dealers and rapists were pouring across the southern border (June 19, 2015); that a strong border and controlling immigration were central to America's survival as a nation (June 30, 2015; July 28, 2015); and that he alone could save America by building a wall to keep foreigners out (July 3, 2015, 6:12 PM). As part of this strategy, he leveraged the tragic murder of Kathryn Steinle in July 2015 to reinforce the idea that "illegal" migrants are dangerous criminals, threatening "beautiful" (white) women (July 3, 2015, 6:44 PM; 11:38 PM; July 4, 2015, 6:15 PM). Crowning himself as the leading voice for members of the ethnic majority murdered by illegal immigrants, he regularly pointed out when such crimes took place, reinforcing a threatening image that dangerous outsiders were inside the proverbial wall (July 10, 2015; July 11, 2015; August 10, 2015, 8:29 PM; 8:58 PM).

The approach of directly comparing a dangerous outsider with a threatened insider was one of the main ways Trump sought to define the parameters of the dominant ethnic group in America. For example, he would regularly contrast and criticize the treatment of

illegal migrants and patriotic veterans (July 18, 2015; October 13, 2015). A central aspect of his strategy here was to mainstream the idea that the dominant ethnic group in the US has been displaced as the rightful heirs of political power (July 17, 2015, 1:32 PM). He branded this ethnic group as the "silent majority" – often using this reference when speaking to supporters at rallies (July 17, 2015, 12:36 PM). Tellingly, his first use of the idea of a silent majority on Twitter was on the same day that his team posted an image that included Waffen-SS soldiers from Nazi Germany (July 14, 2015; Tharoor 2015). His not-so-veiled references to the white majority in America were continuously paired with calls to mobilize to recapture dominance (December 23, 2015). These two themes of othering migrants and calling for mobilization to recapture the state were how he set himself apart from the crowded Republican field – as the candidate that spoke for the white majority (July 29, 2015). During this process of boundary-making, he also began his long-running strategy of tweeting about the crowd size at his rallies, reinforcing that his message was resonating with "real" Americans across the "heartland" and "Middle America."

The later primaries and presumptive candidate

On November 13, 2015, a series of suicide bombings and mass shootings took place in Paris, France. Trump seized upon this event, shifting how he referred to religion to reinforce cultural boundaries and notions of foreignness. Between his initial announcement to run and November 13, 2015, Trump only broached referenced Islam or Muslims six times (with four tweets about a campaign event where he choose to not correct a supporter calling President Obama a Muslim, September 19, 2015). From November 14, 2015, to his inauguration, he tweeted about Islam and Muslims at least 200 times. He explicitly linked Islam to terrorism in over 160 of these tweets (81 per cent of the time). His favored refrain

was to point out that other politicians refused to use the label of radical Islamic terrorism when discussing terrorist activities or ISIS (December 6, 2015). He also consistently raised the spectre of a great Muslim invasion, leveraging the Syrian refugee crisis and its impact in Europe to paint a picture of terrorists pouring into the US (November 17, 2015; December 8, 2015; March 24, 2016).

The cornerstone of this strategy was Trump's proposed ban preventing Muslim immigration (December 7, 2015). This policy was introduced with an explicit call for "a total and complete shutdown of Muslims entering the United States" because "there is great hatred towards Americans by large segments of the Muslim population," and "until we are able to determine and understand this problem and the dangerous threat it poses, our country cannot be the victims of horrendous attacks by people that believe only in Jihad." The conflation between Muslims and terrorists, the comparison between the dangerous "other" threatening the members of the "real" American nation, and the idea that Islam jeopardizes the very foundations of American civilization, were the main pillars of Trump's use of religious myths and symbols (November 25, 2015; March 24, 2016; May 22, 2016).

Trump's depiction of Christianity during this period contrasted sharply with his depiction of Islam. Trump often noted how evangelicals supported him, that Christians in the US were under threat, and that he (as a Protestant) was a valid leader of their group (January 30, 2016; September 19, 2015; July 18, 2015).

In the fall of 2015, Trump began to more regularly combine his ethno-cultural content with a populist ideology. As a part of this process, he represented himself as the sole legitimate voice of the anti-establishment movement (February 29, 2016). He regularly claimed he was self-funding his campaign and that this enabled him to fight special

interests and establishment (October 30, 2015; March 15, 2016). As part of his attack on the establishment, starting in November 2015, he added to his framing of the "silent majority" the idea it was a "movement" (November 28, 2015). Indeed, during this stage of the campaign he transitioned from identifying his core in-group as the "silent majority" to the slightly more ethnically ambiguous "movement." He represented himself as the leader of this movement, working against the establishment (which included the Republican party) (March 3, 2016; March 7, 2016). This image of Trump leading a movement of "real" Americans – protecting them from dangerous outsiders and protecting their interests against their elite allies – carried Trump to victory in enough states to become the presumptive Republican nominee in May 2016.

The general election campaign against Hillary Clinton

Once Trump cleared the hurdle of the primaries and emerged as the Republican nominee, his focus turned more squarely to attacking Hillary Clinton and framing the establishment as an enemy of the dominant ethnic group. Trump's general election strategy largely mimicked – and amplified elements of – his use of ethnic myths and symbols during the primaries. His main tactic was to frame Hillary Clinton as the embodiment of the establishment, a corrupt politician, and an enemy of the dominant group's interests (June 26, 2016; August 14, 2016; October 19, 2016). He regularly pointed out how Clinton and the Clinton Foundation had links to foreigners, implying she was an agent working against, or betraying, the interests of the dominant group. These attacks were paired with the idea that his "movement" was going to recapture America from these malign elites (October 27, 2016; October 19, 2016, 8:58 PM).

Trump's shift in his favoured hash tags during the general election encapsulated the message that he was fighting the elites in the name of "real" Americans. "Make America Great Again" continued to be the foundational theme of Trump's campaign: by taking back the country from self-interested elites allied with outsiders and stopping the "invasion" of dangerous foreigners, Trump promised to restore American greatness to a time before these enemies had captured the state (October 8, 2016; October 19, 2016; October 22, 2016). Starting in the summer of 2016, he combined these ideas with messaging that more clearly emphasized his connection with the dominant ethnic group in America, though maintaining some ambiguity in terms of the ethnic parameters of that group. He consistently used "#ImWithYou" to signal that he represented the people against others and their elite allies (June 22, 2016; August 1, 2016; August 17, 2016). Trump promised to put "#AmericaFirst" – using this to both signal his realist foreign policy objectives (and their link to restoring American greatness) and the idea that elites were working against the interests of the dominant majority in America (May 23, 2016; November 29, 2016). Near the end of the campaign, he tied much of his anti-establishment rhetoric together with his promise to "#DrainTheSwamp" (a phrase he used nearly 80 times in the last three weeks of the election). Together, these pithy slogans betray a strategy that moves beyond a simple populism toward a worldview that connects it with powerful ethno-nationalist ideas. These messages sought to mobilize the dominant ethnic group in America to recapture the state from malignant elites (November 6, 2016).

Seeing Trump's anti-establishment messaging as part of a broader strategy that uses ethno-cultural content to create cultural and moral boundaries becomes clearer when considering his tweets during the general election through our theoretical lens. Trump

framed the establishment and Clinton as allies of outsiders and working against the interests of the dominant ethnic group in three ways. First, he continued his attacks against illegal immigration from Mexico and Muslims, saying Clinton would increase the number of immigrants and refugees, jeopardizing the safety and interests of Americans (October 19, 2016, 9:22 PM; 9:34 PM; 10:31 PM; July 28, 2016). Second, he argued that only his leadership could protect middle class and manufacturing jobs, largely by pulling out of international trade deals (which he suggested were being pushed by Clinton and her global allies) (July 23, 2016; July 30, 2016; October 19, 2016). Third, Trump pointed to the existential threats that migration, terrorism, and trade (presented as products of mismanagement by the establishment) posed to the American dream and values (June 25, 2016; July 28, 2016; October 19, 2016; October 13, 2016).

This messaging resonated with Trump's core constituency: he may have lost the popular vote, but he secured enough Electoral College votes to become the 45th President. As we discuss below, he was particularly successful among white Americans. In his inauguration speech, he tied the threads of his campaign narrative together, to show how underlying it all was a desire to restore American greatness by enabling the majority ethnic group to recapture the state: he promised to make America great again, and to continue the "movement" because "the forgotten men and women of our country will be forgotten no longer" (January 20, 2017).

Conclusion

Our account details how Trump's twitter communication in the 2016 presidential campaign drew upon, and adapted, long-standing ethnic myths and symbols of American identity. As we have shown, Trump's 2016 presidential campaign was imbued with an

ethno-nationalist populism that sought to construct a moral binary between a virtuous dominant ethnic group, and dangerous outsiders and their elite allies. Trump's image of the true America – the "silent majority" – drew upon constitutive myths and symbols that privileged ethnic understandings of the people (namely whiteness, European origins and Christianity). Trump's campaign strategy was centered on restoring American greatness on behalf of this group by excluding dangerous foreigners and recapturing the state from their elite allies.

Trump's principal mechanism for constructing a sense of the majority was through the negative positioning of several significant others. He built his "base" by identifying who was not a member. This approach rests on a long-established process in America of using ethnic markers to identify those that do not fit the mold of "true" Americans. His favoured targets were Mexican migrants, Muslims and political elites, presenting these groups as a threat to the survival and interests of the dominant group. Mexican migrants were represented as dangerous criminals pouring through the southern border, necessitating a wall to protect (white) Americans. Muslims were presented as radical Islamic terrorists that were infiltrating the state and threatening the foundations of American civilization. Political elites were presented as allies of these groups, and linked to nefarious international interests that were destroying the American dream and blocking the "forgotten" Americans from prosperity and controlling the state. This framing of who is – and is not – a member of the American nation was clearly underpinned by ideas that have links back to the ethnic foundations of American political culture that emerged in the eighteenth century.

At the same time, Trump did not simply parrot eighteenth century mythologies. Railing against Catholics, Italians, Irish and Germans would not have found support among the dominant majority today. Rather, Trump's Twitter campaign shows a pattern of "reinventing" the myths and symbols of an ethnic American identity. As our analysis shows, he was also somewhat ambiguous at points on the membership of the majority group, sometimes including African Americans and Hispanics when framing the in-group while being consistent in targeting Muslims as the clear out-group. When building the in-group Trump did not focus on white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestants, but rather, on a more diffuse white, Christian, European majority. Whiteness was a key boundary marker for Trump, but mirroring a longer process of shifts in ethnic and religious demography, he loosened the parameters beyond Protestantism as a religion, and England as the imagined ancestral home. At times, he even put forth a broader conception of the in-group that included African Americans and Hispanics; this loosened conception of the in-group, paired with attacks on Muslims as the clear out-group, indicate a degree of ambiguity in the parameters of the ethnic majority group in America. Indeed, our analysis helps to show that this shifting understanding of the ethnic majority indicates that the content and success of Trump's campaign is about more than just race (and whiteness): his ethno-nationalist populism drew upon broader *ethnic* conceptions of the American people, including their religion and their history, in the process of identifying external "others."

The centrality of this ethnic conception of America – the tendency of the campaign to speak to both a core, white in-group, a more ambiguous majority group, and to target African Americans, Hispanics and Muslims to varying degrees as foreign outsiders – may also help us understand some of the voting patterns in 2016. White Americans were central

to Trump's victory. Approximately 70 per cent of the votes cast in the election were by white Americans: 57 per cent of these voters sided with Trump (20 points higher than their support for Clinton), with Trump winning both white men (62 per cent) and white women (52 per cent) (Edison Research 2016). Equally telling, Trump had much lower levels of support from African Americans (8 per cent), Hispanics (28 per cent), Asians (27 per cent) and other groups (36 per cent). Among voters, his ethno-nationalism clearly reverberated: 64 per cent of those that ranked immigration as the most important issue facing the country voted for him (31 points higher than for Clinton), and similarly 57 per cent of those that ranked terrorism as the most important issue favoured Trump (17 points higher than Clinton).

Clearly, many factors contributed to Trump's win. We are not claiming that his use of ethno-nationalist and populist themes was the sole reason. At the same time, privileging structural factors, such as socio-economic conditions, as the driver of his success, misses an important element of the equation that we have sought to highlight here: the centrality of ethno-nationalist populism to his political communication, and his use of long-established ethno-cultural content to identify an 'in-group' and garner their support.

The resurgence of ethno-nationalist populism in America and elsewhere is among the most pressing issues of our time. Our account of the ethno-cultural dimensions of this phenomenon is intended to compliment structuralist explanations. Recognizing that there is a long-established ethnic conception of American identity helps us understand its power to mobilize people today. Writing at the end of twentieth century, political historian Rogers Smith (1997) warned that despite the seeming ascendance of the liberal "stream" of American identity, its ethnic counterpart nevertheless retained its potential to re-emerge as

a key driver of politics. Our analysis of Trump's political communication suggests that Smith's assessment was correct.

From this perspective, one of Trump's legacies could be to (re)normalize ethnonationalist populism in America. His election campaign reinforced the ethnic boundaries of American identity – defining who is a member, and who is not. His efforts to restore American greatness by excluding outsiders has reinforced a powerful myth in contemporary politics. This myth is shaping current policy debates, and will likely continue to do so for some time. One only need to look to the central role of the border wall in Trump's political communication – as the symbolic key to making America great again – to see how the paradigms of politics and policy are shifting to a more ethnic frame. A longer view of history shows the power of these themes and how, even after they appear to be defeated, they can be "re-discovered" and "re-invented" when a perceived threat to the dominant group emerges.

Endnotes

[1] We excluded re-tweets as we are examining the direct messaging employed by Donald Trump. We do not consider the ensuing discussions that take place among those following or commenting on Trump's tweets given indications that large portions of these discussions are driven by political bots (see Bessi and Ferrara 2016).

[2] The Trump Twitter Archive (available at www.trumptwitterarchive.com), which has been used and cited by numerous popular presses.

[3] For an overview of the coding framework, see the online Annex. This Annex also includes the full text for each tweet cited in this article. All tweets cited in the article are from @realDonaldTrump, using the date of the tweet as the exact reference. This information is also available at www.robertschertzer.com.

[4] See the Annex for illustrative examples of tweets during these three phases of the 2016 campaign.

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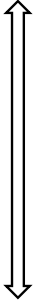
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Table

Table One: Establishing In- and Out-Groups through Negative and Positive Framing of Ethnicity and Religion in Tweets*

Boundary Process and Target Groups	# of tweets	Positive Framing	Negative Framing
In-Group Core Ethnic Group (silent maj; movement; etc)	146	92%	27%
More Ambiguous In-Group	275	82%	29%
• Middle Class	63	97%	22%
• Christians	58	95%	7%
• Veterans	59	86%	20%
More Ambiguous Out-Group	397	23%	89%
• African Americans	53	53%	66%
• Hispanics (and illegal immigrants)	344	18%	92%
Out-Group Clear Out-Group (Muslims and Islam)	200	4%	100%

*Percentages do not add up to 100% given multiple topics and frames being used simultaneously in some tweets