

The discursive hegemony of Trump's Jacksonian populism: Race, class, and gender in constructions and contestations of US national identity, 2016–2018

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Abstract

Contributing to burgeoning studies of populism, this article conceptualises and contextualises Trump's language as 'Jacksonian populism'. We explore how this style of populist discourse influenced political debates before and after Trump's election. Ours is the first article to analyse opposition and media responses to Trump's construction of 'real America' as that of a Jacksonian, White, and male working class. To do so, the article analyses 1165 texts, from the government, opposition, newspapers, television coverage, and social media. In addition to locating Trump's reification of a mythologised White working class within a broader Jacksonian tradition, we find that the Democratic opposition and mainstream media initially reproduced this construction, furthering Trump's cause. Even where discursive challenges were subsequently developed, they often served to reproduce a distinct – and hitherto unspoken for – White (male) working-class America. In short, early resistance actively reinforced Trump's discursive hegemony, which centred on reclaiming the primacy of working, White America in the national identity.

Keywords

discourse, populism, race, Trump, working class

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Introduction

This article conceptualises and contextualises Trump's specific brand of populism, before exploring its impact on the discursive structures of American politics and foreign policy. We map evolving political debate, from 2016 through to 2018, with a focus on narratives of national identity, as they emerge from three sources: the Trump administration, Democratic opposition, and mainstream media. Specifically, our article is the first to

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study the role of mythologised working, White America as this important idea traversed the landscape of America's political debate during Trump's electoral campaign and at the outset of his presidency. We go significantly further than extant research, by (1) locating Trump's particular variant of populism within the Jacksonian tradition of American political history *and* (2) analysing the reproduction and contestation of its key underpinning – the identity and national narrative centrality of White, working-class America – in a moment of discursive hegemony. Ours, then, is not just an analysis of Trump's style of governance and communication; rather, it is an analysis of resistance and its limitations, under the relative discursive hegemony of Trump's particular brand of Jacksonian populism, as it conditioned understandings of how race, class, and gender interweaved with the US national identity.

To analyse Trump's Jacksonian populism and its impact on US political debate, we employ a computer-aided, 'model 2', discourse analysis of 1165 foreign policy texts, across the government, opposition, and media (Hansen, 2006).¹ In so doing, our research adds further discursive breadth to the investigations of Trump's rhetoric presented elsewhere in this issue (see Blanc, 2021; Boys, 2021; Hall, 2021; Lacatus, 2021; Meibauer, 2021; Skonieczny, 2021). Our analysis draws on ideational and discursive studies of populism, as well as broader constructivist research, developing two key contributions to these literatures. First, we show that Trump's language is embedded in American social, political, and demographic history, conceptualising his style as 'Trumpian Jacksonian populism'. We find that the Trump administration mobilised a specific vision of the national identity as synonymous with the White (male) working class, which served to reify the group, elevating it to become the mythical backbone of US society and, by extension, the US economy and foreign policy. This was done in precise ways: most notably, Trump and associated officials made use of 'Trumpian' emotionality and hyperbole, within a broader, electorally effective Jacksonian rhetoric – that is, 'a distinctively American populism' (Mead, 2017: 3) – which emphasised emotions such as pride, coupled to specific material embodiments, such as male-dominated blue-collar industries, particularly (a romanticised vision of) coal mining. This was a powerful vision, which was electorally and politically consequential. And it is an approach that is more precise and contextualised than simply archetype 'populism' writ large. This is important: embodying the quintessence of the Jacksonian tradition enabled Trump to locate his candidacy and presidency within the specific context of the American political landscape, even as he added his own 'Trumpian' flourishes. This embedding helped populist appeals to resonate and made contestation harder (Holland, 2013; Krebs, 2015).

Following on, second, our analysis reveals that this construction of working-class, White citizens as 'real America' was supported, rather than undermined, by opponents and the media. We argue that, between 2016 and 2018, Trumpian Jacksonian populism achieved discursive hegemony through its reimagining of the nation around the White (male) working class. We show how even alternative imaginings of the nation served to reproduce the notion of an ordinary (and hitherto unheard and unspoken for) White America, which was central to Trump's electoral success and acted as the basis for his presidency and its policies. Early resistance was oftentimes actively reinforcing of Trump's position and, with it, the political stranglehold of a populist, Jacksonian president. The impact of this reinforcement centred on the narrowing of space to resist damaging policies, through the unintended reproduction of the new government's discursive bases. In short, Trump's political capital, after his election, came from his own significant discursive efforts, as well as unintentional media and opposition reinforcement. This was

a moment of relative discursive hegemony, centred on a particular Jacksonian imagining of race, class, and gender in the United States, even as political debate appeared to rage around Trump's presidency.

To develop our analysis and the two contributions that derive from it, the article is structured in two parts. First, we set out the ideational/discursive populism literature to which this article contributes, outlining the distinctly American populism of the Jacksonian tradition. Second, we present the project's empirical analysis, exploring the construction of the national identity within Trump's Jacksonian populism and its intended critique – if ultimate reinforcement – in the language of the media and political opponents. We conclude by noting that Trump's discursive strategy has remained constant, from birtherism, through the Travel Ban, to coronavirus. The discursive structures it has engendered will guide his re-election campaign and shape its chances of success.

Trump's Jacksonian populism and the White (male) working class

Since at least the 1960s, studies of populism have developed a range of competing approaches, such as the organisational and performative. Here, we understand populism minimally, as a chameleonic style of discourse, which pitches elites in opposition to the people, but crucially adapts to its specific environment (Norris and Inglehart, 2019: 4; see also Hawkins et al., 2018). This ideational approach to the study of populism extends back to Ernesto Laclau's work in the 1970s, and focuses on the framings, language, and style of populism. Analysing language enables an exploration of how populism functions in context; for example, amid the specific demographic landscape of the United States. 'After all, it is the national and political cultures in which populist actors mobilize that provide a better understanding of the conditions under which people come to see political reality through the lenses of populism' (Mudde, 2017: 41). Populism comes in many forms and a discursive approach enables us to analyse Trump's specific variant and its impact across US political debate.

We are not the first to apply such an approach to the United States or to Donald Trump. As Homolar and Scholz (2019) have argued, for example, the socio-linguistic features of populist 'Trump-speak' include emotionally charged, anti-establishment crisis narratives. We agree that Trump's preferred narrative structure is one of crisis, as 'a leader who uses populist rhetoric' (Norris and Inglehart, 2019: 3; see also Hall, 2021) which taps into nostalgia and exploits ontological insecurities, diagnoses their cause, and promises a return to pre-eminence (Homolar and Scholz, 2019: 15). It is these qualities – emotionality and hyperbole in particular – we suggest, that can be thought of as distinctly 'Trumpian', when contrasted with other leading political figures. However, we argue that, as a particularly effective and affective 'identity entrepreneur' (Reicher and Haslam, 2016; see also Agius and Keep, 2018), Trump's variant of populism is embedded within the landscape of American political history: it is distinctly Jacksonian. That is to argue that Trump was successful in his efforts 'to represent himself and his platform in ways that resonate with his would-be followers' experience of their world' (Agius and Keep, 2018) through a Jacksonian narrative logic. This logic told a consistent and emotionally arresting story, albeit one that rendered invisible many Americans within the national story, as instead the White (male) working class were re-prioritised, with the suffering and struggle of their lived experience located at the heart of a story of American betrayal.

Following Mead (2017), we argue that Jacksonianism is a uniquely American variant of populism, and that Trump has clearly embodied many of the defining traits associated with that tradition: an unabashed military populism, centred on an ethos of pride and respect; a desire to avoid war unless threatened or attacked; clear scepticism of existing international trade and legal agreements; and a general disinterest in issues of human rights, democracy promotion, and nation building abroad (Biegon, 2019; Lacatus, 2021; McDonald, 2018: 412). Most clearly, however, Trump's claim to be a Jacksonian lies in the views he shares with America's seventh president: a narrow and often racialised definition of America(ns) and a deep suspicion of those outside of the polis, who are deemed to threaten economic and physical security (Holland, 2020: 219–220).

Terri Bimes (2007: 246) defines the Jacksonian model of US leadership as that in which 'the president claims to be the best spokesperson for the national will – an instrument of public opinion'. To this extent, Jacksonianism can be understood as a strand of conventional populism: there are obvious parallels to be drawn between the two presidents' suspicions of Washington elites, as well as Trump's 'permanent campaign' style of governing and Jackson's eagerness to connect with the American people, for example through a then unusual tour of the country in 1833 (Bimes, 2007: 248). However, the Jacksonian tradition also remains a uniquely American, militaristic, and individualistic variant of populism. In order to understand its relevance to US foreign policy and to Donald Trump, it is important to consider the cultural particularities which set it apart from other movements that have been grouped under the global populist umbrella in recent years.

The values and beliefs of Jacksonian America(ns) originated in the Ulster-Scots diaspora, which settled disproportionately in the Appalachian region, at a key formative moment of American political history. Andrew Jackson himself was a part of this diaspora, his family having migrated from Carrickfergus to North Carolina two years before his birth (Brands, 2006: 11–12). For Wood (2009), Jackson's Southern background was key to his military and political career. This translated into hawkish policies towards Native Americans in particular, with Jackson arguing for strong military policies over diplomacy, on the basis that treaties 'answer No other Purpose than opening an Easy door for the Indians to pass through to Butcher our citizens' (Wood, 2009: 133). In the War of 1812, Jackson's militarist impulse was evident as he responded to the Red Stick massacre at Fort Mims by killing 800 Muskogee and claiming 22 million acres of land despite Washington's instructions not to punish those who had allied themselves to the States (Wood, 2009: 687). Mead (2002) argues that the War of 1812, along with the Civil War were both key to the spread of the traditions previously associated with the 'Scotch-Irish' diaspora throughout rural America. In the 20th century, Mead argues this legacy can help us to understand not just the success of populist politicians, but also the particularities of the US military's 'warrior culture', and public support for it.

In the modern day, the Jacksonian tradition continues to favour strong militarism where necessary to protect Americans from external threats but is sceptical of getting involved in foreign entanglements for any other reasons (Rathbun, 2013). Indeed, Jacksonians are wary of any state spending or interference that does not help or protect the folk community. Jacksonians are therefore distinguishable from Mead's other traditions of American foreign policy by the 'strong distinction' they draw 'between those who belong to the folk community, and those who do not' (Rathbun, 2013: 23). As a relatively inward-looking group, unlike other more worldly communities, the Jacksonians cared little for enlightenment values and far more for 'their own' (see Mead, 2002, 2017; and also Fischer, 1989). Much like Jackson, who asked how the 'wandering savage' could be

more attached to ‘his home’ and the ‘graves of his fathers’ than ‘our brothers and children’ (Jackson, 1830), Jacksonians are unlikely to spend resources on (perceived) outsiders which could be better spent at home.

In ideal times then, Jacksonian America hopes to ignore politics and foreign policy, but, in 2016, a series of concomitant conditions interwove to elevate their desire for change – and for protection. Wage stagnation, the creative destruction of capitalism, drug use, and the perceived zero-sum advancement of a multicultural political agenda all combined to fan the flames previously ignited in the Tea Party movement and captured in the words of political figures such as Sarah Palin. The visceral desire for protection and security was activated, in this instance, by the perceived threat posed by immigrants, an establishment that (seemingly) operated at the expense of ‘ordinary Americans’, and the taking for granted of the United States by other states (Mead, 2017). Jacksonians demanded more: more protection for them, more prioritisation of them, and more patriotism from America’s politicians. As Huntington (2004) foresaw, Trump’s rise would come through the exploitation of the divide between a ‘thank God for America’ public and the ‘dead souls’ of America’s elites. And this was driven, in part and rightly or wrongly, by concerns over demographic change and fears of political, cultural, and economic displacement (Cox et al., 2017; Kaufmann, 2018; Mead, 2017) or even discrimination (Jardina, 2019: 3), following the perceived rise of a majority–minority America (e.g. Mutz, 2018). In 2016, race, work, and class interwove in Jacksonian America’s political concerns.

This group is not simply phenotypically White or low paid or employed in manual labour, but rather a (specific) combination of these traits, centred on particular, romanticised industries, such as coal mining. Nowhere is this clearer than West Virginia: a state that is reeling from the impacts of globalisation as traditional (White, male, working class) industries decline, and which has swung from solid Democrat support to solid Republican. Here, Trump took 77% of the primary vote and 69% in the election. So overwhelming and widespread was his support, here, that he won a majority in every single county, largely off the back of an impossible promise to restore what had been (perceived to be) wrongly taken from the White working class.

This promise was important, demographically and geographically. During the depression, ‘Appalachian migrants streamed out of the mountains into the factories of the north’ (Kunzru, 2016). Jacksonian Americans came to populate electorally key states, such as Ohio, as well as the nearby centres of American industry, now declining as part of the broader Rust Belt. Intentionally or otherwise, Trump exploited a key Jacksonian impulse – a sense of White working-class decline, despair, and anger – within states such as Michigan, Wisconsin, and Pennsylvania. Appealing to this sentiment, in these three states, helped to ensure victory was achieved through a coalition of just over one hundred thousand key votes. As a result, two complementary understandings of Trump have emerged: as a populist leader, mobilising the language of a Jacksonian outsider (e.g. Biegon, 2019; Clarke and Ricketts, 2017; Hamilton, 2017; although contestation is also evident, e.g. Aslam, 2018: 421; Bentley, 2016; Thompson, 2017; Wintour and Borger, 2019).

Constructing and contesting US national identity, 2016–2018

Trump’s construction of the White working class as the national identity

Trump’s inaugural did not sound normal because it was not written for the purpose of uniting all Americans, but rather justifying the prioritisation of a few. When Trump spoke of rusted out factories littering the American landscape like tombstones, he was addressing a

core electoral group that had helped to propel him to political office: America's White (male) working class. It was with this group in mind that he noted the need for total allegiance to the United States, and the end of America's being taken for granted. That re-prioritisation, Trump had told supporters, was too long coming. It tapped into long-standing concerns about immigration and cultural marginalisation, as well as economic decline. And it pitted a particular vision of 'the people' in direct antagonism with 'the elite'. Now, they understood, 'the swamp' would be drained because 'the people' demanded it and the president would deliver.

Trump's discourse, we argue, can and should be thought of as 'Trumpian Jacksonian populism'. To break that down, we argue that Trump's language certainly featured 'Trumpian' flourishes, such as emotionality and hyperbole – think: superlatives, sentiment, and exaggerated rankings – that are peculiar to the innovations of America's 45th president and, perhaps, well-suited to an era of both social media and reality television (Holland, 2019). However, this individual style plugged into a far broader and long-standing tradition in US political history. Embedding his language in the Jacksonian tradition and enhancing it with Trumpian flourishes helped to locate a specifically American variant of populism – understood generally, through an ideational approach, as the constructed antagonism of the people and the elite – that was both resonant with key constituencies and coercive of would-be opponents (Holland, 2013). Analysis of our dataset shows that the Jacksonian tradition is crucial to making sense of Trump's specific brand of populism and its power.

Discussed here in turn, efforts to frame the White working class as the forgotten heart of the nation drew upon the Jacksonian tradition in three principal ways: (1) a dangerous outside; (2) juxtaposed to a narrow polis; (3) united in pride, anger, and suffering. This narrow polis was understood with recourse to a more generic populist claim centred on (4) betrayal by a corrupt elite. Even here, however, this elite was imagined along Jacksonian lines, through conflation of the domestic and foreign threat to the nation. To be clear, going beyond more generic understandings of populism, the Jacksonian tradition helps us to understand both the construction of a polis that is narrower than (all of) 'the people', through the linking of a corrupt elite to threatening foreign outsiders, and the articulation of their lived experience with recourse to specific and politically powerful emotions, such as pride and anger.

The first and most important discursive move in the Jacksonian tradition relates to international affairs and connects foreign policy with domestic and electoral politics. Threat narratives were powerful in helping to carry Trump to the White House, for example, through the frequent association of migrants with terrorism and crime. The former quickly reached a policy apogee with the Travel Ban, which was framed as a necessary move to 'keep America safe' and justified on the grounds of a lack of sufficient anti-terrorist 'vetting' in seven Muslim-majority nations. The latter – crime – was a recurrent foil for the president, as he set out a clear demarcation between Americans and threatening outsiders. Efforts to dehumanise Latin Americans through links to the drug trade have been commonplace. Infamously, the White House singled out drug gang MS-13 as 'animals', relating graphic details of violent murders against innocent Americans (Collins and Hayes, 2019; White House, 2018). Moreover, linked to the opioid crisis, migrants from Mexico were tied to the narrative of unfair and foreign-inspired decline in formerly thriving working-class communities (Hansen, 2017). Attorney General Jeff Sessions summed up the immigrant threat narrative in typically apocalyptic fashion: 'We are not going to let this country be invaded. We will not be stampeded. We will not capitulate to lawlessness' (Sessions, 2018).

Second, Trump's Jacksonian populism actively constructed domestic (as well as foreign) Others in juxtaposition to 'real Americans' (Fermor and Holland, 2021; Lacatus, 2021). Efforts to narrow the American polis began early. Shortly after the election, a narrative of disruptive, divisive, and even 'professional' 'anarchists, thugs and paid protesters' (Trump, 2017a) was important in discrediting political opposition and reinforcing the notion that Trump's core constituency were, in contrast, real America(ns). The effect was to narrow the official construction of the national identity, centred on the imagined community of 'White working-class voters' at the expense of protestors and minorities ('working class' or otherwise); it effectively erased the national existence of working-class progressives and leftists, as protests were imagined as the pastime of an unpatriotic, privileged elite (see Parmar, 2017).

Third, Trump spoke of a quintessential populist theme: elite betrayal. He insisted that America's White working class – real America – had been forgotten for too long and his leadership would reverse that. The notion that US foreign policies had benefitted Washington elites but ultimately failed to improve the lives of true Americans, especially those living in the Rust Belt, stoked an important narrative of the betrayal of real, Jacksonian America. More than mere complicity or an uncaring establishment, Trump's language invoked the notion of America's working class having been deliberately abandoned. For Jacksonian America, therefore, Trump's quest for the presidency was rendered as the active taking back of what was rightfully theirs to begin with. Ever present, this narrative peaked with the announcement of tariffs on imports from Mexico, Canada, and the European Union (EU) from June 2018. The guilt of elite betrayal was located within the nostalgic narrative context of a formerly great America having fallen prey to a Washington bureaucracy that does not care about true blue-collar Americans.

Fourth, Trump explained the everyday lived experience of his base with recourse to the core Jacksonian values of pride and honour, which contrast the anger they felt at elite betrayal and being taken for granted by other nations. He explicitly linked these emotions to the manufacturing industries associated with Appalachia and the Rust Belt. Key, then, to a narrative of nostalgia and redemption (e.g. Homolar and Scholz, 2019) was the (Jacksonian) emotion it stoked (Holland and Fermor, 2017):

America is a nation that honors work. We honor grit. We honor craftsmanship. We honor the skilled tradespeople who turn rock and steel and iron and cement into works of art and grace and beauty . . . The wrench and ratchet are not only tools, but instruments that help build cities out of deserts and send ships across oceans. And the tools of craftsmen and the masons are just as important as the tools of the doctor and the dentist or the CEO, or even the tools of politicians, believe it or not – and their work is every bit as noble. They take pride in their jobs, and we take pride in them. (Trump, 2017b)

This emotionality varied in style and extent. It included more extreme variants, such as the articulation of anger arising from humiliation, that Trump himself gave clear voice, and is reflected in analyses centred on terms such as 'Whitelash' and 'White backlash' and 'White rage' (e.g. Abrajano and Hajnal, 2017; Kaufmann, 2018), which focus on the explicit resentment of cultural displacement arising from immigration. Subtler variants were also evident and equally powerful, such as, for instance, the highly emotive promise to restore a quiet dignity to forgotten working people.

Politically, these were powerful emotional forces to unleash and difficult themes to contest for would-be opponents. The coercive effects of powerful emotional themes helped to disarm political opponents by dissuading them from entering the argument in

the first place. Who would want to argue against a restoration of honour to long down-trodden mining communities, or hard-grafting steel workers? These signifiers functioned through synecdoche at various levels, as the betrayal of the White working class came to stand symbolically for the betrayal of the entire American nation, taken for granted by free-riding allies and sold-out by crooked establishment politicians. The part represented the whole, with a widely understood and popular image of White, male manual labour, which would be restored and emboldened – freed from the exploitation of foreigners, facilitated by the corrupt political elite. Trump promised to resurrect dead and dying industries in order to restore pride, honour, and dignity to the working lives of White, male Americans in a reversal of the humiliation this group – and by extension, the United States of America – had been suffering. Stitching these together helped to give meaning to the promise to make (Jacksonian) America great again. Their story was America's story. And it fitted – to be read and understood – in four letters on baseball cap. That is a remarkable feat of political storytelling and a refined populism, resonant and coercive in the US context.

Media reproductions of the White working class and/as the national identity

Trump's win and its surprising nature have frequently been accounted for through two arguments: (1) that the Trump campaign mobilised a bloc of voters not usually inclined to vote en masse, to the extent that they were under-predicted in polling models; and (2) that Trump's appeal to this bloc was so far removed from the concerns of political and media elites that they failed to imagine victory as even remotely comprehensible. Retrospective analyses both made sense of Trump's win with recourse to these overlooked voters and accounted for predictive failure through (lamented) elite disengagement with this key community. Despite the complexity and diversity of Trump's constituency, both geographically and economically, it is (broadly) 'American preservationists' (the White, male working class) that are most often identified as the 'core group which propelled Trump' to the White House (e.g. Bowman, 2017; Ekins, 2017) due to their role in key swing states and Trump's overt appeals to them.

Our analysis reveals that even critical media voices (e.g. framing him as divisive, racist, incompetent, and even un-American) rarely challenged the notion of a 'real', White, working America; instead, the influence of this group was presented across the mainstream media as a key lesson for political elites in both parties. Indeed, Trump's outmanoeuvring of his opponents on the discursive battlefield was so effective that paying lip service to this newly remembered backbone of American society was rendered a compulsory political shibboleth, for Republicans, Democrats, and the media alike.

Of the media texts included in our analysis, Fox News sources were unsurprisingly the most supportive of the Trump administration, and the most likely to overtly reproduce his national identity narrative. In the immediate aftermath of the election, Fox amplified the official discourse by foregrounding the concerns of 'White working-class' Americans, and repeating narratives that helped to create domestic Others through the portrayal of thousands of dangerous and divisive anti-Trump protestors. Class-based divisions were a strong theme in Fox's coverage, which were gendered as well as being racially constructed. Moreover, the 'White working class' was consistently conflated with the national identity. For example, in one telling exchange on *Fox News*, 'real America' is explicitly equated with the White working-class struggle in the 21st century:

I think the movement against Hillary Clinton and against Barack Obama was economically based, because that white working class has seen . . . Wage stagnation, underemployment, some increase in unemployment, but the larger American dream is largely gone for them. Their kids aren't going to do better than them. There's real difficulty financing education, retirement and health care. And they were looking for a new approach, which Trump offered . . . Undeniably the Democrats have listened to both coasts, Washington, New York, to the exclusion of what I would call the real America, which is working class. (Schoen and Gigot, 2016)

Here, we see an analysis of Trump's victory and Clinton's loss that claims to place class and economic disparity at its heart, yet still points to the essential Whiteness of what is considered real working-class America. The concerns of Black and ethnic minority working-class groups are brushed aside to make space for 'forgotten' rust belt communities.

Elsewhere in the data, this reduction of real Americans to the White working class was readily tied to a Jacksonian foreign policy prioritisation of America and Americans first, creating a clear and narrow political message for elites to learn:

The real concern of American politicians ought to be American citizens . . . your number one priority is looking out for your people: American citizens. And on the left they don't care. (Carlson, 2016, edited for grammar)

This extract, in which the speaker explicitly (re)produces Mead's Jacksonian distinction between the folk community and the Other, is taken from an early episode of *Tucker Carlson Tonight*, which aired just a week after the election. This programme would go on to become one of the most popular prime time cable news shows, contributing to Fox's ratings dominance over MSNBC and CNN rivals (Katz, 2018). Here, the host crafted a strong Jacksonian message that would be repeated a month later in Trump's inaugural address: the duty of American leaders is to champion and protect the true American people. Carlson has since written this resonant message into a book which topped the New York Times Bestseller list, subtitled *How a Selfish Ruling Class Is Bringing America to the Brink of Revolution* and promoted as a cautionary tale for out-of-touch elites on the dangers of forgetting the concerns of 'ordinary' Americans (Carlson, 2018; *The New York Times*, 2018).

Beyond Fox, the mythologisation of the White working class was also reproduced across left-leaning and centrist mainstream media, which often adopted a tone of contrition for failing to see Trump coming. The *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *USA Today*, and MSNBC were all pro-active in framing Trump as divisive, racist, and sexist, and thereby contributed to a cross-platform critical narrative that placed in question Trump's suitability for the position of president. Even so, in attempting to make sense of Trump's victory over Clinton, these outlets embraced and reproduced the Trump administration's favoured narrative of 'left behind' White working-class Americans having swayed the election. This in turn reinforced the president's key discursive underpinning: that globalist elites had forgotten ordinary, local Americans. As Fareed Zakaria put it on CNN,

Trump remade the political map with a huge surge of support from working-class whites, particularly in rural communities. Let me be honest, this is a world I don't know – and many people probably don't know very well – and that's part of the problem. We have all managed to ignore the pain of rural America. (Zakaria, 2016)

Zakaria reproduced the same dividing line between elites and the White working class, and thereby reinforced the official construction of the national identity centred on a 'rural'

America defined by its Jacksonian concern that elites were wasting American resources on the causes of others. Similarly, frequent discussions (e.g. on MSNBC) covered whether the Democrats should have picked a less internationalist figure, such as Bernie Sanders, to counter Trump's appeal to White, working-class Americans:

Democrats are feeling as though if they had put up Bernie Sanders, he would have been able to make the case with trade. He would have been able to make the case to working class whites. (Yamiche Alcindor, MSNBC, 2016)

The discussion of this apparently exotic class of people, hitherto unknown and never 'experienced' by those charged with understanding American politics, occasionally bordered on caricature, and thus further fuelled Trump's populist distinction between elites and 'real' Americans. Discussing polling in Michigan, Chuck Todd noted that 'Donald Trump won 76 percent of counties with a Cracker Barrel restaurant and 22 percent of counties with a Whole Foods grocery store' (MSNBC, 2016). Furthermore, time and again, JD Vance was interviewed, as the author of *Hillbilly Elegy*, for his ethnographic and anthropological insights into the Jacksonians who put Trump in the White House:

The book has become sort of a cult following among a bunch of us political junkies, you know, all trying to figure out, okay, what do we miss. (Chuck Todd, MSNBC, 2016).

These types of statements othered rural, Appalachian Americans from the liberal intelligentsia, heightening their political importance, at the expense of other groups, in a way that more often than not served to complement rather than critique Trump's efforts. This tended to give the impression of a pundit class that was both eulogising of and condescending to (a romanticised image of) America's true heartland. In attempting to fill the gap in their electoral knowledge by re-examining the working class, the 'liberal' mainstream media systematically reproduced the same boundaries and identities constructed by the Trump administration and more right-wing speakers at Fox News. In Gramscian terms, a hegemonic consensus was thus established between the media of various stripes and the White House which set the established wisdom underlying explanations of the 2016 election.

Opposition constructions of the national identity and the White working class

Following the election, prominent Democrats attempted to mobilise a critical discourse that nevertheless failed to seriously challenge the president's key rhetorical manoeuvre: the reimagining of the American national identity as centred on the Jacksonian ideal and experience of White, working-class citizens. Democrats were quick to push a narrative that Trump was racist and sexist; characterisations that increased following the appointment of Steve Bannon to the transition team and the introduction of the Travel Ban, to the extent that labels such as 'White supremacist' were relatively commonplace (see, for example, Warren, 2016). Increasingly, fear of Trump's presidency was coupled to anger and disgust at his actions, especially among key figures such as Elizabeth Warren, Cory Booker, and Bernie Sanders. In addition to their proactivity in embedding Trump's racist and sexist identity into their language, Democrats also attempted to challenge the ever-narrowing construction of the American self by insisting upon the importance of diversity, inclusivity, and liberal values to the national identity:

This Nation is, has been, and always will be a nation of immigrants and refugees. This is who we are. We don't turn our back to those in need. And certainly, we do not do so on the basis of religion. (Lee, 2017)

This Executive Order [13769] is antithetical to our values and runs counter to what truly makes America great. America's diversity is the defining element of its culture, its history, and its families. (Murray and Harris, 2017)

These texts show how opposition speakers reacted to Trump's election and the Travel Ban by appealing to the Jeffersonian tradition and articulating a civic nationalist understanding of America (Restad, 2020). In broad terms, there were calls for unity and inclusiveness after a 'divisive' election, and these centred on the imagined loss of a core element of the national character: its willingness to accept immigrants and refugees regardless of race or religion. This discourse speaks to and draws on American exceptionalism, founded on the separation of the New World republic from the intolerant European powers of the 18th and 19th centuries. In Congress, speakers explicitly referred back to this history, asking how the Muslim Ban could fit with the Enlightenment values associated with the founding fathers:

What are we to think in the United States? This great Nation born from the ideas of liberty and freedom – freedom to pray as we want – what are we to think? (Booker, 2017)

These kinds of rhetorical moves were effective in developing an alternative narrative to appeal to critics and opponents of Trump's Jacksonianism. Furthermore, this emotionally affective alternative would resonate with liberal audiences both lamenting Trump's victory and fearful of the consequences for minorities, migrants, and refugees in post-2016 America. Despite this, there was little in this discourse that could challenge or disrupt the official/media consensus on 'real' White working-class America. Instead, the debate on the importance of diversity to the national identity took place largely separately from debates on 'forgotten' rural America. What was missing in the opposing discourse, at least in the weeks following the election, was a sustained attempt to position the lived experience and concerns of minorities explicitly at the centre of the national self, in the same way that official and media actors had achieved with the White working class. Instead, migrants and refugees were largely framed as a vulnerable Other that should be welcomed by the self. Thus, the constructed boundaries around true (White) America were maintained.

One opposition figure who did speak directly to the concept of ordinary, working America having swayed the election for Trump was Bernie Sanders:

Donald Trump tapped into the anger of a declining middle class that is sick and tired of establishment economics, establishment politics and the establishment media. People are tired of working longer hours for lower wages, of seeing decent paying jobs go to China . . . Of billionaires not paying any federal income taxes and of not being able to afford a college education for their kids. (Sanders, 2016)

Sanders reflected much of the same sentiment as can be seen in official and media discourses, separating an angry, forgotten real America (albeit in this case labelled 'middle class') from establishment elites. Of course, here the construction of the middle/working class was not linked to any racial group, and unlike in the discourses explored in the

previous sections, there was no distinction made between rural and urban voters. Even so, there was still little attempt to place the experiences of minority Americans at the centre of the national identity. Instead, Sanders opted for a 'colour blind' language, that saw the concerns of all middle/working-class Americans as broadly the same. Once again, this appears to have been a missed opportunity to expand the emerging consensus on the Jacksonian understanding of 'real' America.

Where Democrats spoke about the importance of America's liberal, inclusive identity, this was often accompanied by a growing anxiety over the divisiveness of political discourse, as marking the potential death of civil dialogue and bipartisan cooperation. An important narrative emerged here, making the case for unity and cooperation, in the face of political and societal division. Often, calls for inclusivity were focussed on the need to promote bipartisan cooperation between the two main parties, with Nancy Pelosi, for example, arguing,

After an election in which Donald Trump won the electoral college and Hillary Clinton won the popular vote, we have a responsibility to come together and find common ground. (Pelosi, 2016)

This discourse recognised the danger posed by the Trump administration to liberal America, but also made efforts to articulate the willingness of Democrats to work with Republicans in key areas. Because of its concern for political unity, this discourse was less likely to challenge Jacksonian concerns on security and immigration, a position epitomised by senior Democrats' offer to fund the Mexican border wall in return for protections for immigrants living in the US under the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) programme (Berman, 2018).

At the time of writing, this discourse is best exemplified by presidential candidate Joe Biden, who has stated his belief that Trump's time in office is an 'aberration' and that dialogue and cooperation should still be pursued because 'this is not the Republican party', at least according to his 'Republican friends in the House and Senate' (Goldmacher, 2019). In our data, this sentiment manifested itself as a general unease at the trajectory of American political discourse. While Trump was framed as divisive, racist, and sexist, an apparent lack of dialogue or cooperation between Democrats and Republicans – despite the latter's vocal support for their new president – was seen as similarly dangerous. Once more, this opposing narrative failed to challenge or disrupt the discursively narrow construction of national identity voiced by official speakers. Indeed, in favour of perceived unity, it ignored the troubling racial undertones that re-constructed the US national identity in Jacksonian terms. We ask, just how unified can a nation become, if accepting of ethno-nationalist claims as legitimate alongside civic nationalism?

Overall, whether opposition speakers responded to Trump by labelling him as dangerous, by promoting a values-based construction of the national identity, or by emphasising the need for bipartisan dialogue and cooperation, they failed to critique, challenge, or disrupt the mythology of White working-class America articulated by official actors and reproduced by the media. Even critical voices that placed values at the centre of the national identity in seeking protections for migrants and refugees affected by the Travel Ban ultimately framed the latter as a vulnerable Other, and therefore failed to reverse the narrowing construction of the self. Similarly, while critical voices attempted to produce a more progressive narrative of working-class anger, they often avoided explicitly placing the experiences and concerns of 'ordinary' minorities at the core of their message.

Conclusion

Donald Trump redefined US national identity in pursuit of the White House, placing the White (male) working class at the centre of the US imaginary. First, we have argued that Trump placed the mythology of the White (male) working class at the heart of US national identity through a discourse of Jacksonian populism. Specifically, it is the Jacksonian tradition that enables Trump's style of governance and communication to be conceptualised and contextualised, beyond more generic appeals to populist distinctions between the people and the elite. This enables a fuller understanding of how Trump embedded his language within the landscape of US electoral politics and American political history, achieving resonance through appeals to distinct emotions and the construction of a narrow polis. Second, we looked beyond this, adding context to the research into official rhetoric presented across this Special Issue, in showing that this move was successful not just rhetorically but discursively, as evidenced by the related lines of contestation among the media and opposition. Pundits and politicians of all persuasions were quick to demonstrate (partial) acceptance of the narrative that this politically significant community had swayed the election, and even to offer mea culpas for failing to recognise their blind spot sooner. Herbert et al. (2019) are, therefore, not wholly correct: while there is a disconnect between Trump's policy and rhetoric, his language is far from ordinary and certainly significant; his reworking of American discourse and the US national identity is fundamental, remarkable, impressive, and consequential.

The result of these efforts and limited contestations is ongoing. Trump's discursive strategy has remained constant from his initial leadership of the birther movement, through the imposition of the Travel Ban, to the current global pandemic. Initial resistance of Trump's language was difficult since, despite furthering a racially exclusivist national identity, it rendered potential opposition as merely further proof of elite snobbery and the continued subjugation of forgotten, 'real' Americans. Disagreement was readily cast as proof of ongoing elite betrayal and the need for a self-styled Jacksonian populist hero. Going forward, the discursive structures this Jacksonian populism have engendered are shaping the manner in which the US response to coronavirus and COVID-19 is playing out. Simultaneously, Trump's angry response to nationwide protests following the police killing of George Floyd has been spoken almost exclusively in the language of Jacksonian militarism. Both of these crises are likely to set the stage for the upcoming November 2020 presidential election. Already we have seen desperate Jacksonian efforts to render the virus as a visible, foreign enemy, most notably in the form of China, but also in the work of the World Health Organization. Meanwhile, news stations have broadcast live split screen footage of police forcibly dispersing protestors outside the White House while the president announced he was 'dispatching thousands and thousands of heavily armed soldiers' to stop the civil disobedience (Trump, 2020). If, before these crises, the discursive deck appeared stacked in Trump's favour, as the defender of 'real America' from foreign threat (e.g. Fermor and Holland, 2021), the president's mishandling of the current health and societal crises has thrown this into disarray. So far, his strained attempts to blame threatening Others for the pandemic and his authoritarian response to protests suggest a presidency gambling on a discursive strategy that is, on the one hand, ill-suited to the complex management of national and global health crises and, on the other, appears designed to widen rather than confront America's racial divides.

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Note

1. Texts were coded manually (in NVivo) and abductively, making use of both inductive and deductive approaches. We included texts, from 2016 to 2018, by keyword, from the President, Vice President, Secretary of State, Secretary of Defense, National Security Advisor, Attorney General, Ambassador to the UN, Press Secretary, Treasury Secretary, Secretary of the Interior, and various administration officials, for example, Chairman of the White House Council of Economic Advisers, Secretary of Agriculture. Opposition sources included Congressional and Senate records, as well as speeches from key figures, such as the House Minority Leader and Senate Minority Leader, Bernie Sanders, Joe Biden, Cory Booker, Kamala Harris, Nancy Pelosi, Chuck Schumer, and Elizabeth Warren. For the media, we included the *New York Times*, *USA Today*, *Washington Post*, MSNBC (TV), CNN (online), and Fox News (TV), as the five most visited, subscribed to, read and shared (on social media) news websites, plus the *Washington Post*, as the largest specialist politics national newspaper.

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