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**Title:** A Populist Grand Strategy? Trump and the Framing of American Decline

**Author:** Rubrick Biegon

**Affiliation:** University of Kent

**Abstract:** What is the role of ‘populism’ in Donald Trump’s foreign policy? Defining populism as a framing style that constructs antagonisms around ‘the people’ and their adversaries, this article explores Trump’s rhetoric in relation to his efforts to shift US grand strategy away from its traditional investment in the liberal international order. Based on an approach grounded in the ontological commitments of Critical Discourse Analysis, it examines three interlocking frames: (1) the ‘corrupt’ elites of the establishment ‘swamp’ (2) the anti-globalist, ‘America first’ agenda, and (3) poor deal-making responsible for the US ‘losing’ in international affairs. In responding to declinist themes and anxieties, Trump’s populist rhetoric frames a Jacksonian ideological approach based on nationalism, mercantilism and a reliance on coercive power.

**Keywords:** US foreign policy, Trump, populism, framing, critical discourse analysis, decline

**Short bio note:** Rubrick Biegon is a Lecturer in International Relations in the School of Politics and International Relations at the University of Kent. His research interests include US foreign policy, security cooperation, trade politics and inter-American relations. He is the author of *US Power in Latin America: Renewing Hegemony*, published by Routledge (2017).

**Full contact details:** School of Politics and International Relations, Rutherford College, University of Kent, Canterbury, Kent, CT2 7NX, United Kingdom

**Email:** R.Biegon@kent.ac.uk

For many, Donald Trump is emblematic of a new wave of global populism.<sup>1</sup> An outsider who campaigned against the internationalist consensus underpinning American foreign policy, his rhetoric suggested major changes to US statecraft, which is assumed to be moving in a populist direction.<sup>2</sup> What are the implications of Trump's populism for the agency of the United States in international politics?

The literature on US foreign policy has increasingly focused on the concept of grand strategy, a trend which has carried over into the Trump presidency.<sup>3</sup> As the 'conceptual framework that helps nations determine where they want to go and how they ought to get there',<sup>4</sup> grand strategy connects debates over the 'national interest' to changing international environments. In providing order to specific foreign policy agendas, grand strategy spans military, economic and diplomatic spheres precisely because the various forms of power put to use by states (to pursue security and other goals) are interlinked. What Brooks and Wohlforth characterise as Washington's 'basic grand strategy' of 'deep engagement'<sup>5</sup> entails a vision of the US's wider role vis-à-vis the postwar 'liberal order', including its institutions and economic structures. As stated by Brands, 'Trump came to Washington promising a grand-strategic revolution—the deconstruction of America's multi-generational project to shape a stable, open world'.<sup>6</sup> I argue that Trump's populism is a means of framing the reorientation of US hegemony toward a more coercive, illiberal disposition. It isn't the strategy per se that is 'populist', but rather its discursive presentation.

To date, there has been little research on populism within International Relations (IR). This may be changing, in part because populism is often seen as a transnational phenomenon.<sup>7</sup> This article argues that Trump's populism is best understood in relation to anxieties around American decline, which have enabled the populist message to take hold. Ontologically, this

decline has both material and discursive facets. Reflecting this, the article's investigation is based on Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), an interdisciplinary approach to language that highlights the significance of extra-discursive factors and the co-constitutive dynamic between discursive practices and the material 'base' of social relations.

The article begins by reviewing the literature on populism. It argues that populism is best conceptualised as a framing style that constructs antagonisms around 'the people' and their adversaries. It links CDA to frame analysis to examine the rhetoric of Trump's campaign and early tenure in office. This rhetoric places 'forgotten' Americans in opposition to the elites in the establishment, who, through their support of globalism, have caused the US to 'lose' to other countries. The article then locates populism alongside the tradition of Jacksonian nationalism, which constitutes the 'fuller' ideological orientation of the Trump administration. In examining the debates over American decline, the analysis illustrates the ways in which Trump's discourse exploits declinist anxieties. The article highlights three interlocking frames in Trump's grand strategic and foreign policy rhetoric: (1) the 'corrupt' elites of the establishment 'swamp' (2) the anti-globalist, 'America first' agenda, and (3) poor deal-making responsible for the US 'losing' in international affairs.

### **Populism as Discourse**

As noted by Ernesto Laclau, 'a persistent feature of the literature on populism is its reluctance—or difficulty—in giving the concept any precise meaning'.<sup>8</sup> Unlike other contested concepts, 'it has become an analytical attribution rather than a term with which most political actors would willingly identify'.<sup>9</sup> Scholarship on populism tends to track larger theoretical and analytical cleavages in political science. Some view it as a *model* of

leadership or governance; others as an *ideology*; and still others as a *discourse*. In Laclau's theorizing,<sup>10</sup> populism denotes a mode of articulation that constitutes 'the people'. It is the discourse of populism that allows this subject to make demands on an antagonist. In acknowledging that populism can have multiple features and manifestations, this article adopts a discursive approach that focuses on the instrumental use of language: namely, the rhetoric and framing practices of Donald Trump and his administration.

There is a vast literature on populism, which touches on its complex relationship with democracy. For Canovan, populism mobilises 'the people' against 'the powerful' in a direct and democratic way.<sup>11</sup> This helps to actualise abstract notions of popular sovereignty. Likewise, for Laclau, populism has a democratic purpose in that it constructs 'the people' as an actor capable of mobilisation and agency.<sup>12</sup> It can foster a counterhegemonic democracy of underdogs, *plebs* and/or marginalised groups. Some liken it to a 'spectre' of democracy—as something that shadows and haunts liberal politics; sitting at the periphery of democracy, populism can agitate and threaten liberalism, whether through the excesses of bottom-up movements or the messianic manias associated with political 'saviours'.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, it is the fusion of mass politics and demagogic leaders that leads some to perceive populism as a kind of 'mob rule'.<sup>14</sup> The image here is of an irresponsible 'strongman' (or showman, in Trump's case) whipping the masses into a frenzy to unsettle the established order.

For some, populism represents a model in which domineering, charismatic leaders use patronage to advance the short-term interests of their followers while consolidating their own power. The specifics can vary, taking on different characteristics depending on historical and cultural contexts. Populism becomes closely aligned with nationalism as the charismatic leader appeals to national identity and the purity of the national 'heartland'. In the US, this

brand of folk politics can be traced to the presidency of Andrew Jackson and his vision of ‘national greatness’ as something to be actively and forcefully promoted rather than passively embodied. In foreign policymaking, Jacksonianism implies an aggressive disposition based on the veneration of military power and the protection of the cultural, ethnic and racial ties of the folk community.<sup>15</sup> This sat at the core of Donald Trump’s campaign, which oscillated between ‘isolationist’ and militaristic/interventionist appeals, infused with anti-elitist messages.<sup>16</sup> Although ‘populism’ captures Trump’s discourse, this is intertwined with a Jacksonian nationalist ideology at odds with other strands of (left-leaning) populism in the American political tradition.

Traditionally, in the US, populism was seen as interventionist and redistributive—a force that targeted elites in the business and banking sectors. As elsewhere, populist leaders were often defined by their rhetorical appeals to ‘the people’. The etymology of ‘populism’ is revealing; stemming from *populus*, Latin for ‘people’, definitions of the concept converge on this constitutive dynamic. This moves the discussion toward a more sophisticated approach, one which transcends the narrow focus on charismatic politicians, clientilistic systems and/or ‘mob rule’. More than a *model* of politics, then, populism is about a certain set of ideas involving ‘the people’ as a coherent grouping. ‘While there is no scholarly agreement on the meaning of populism’, writes Panizza, ‘it is possible to identify an analytical core around which there is a significant degree of academic consensus’.<sup>17</sup> This core is comprised of the identification of ‘the people’ as a unitary actor in an antagonistic relationship to a powerful ‘other’.<sup>18</sup> Populism must be *against* something. At the same time, it contains ‘paradoxes and ambiguities’, in Laclau’s terms,<sup>19</sup> because the anti-elite message is generally articulated by individual political elites.

Cas Mudde captures the conflictual notion of populism in his influential article ‘The Populist Zeitgeist’, which foregrounds the normative aspects of the Manichean dichotomy between ‘the pure people’ and their adversaries, normally ‘the corrupt elite’.<sup>20</sup> He argues that populism is an ideology in which the ‘general will’ of the people must prevail. Mudde is careful to posit populism as a ‘thin ideology’, one which can be seamlessly combined with other ideologies, either ‘thin’ or ‘full’.<sup>21</sup> Others have developed this ideological argument,<sup>22</sup> which is useful in illuminating not only the antagonistic nature of populism but its normative features (‘the people’ always represent the virtuous side of the populist divide). Nevertheless, labelling populism an ideology—even a thin one—confuses matters. Populist actors don’t claim the label. As an epithet, ‘populism’ implies a kind of demagogic agitation in right-wing criticism, while, for left-wing critics, it denotes the subordination of socialist struggle to common prejudices, assumptions and habits, as displayed in some fascist movements.<sup>23</sup> It is ideologically ambiguous. For Laclau, populism can be a virtuous and democratic force, but this isn’t automatically the case, because, as he explains, the antagonisms and contradictions of populism mean that it can be affixed to disparate movements and ideas, including on the far-right of the political spectrum.<sup>24</sup>

Indeed, populism can be leftist, rightist or centrist. It can be top-down or bottom-up, statist or neoliberal. In Latin America, for instance, populism is frequently a means of leftist mobilisation, fuelled by bottom-up demands of the ‘popular classes’, a category that includes industrial workers and peasants alongside the urban poor and even elements of the middle class. A charismatic figurehead, such as Hugo Chávez in Venezuela or Evo Morales in Bolivia, often holds the eclectic, multiclass coalition together. In contrast, in Europe, populism is more often (though not always) a phenomenon of the right,<sup>25</sup> exemplified by politicians like Hungary’s Viktor Orbán and France’s Marine Le Pen. Although Trumpism is

clearly rightist, and shares similarities with populism's 'European' variant, the larger tradition of American populism has its roots on the left.

That populism can be confidently attached to both democracy and authoritarianism and applied across the political spectrum points to the limitations of conceptualising it as a model. Its thinness limits the analytical application of 'populism' as an ideology. Following Laclau, I see populism as fundamentally discursive. This is consistent with those who approach it *stylistically*, as something to be *performed*.<sup>26</sup> The populist leader champions the folk values of the country's 'heartland', an idealised conception of community that is 'felt rather than reasoned, and something that is shrouded in imprecision'.<sup>27</sup> He/she must show that they will lead the people valiantly against their corrupted foes. This is achieved through rhetoric, framing, narrative, discourse—concepts that are intertwined in social science theorising but worth distinguishing for analytical clarity.

### *Critical Discourse Analysis: Theorising Trump's Rhetoric*

I define populism as an antagonistic framing style built on the normative dichotomy between 'the people' and their adversaries. It is best viewed as a deliberate, instrumental element of a wider discourse that is dialectically aligned with the 'fuller' ideological interests of the populist agent. Trump's populism is subsumed to his nationalistic and neo-mercantilist agenda, one focused on the coercive, 'hard power' aspects of US hegemony (or 'greatness', in Trump's preferred terms). Trump's rhetorical strategy, and the public's receptiveness to his style, are impacted by the material context that surrounded his election. Trumpian discourse must be analysed in concert with the structural realities confronting the United States in a period of relative decline. Of course, the scope, nature and causes of this 'decline' are not

mere ‘facts’ devoid of political interpretation. The material conditions of the US political economy are mediated through the actions and discursive practices of specific agents. Across both economic and security issues, Trump’s populism frames American decline as a consequence of ‘corrupt’, ‘globalist’ elites. This, in turn, shapes the strategic response of his administration, one which downplays traditional policy commitments to liberal internationalism.

This article’s theoretical framework is grounded in Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). An interdisciplinary approach to the relationship between language and power, CDA emphasises that power operates both *in* discourse and *behind* it.<sup>28</sup> Discursive practices are embedded in wider social, cultural and political realities. ‘Hegemonic struggle takes place to a significant extent in discourse’, writes Norman Fairclough, ‘and discourse analysis needs to be used alongside other types of analysis’ to fully grasp socio-political change.<sup>29</sup> In contrast to poststructuralism, CDA emphasises that discursive practices are ‘constrained by the fact that they inevitably take place within a constituted, material reality, with preconstituted “objects” and preconstituted social subjects’.<sup>30</sup>

Trump’s rhetoric plays off of the relative ‘decline’ of US material capabilities, which has seen new powers ‘rise’ to the fore in international politics.<sup>31</sup> Socio-economic realities associated with structural shifts in the global economy helped create conditions for populism to take hold. ‘A fully “critical” account of discourse (requires) a theorization and description of both the social processes and structures which give rise to the production of a text’, notes Ruth Wodak, ‘and of the social structures and processes within which individuals or groups as social historical subjects, create meanings’ from those texts.<sup>32</sup> I argue that Trump’s ‘texts’, from speeches and official documents to his Tweets,<sup>33</sup> are best examined in the context of

Jacksonianism, an ideological strand of American populism that has long influenced foreign policymaking.

Importantly, CDA highlights the connection between discourse and ideology without conflating the two. According to Fairclough, CDA differs from other approaches ‘in not just describing discursive practices, but also showing how discourse is shaped by relations of power and ideologies, and the constructive effects discourse has upon social identities, social relations and systems of knowledge and belief, neither of which is normally apparent to discourse participants’.<sup>34</sup> As noted above, populism is less an ideology than a means of framing particular ideological commitments. Populist discourse can naturalise an ideology by linking it to the legitimacy of ‘the people’. For Fairclough, this ‘naturalisation’ process is hegemonic, reinforcing the asymmetrical power of dominant actors.<sup>35</sup> Framed strategically, certain political ideas and interpretations, including those associated with elite interests, can become ‘common sense’ through their attribution to the ‘folk’ culture.

Based on a realist ontology, CDA attends to the dialectical relationship between the discursive and structural/material spheres of social practice. This is crucial to any analysis of Trump’s grand strategy, in which populist rhetoric is used to respond to, and frame, concerns over US decline. I use the approach to highlight the discursive features of a hegemony that has relied on structural, material and institutional forms of power in the postwar liberal order. Trump’s rhetoric suggests that unencumbered coercive force can be used to reverse American decline and improve the lives of the ‘forgotten’ folk community. This is a stylised, strategic ploy to naturalise the ideology of the Trump project, which, while reactionary and illiberal, is generally consistent with the Jacksonian wing of the Republican Party.

Trump's discourse unfolds in a series of frames that construct antagonisms between 'the people' and the sources of American decline. In Goffman's seminal study, framing is largely about everyday interpretation and common speech patterns.<sup>36</sup> Similarly, for Fairclough, frames are a form of mental representation. However, Fairclough relates these everyday experiences to wider ideological processes.<sup>37</sup> In their social movement theory, Snow and Bedford also trace the resonance of frames to their ideological function.<sup>38</sup> The discussion of framing in the analysis of foreign policy tends to focus on individual actors at the highest levels of decision-making, including presidents and top advisors.<sup>39</sup> There is also considerable focus on media framing in relation to foreign policy,<sup>40</sup> owing in part to the influence of the concept of framing within the disciplines of communications and media studies. It is generally accepted that the choice of a particular frame is a deliberate process. According to Entman, 'to frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation'.<sup>41</sup> The focus is less on everyday experiences and more on the deliberate use of frames to achieve political goals.

In other words, framing is instrumental. This is true whether the frames are diagnostic, prognostic or motivational; whether they are intended to identify a problem, proscribe a solution or inspire participation in a movement.<sup>42</sup> Frames are rhetorical devices that order the broader discursive terrain. They can, and do, have multiple audiences, and their utility and purchase emerge out of existing discourses. Populism is an 'argumentative frame'.<sup>43</sup> It constructs the 'pure people', based in the virtuous and metaphorical heartland, against their powerful and often distant foes, fuelling notions of a besieged underdog. There is a fluidity in populist framing which, despite its imprecision, gains a certain potency in the pugnacious style of populist leaders. The versatility of the language (provided by the vagueness of

concepts like ‘the people’) enables the chameleonic, shape-shifting politics that often characterise populist-infused projects. In the case of nationalists like Trump, leaders are able to ‘dress up’ their ‘real’ agenda with the virtue of the national heartland. To consolidate power, populists elide their political opponents with the enemies of ‘the people’. Again, these adversarial forces/actors can be vague—elites, foreigners, the establishment. But to compensate for this, the framing needs to be consistent, meaning the rhetorical style needs to be forceful and unwavering, and Trump’s rhetoric, for instance, is famously repetitive.<sup>44</sup> The degree to which audiences are receptive to populist framing is impacted by material conditions and existing ideological assumptions.

### **Jacksonian Populism in Historical Context**

The Trump phenomenon is about much more than the celebrity-*cum*-politician himself. Clearly, his idiosyncrasies shape his approach to governing. However, Trump’s rhetoric must be understood in the context of American populism, a (set of) tradition(s) that can be traced from the eponymous period of Andrew Jackson through the racialised appeals of Richard Nixon’s ‘southern strategy’ and the consolidation of the ‘new right’ under Ronald Reagan,<sup>45</sup> which married populist appeals with a resurgent and movement-based conservatism. The racialised features of American populism challenge more generalised conceptualisations of the concept,<sup>46</sup> reinforcing the importance of viewing it in relation to Jacksonian ideology, which has always placed ethnic and racial parameters on the ‘folk’ community. The complexity of this topic cannot be fully addressed here; suffice it to say that racialised populism has an extensive history in the United States, which saw iterations of the phenomenon prior to Trump. The Islamophobia and xenophobia that fuel Trump’s populism,

and which depict both Muslims and Latinos as threatening ‘others’, represent an extension of this history.

In Michael Kazin’s monumental study, American populism is shown to be highly elastic, more ‘impulse’ than coherent ideology. A ‘flexible mode of persuasion’, he writes, it was, in essence, ‘the rhetoric of American discontents’ for many decades, across a number of causes and issues; as an approach to politics, then, it has been chock full of ‘ironies and contradictions’.<sup>47</sup> Although populism is generally associated with domestic politics, it can have ramifications for foreign affairs, particularly when it reinforces an aggressive, chauvinistic or xenophobic form of nationalism. Because of the United States’ hegemonic role, the country’s politics are closely intertwined with its foreign policies. At various points in history populist ideas have had major implications for US actions in international relations, as was the case with the ‘America first’ movement of the interwar period. Even when not actively engaged, the populist impulse is latent in US political culture. Furthermore, post-Cold War processes of globalisation mean domestic realities are increasingly impacted by the international political economy. In this vein, analysts point to the importance of the financial crisis and recession of 2008-09 to the recent boom in American populism.<sup>48</sup> From the Tea Party and Occupy movements to the candidacies of Bernie Sanders and Donald Trump, the populist turn in US politics reflected emerging insecurities and vulnerabilities in the US ‘heartland’.

As outlined in the popular history of Walter Russell Mead, Jacksonianism is one of four traditional schools of American foreign policy. Named for Andrew Jackson, a former general who in 1829 became the seventh president after capitalising on an expanded franchise, it coexists with, and contrasts with, Jeffersonian, Hamiltonian and Wilsonian schools of

thought. ‘For Jacksonians’, according to Mead, ‘the prime goal of the American people is not the commercial and industrial policy sought by Hamiltonians, nor the administrative excellence in support of moral values that Wilsonians seek, nor Jeffersonian liberty’. Rather, ‘Jacksonians believe the government should do everything in its power to promote the well-being—political, moral, economic—of the folk community’.<sup>49</sup> Rooted in Protestant beliefs and the emotional terrain of the frontier, this ‘instinct’, for Mead, emphasises the heartland and the heroism of the American people. Jacksonians have little regard for international law, multilateral institutions or ‘soft power’. In an anarchic and violent world, military might is paramount. Because warfighting is seen to enhance the honour of the nation and its people, Jacksonianism is prone to militarism.

Although it competes with other currents in US political culture, Mead argues that ‘the United States cannot wage a major international war without Jacksonian support’.<sup>50</sup> Isolationist impulses in the Jacksonian worldview are tempered by a desire for the nation to assert itself and ‘win’ when challenged. If adversaries are framed as enemies, the Jacksonian tradition can serve as a reservoir of support for overseas military actions and interventionism. ‘To engage Jacksonians in support of the Cold War’, Mead notes, ‘it was necessary to convince them that Moscow was engaged in a far-reaching and systematic campaign for world domination’.<sup>51</sup> Anti-Communism was integral to the rightward shift of American populism from the 1930s through the 1980s.<sup>52</sup> This reached an apex during the early part of the Reagan presidency. More recently, the George W. Bush administration used populist themes to mobilise support for its Manichean ‘War on Terror’.<sup>53</sup>

As the first president in US history to enter office without any government or military experience, Donald Trump is a *sui generis* figure in American politics. He has professed a

strong affinity for Jackson, and his acolytes encouraged the comparison (namely Steve Bannon, former White House counsel, and former Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich, an informal advisor). For Mead, Trump's election represented a full-on 'Jacksonian revolt'. He writes: 'For the first time in 70 years, the American people have elected a president who disparages the policies, ideas, and institutions at the heart of postwar US foreign policy'.<sup>54</sup> Trump's outsized personality and unusual profile can blur the 'true nature' of his impact on the operation of the American state; to an extent, this may be (part of) a deliberate strategy by the media-savvy outsider, long fascinated with the power of his own brand.

Kazin traces the evolution of populism through the Nixon and Reagan presidencies and into the candidacies of billionaire businessman H. Ross Perot.<sup>55</sup> The construct of 'Middle America' stems from Nixon-era discourse and the backlash against the counter-culture and social movements of the 1960s and 70s. Trump's affinity for Richard Nixon is well-known, and he has deliberately echoed Nixon's Jacksonian discourse to great effect. Not only did Trump lift Nixon's 'silent majority' trope, he connected it to the 'law-and-order' mantra also made famous by Nixon. Perot's outsider campaigns and eclectic ideology provided a more recent blueprint for Trump, who flirted with Perot's Reform Party ahead of the 2000 campaign. Whereas Perot used his wealth to gain access to the national political stage, Trump used his celebrity. The campaigns of Patrick Buchanan, a conservative commentator and speechwriter for Nixon, were another precursor. Although Buchanan was to the right of Perot, the two were similar in their opposition to the bipartisan consensus on economic globalisation.<sup>56</sup> Trump claimed many of the cultural issues exploited by Buchanan, most notably immigration. Trump's rhetorical focus on the construction of threatening others (including immigrants, but also refugees, Muslims, criminals and protesters) reinforces his association with the (racialised) folk community of 'forgotten' Americans.

Trump seeks to connect issues around immigration, trade and ‘globalism’, which helps sharpen his appeal to folk-based (and racialised) notions of ‘the people’ while othering ‘globalist’ elites. The blend of identity politics and economic protectionism is central to interpretations of Trump as a populist. For Ronald Inglehart and Pippa Norris, Trump is a ‘populist authoritarian’ who rode burgeoning resentment against post-materialist values among working-class whites. Declining real income and job security over a 35-year-period had primed the US electorate for a xenophobic turn. ‘The groundswell of support for populists ultimately reflects economic insecurity’, they write, ‘but its immediate cause is a backlash against rapid cultural change’.<sup>57</sup> Like Perot and Buchanan before him, but unlike the majority of Republican Party officials, Trump criticised free trade. Moreover, on certain other socio-economic issues (namely entitlements, but also, at times, taxes and health care) Trump (occasionally if not consistently) positioned himself to the left of other Republican candidates.

Similarly, on the Iraq war, Trump staked out a position at odds with the wider Republican Party by claiming (erroneously) that he had opposed the war prior to the US invasion.<sup>58</sup> This resonated with many rank-and-file conservatives who had grown disillusioned with Bush-era foreign policy in the wake of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars.<sup>59</sup> The move placed Trump in opposition to the party’s neoconservative foreign policy establishment symbolised in the candidacy of Jeb Bush (reinforcing his ‘outsider’ *bona fides*), with many Republican officials/experts subsequently committing themselves to a ‘never Trump’ position during the campaign. Along with his criticisms of ‘nation-building’ and the broader trajectory of US foreign policy, the ‘anti-war’ claims helped Trump create what Stephen Walt characterises as

‘a crude caricature of realism’. Walt argues that any claims to realist strategy are undone by his ‘erratic leadership’ and ‘chaotic, confusing, and inept’ foreign policy.<sup>60</sup>

Trump’s rhetoric and positions are fluid; he isn’t defined by his *ideology* as much as his *style*. Early in his presidency, Trump walked back aspects of his campaign agenda (on entitlements, for example) while doubling-down on some of his more controversial positions (e.g. the proclaimed ‘Muslim ban’). Much of his ‘economic populism’ was quickly abandoned in favour of conventional Republican positions.<sup>61</sup> This isn’t to say that other US presidents haven’t changed positions abruptly, or that the Trump phenomenon is devoid of a concrete political program. Populism’s conceptual utility here lies in the fact that it offers some purchase on the swings and contradictions of the Trump era; that it captures something fundamental in the administration’s peculiar discourse; and that it fosters an understanding of his ‘America first’ agenda.

### **Framing Decline in Trump’s Strategic Shift**

Although it is based on measurements of material power, there is a discursive element to ‘decline’ as a complex, contested political phenomenon, which can be understood in a number of ways—from the ‘high politics’ of global leadership to more mundane concerns experienced by the US population; from deteriorating hegemonic legitimacy and the perceived loss of status to dwindling economic output, deindustrialisation and associated social ills. In the context of actually-existing power shifts, Trump’s election was facilitated by his rhetorical exploitation of declinist themes. There is considerable concern that Trump’s cavalier, Jacksonian approach will damage Washington’s international leadership and erode the US-led liberal order, accelerating American decline.

Trump's major speeches have been unusually bleak. In accepting the Republican nomination, for example, he used 'dark imagery and an almost angry tone' to portray the US 'as a diminished and even humiliated nation', offering himself as 'an all-powerful savior who could resurrect the country's standing'.<sup>62</sup> His 'populist inaugural address' recited 'a litany of horrors including gangs, drugs, crime, poverty, and unemployment', with Trump proclaiming: 'This American carnage stops right here and stops right now'.<sup>63</sup> Trump's rhetoric consistently interweaves the power of the nation with the declining livelihoods of the 'forgotten men and women' of the heartland,<sup>64</sup> while presenting himself as the champion of a declining and 'crippled America', to quote the title of Trump's campaign book.<sup>65</sup>

Declinist anxieties have arisen at multiple points in US history. In the 1980s, Paul Kennedy's *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers* sparked intense speculation on the topic. The key dynamic was 'imperial overstretch'. He wrote: 'decision-makers in Washington must face the awkward and enduring fact that the sum total of the United States' global interests and obligations is nowadays far larger than the country's power to defend them all simultaneously'.<sup>66</sup> The collapse of the Soviet Union all but buried these concerns, which gave way to the heady optimism of the unipolar moment, globalisation and the Washington Consensus. The post-9/11 period saw a deepening hubris regarding the future of US pre-eminence. That optimism, however, quickly subsided during the latter stages of the George W. Bush years, mainly as a result of the costly and violent occupation of Iraq.<sup>67</sup> Trump's claims to have opposed the Iraq war provided a means of criticising the 'globalist' 'establishment', which precipitated this decline through the decision to invade Iraq. The global financial crisis, which stemmed initially from the US housing sector, further inflamed debates over American decline.

Of course, the ‘decline’ of one state implies others are ‘rising’. In debates over polarity in IR, discussion has centred on the ‘rise of the rest’.<sup>68</sup> The key metric is economic output; as the US share of the global economy narrows, its status as the largest economy is imperilled, with China set to overtake the US in the near future. Scholars remain split on the implications of global economic trends. In a certain segment of the literature, the idea that the US can sustain its global hegemony is, at best, an illusion.<sup>69</sup> In contrast, others see the unipolar arrangement, and thus American primacy, as enduring, even if the postwar system is becoming more unstable.<sup>70</sup> For Ikenberry, writing prior to Trump: ‘Ironically, the prospect of a decline in American relative power generates incentives for a renewed commitment by the United States to an open and rule-based order. In the end, it is these liberal features of the international order that will slow down and mute the consequences of a return to multipolarity’.<sup>71</sup> In Trump, however, Ikenberry sees a ‘plot’ against the traditional precepts of US grand strategy.<sup>72</sup>

Debates over grand strategy tend to converge on the question of how to preserve or extend US power in the emerging multipolar order. Trump blends neo-isolationist appeals with militarism and ‘hard power’. Multilateral leadership is downplayed in favour of a more unilateral posture, one with little outward concern for the institutions of the liberal order. If the Obama administration was focused on attending to the growing constraints on US power from a Jeffersonian ideological position,<sup>73</sup> Trump portends a Jacksonian approach to decline, one emphasising coercive force and a more mercantilist foreign economic policy.<sup>74</sup> There was a clear trend toward militarisation from early in Trump’s presidency, as evidenced by the posting of generals to key positions and a pledge to drastically increase the budget of the Defense Department.<sup>75</sup> The National Defense Strategy, while showing continuity with the

previous administration on the importance of alliances and the integration of multiple elements of US power, outlined a greater focus on ‘revisionist powers’ such as China and Russia and called for the restoration of warfighting readiness and the fielding of a more lethal force.<sup>76</sup> The 2017 National Security Strategy recast US leadership as putting ‘America first’ to ‘reassert America’s advantages on the world stage’.<sup>77</sup> The document also foregrounded economic issues, with the promotion of prosperity a ‘pillar’ of US strategy.

Personnel changes in Trump’s second year reinforced the more nationalistic and rightist tendencies in his White House. Perceived moderates like National Security Advisor H. R. McMaster and Gary Cohn, director of the National Economic Council, were replaced by more conservative Trump allies, John Bolton and Larry Kudlow, respectively. Stewardship of the State Department was handed over to Mike Pompeo, previously Director of the Central Intelligence Agency and a ‘hawkish’, Tea Party-affiliated Congressman. As Trump settled into the presidency, he doubled-down on the themes of his campaign. He withdrew the US from the multilateral Iran nuclear agreement (formally known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action). He implemented a series of tariffs impacting key trading partners. In the lead-up to a meeting with North Korean leader Kim Jong-un, he roiled the 2018 G7 Summit by suggesting Russia be readmitted to the group. The overall approach, then, featured unilateralism, transactionalism and the prioritisation of coercive power, all in the service of a narrower understanding of US interests. How would this be presented?

### *The ‘Corrupt’ Elites of the Establishment ‘Swamp’*

Since the 1980s, Donald Trump has been a billionaire entrepreneur and television personality. Although Trump bragged in the presidential debates that he was ‘very rich’, he was not a

member of the elite, in his view—those who were responsible for the ‘losing’ that had produced the country’s decline. Indeed, Trump’s attacks on the elite have been a hallmark of his populism. Using slang terms like ‘winning’ and ‘losers’ reinforced a low vernacular style. Punctuated by spontaneous gestures and crass language, refined in the worlds of reality TV and professional wrestling, his low-brow style ‘brings entertainment value and explains his political success’, write Hall, Goldstein and Ingram: ‘Laughing with Trump, supporters are empowered’.<sup>78</sup>

Trump’s background in entertainment provided him with the experience and skill-set to stand apart from the elites and present himself as an ‘outsider’ in spite of his celebrity and wealth.<sup>79</sup> This was displayed in Trump’s ridiculing of individual politicians and the wider political class, including through the use of insulting nicknames. Trump’s off-repeated nickname for Hillary Clinton, ‘Crooked Hillary’,<sup>80</sup> served to reinforce the framing of elites as corrupt. Whereas norm-breaking carries considerable risks for traditional politicians, it helped place Trump in an antagonistic relationship to the establishment. This set a precedent for Trump’s early tenure in office; he continued to transgress established norms. Through the use of Twitter, his framing of global/international issues was both sensationalised and an important barometer for the formation of foreign policy.

Trump has activated this anti-elite frame in a variety of ways. Perhaps most prominently, his slogan ‘drain the swamp’ gained traction in the lead-up to the election, and ‘swamp’ quickly became Trump’s favoured means of depicting the targeted political class. Trump extended the metaphor to encompass negative coverage from the news media as well as opposition from members of Congress, federal agencies and the bureaucracy. With elements of the US state pushing back against aspects of his agenda, persistent references to the swamp helped

(re-)establish Trump as an antagonist of the ‘establishment’. As noted in Sclafani’s sociolinguistic study, ‘drain the swamp’, like the related ‘make America great again’ slogan, served to ‘construct Trump as the big, strong, forceful Washington outsider who will... restore order to American life’.<sup>81</sup> Trump’s ‘swamp’ implies a quagmire or morass; wastage and seepage—problems associated with the ‘globalist’ establishment (whether liberal or neoconservative); in Jacksonian fashion, the (heroic) military is exempted from the ‘swamp’ metaphor.

Speaking at the Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) in February 2017, Steve Bannon stated that Trump’s agenda centred on the ‘deconstruction of the administrative state’, which he would pursue in tandem with ‘economic nationalism’ and ‘national security and sovereignty’ (as the three principal ‘buckets’ in the administration’s policy agenda).<sup>82</sup> In this context, the administration’s first budget proposal staked out cuts to the State Department in excess of 30 percent of its annual budget. The document ‘reflect(ed) the White House’s preference for a narrow definition of US interests not seen since before World War II. Titled “America First”, the Trump budget also reflect(ed) a deep skepticism of government programs meant to defuse conflicts, fight poverty abroad, or battle transnational challenges like climate change’.<sup>83</sup> The budget proposal also included reductions in funding for the World Bank and other development banks.

In concert with the hollowing out of the State Department, the Trump administration aimed to bolster the resources of the US military. The initial budget proposal included \$54 billion in additional spending for the Department of Defense, an increase that, in itself, was larger than the annual budget of the State Department. The proposal also included increases for the Department of Homeland Security. According to the administration’s budget director, ‘this is

a hard-power budget, and that was done intentionally. The president very clearly wants to send a message to our allies and to our potential adversaries that this is a strong-power administration'.<sup>84</sup> In Jacksonian fashion, Trump's foreign policy prioritises coercive force over other forms of power. The weakening of the State Department's capacity was justified explicitly with reference to the 'drain the swamp' frame by the administration and its supporters.<sup>85</sup>

### *The Anti-Globalist and 'America First' Agenda*

In Trump's framing, the elites of the US establishment are committed to 'globalism'. Trump has used this term in a number of his more scripted speeches. In a major foreign policy speech in April 2016, for example, he said: 'We will no longer surrender this country or its people to the false song of globalism. I am skeptical of international unions that tie us up and bring America down. And under my administration, we will never enter America into any agreement that reduces our ability to control our own affairs'.<sup>86</sup> 'Globalism', the diagnostic component of this frame, is constructed as the antithesis of Trump's 'America first' nationalism, which accounts for its prognostic side.

'Globalism' contains a plethora of (sometimes competing) ideas.<sup>87</sup> As an ideational counterpart to economic globalisation, the widespread use of the term on the American right is a relatively new development, although it has antecedents in the conservatism of Patrick Buchanan and the John Birch Society (which was established in the 1950s, ostensibly to combat Communist conspiracies). It echoes the paranoia and extremism of the militia and far-right 'patriot' movements of the 1990s, which attacked free trade and multilateral institutions like the United Nations as components of a nefarious plot to overthrow American

sovereignty, known as the ‘New World Order’.<sup>88</sup> Steger refers to this phenomenon as ‘national populism’.

Buchanan’s populist focus on the ‘treacherous’ activities of the neoliberal ‘Washington Establishment’ serves as the foundation for his rejection of the market-globalist claim that nobody is in charge of globalization. He points his finger at ‘greedy global mandarins who have severed the sacred ties of national allegiance’ to be found among the members of the US Council on Foreign Relations and the Business Roundtable. Their elitist conspiracy, he insists, has eroded the power of the nation-state and replaced it with a neoliberal new world order. As a result, most mainstream American politicians are beholden to transnational corporate interests that are undermining the sovereignty of the nation by supporting the WTO (World Trade Organization) and other international institutions.<sup>89</sup>

Just prior to his inauguration, Bannon evaluated Trump’s victory: ‘The globalists gutted the American working class and created a middle class in Asia. The issue now is about Americans looking not to get fucked over’.<sup>90</sup> In his 2011 book, Trump argued that ‘Obama and his globalist pals’ were responsible for the outsourcing of US jobs to China.<sup>91</sup> A number of key issues, from deindustrialisation to immigration, can be laid at the feet of the globalists. ‘The US’, Trump declared upon announcing his presidential run, ‘has become a dumping ground for everybody else’s problems’.<sup>92</sup> The globalism frame combines with the (anti-)elite and winning/losing frames and finds considerable resonance with Trump’s audiences. On the appointment of H. R. McMaster as National Security Advisor, for example, a writer for the newspaper of the John Birch Society argued his membership in the Council on Foreign Relations showed he belonged to the ‘establishment globalist swamp’.<sup>93</sup>

To counter globalism, Trump advocates an ‘America first’ agenda. One of the dominant slogans of the campaign, it was deliberately carried over into the administration.<sup>94</sup> Trump expounded on the frame in his inaugural address:

We’ve defended other nations’ borders while refusing to defend our own; and spent trillions of dollars overseas while America’s infrastructure has fallen into disrepair and decay. But that is the past. And now we are looking only to the future. We assembled here today are issuing a new decree to be heard in every city, in every foreign capital, and in every hall of power. From this day forward, a new vision will govern our land. From this moment on, it’s going to be America first.<sup>95</sup>

The ‘America first’ frame dates to 1940, when pro-fascist populists led by Father Charles Coughlin, a Catholic priest and radio personality, created the America First Committee to try and prevent the US from entering the war on the side of the Allies.<sup>96</sup> The Committee was bolstered by the celebrity aviator Charles Lindbergh, who espoused anti-Semitic and isolationist views. ‘While Lindbergh’s hostility to a crusading foreign policy was fundamentally inspired by the dissenting Jeffersonian tradition’, writes Michael Hunt, ‘it was strongly reinforced by a preoccupation with race and revolution drawn, ironically enough, from the dominant foreign-policy ideology itself’.<sup>97</sup> In other words, ‘America first’ isolationism rested on, and reinforced, Jacksonian ideas of national ‘greatness’, supremacy and ‘exceptionalism’. In Trump, the ‘America first’ frame reinforces the coercive features of Jacksonianism and moves US strategy toward ‘illiberal hegemony’, an approach at odds with the charges of ‘isolationism’ occasionally levelled against Trump.<sup>98</sup> Whereas American exceptionalism has previously been wrapped-up in liberal internationalism (or ‘globalism’, in

Trumpian discourse), with the US viewing itself as an ‘indispensable’ actor in the maintenance of an open world order, the explicit ‘America first’ framing breaks with this traditional postwar understanding.<sup>99</sup>

### *Winning, Losing and Dealing*

Anxieties over American decline find echoes in Trump’s fixation on winning and losing. As a candidate, he framed himself as a ‘winner’ through references to his own personal wealth, selected polling numbers and the ‘loser’ qualities of his opponents. In Trump’s rhetoric, the zero-sum, winner/loser binary applies not only to his own career (and in particular his beginnings in the real estate business), but to virtually all issues and challenges confronting the United States, from trade policy to national security strategy.

The term ‘loser’ gained notoriety in the 1990s as a demeaning but playful putdown, and it has since become associated with ‘little people’ who haven’t ‘made it’.<sup>100</sup> Trump has frequently referred to his political rivals as ‘losers’, a term used in 243 of his Tweets through his first six months in office.<sup>101</sup> (He has also referred to terrorists as ‘losers.’) The popularity of the term ‘winning’, meanwhile, is more recent, and is often used as an exclamatory means of generating excitement and humour.<sup>102</sup> Repetition is central to the use of this particular frame. As noted by the linguist George Lakoff: ‘Words are neurally linked to the circuits that determine their meaning. The more a word is heard, the more the circuit is activated and the stronger it gets, and so the easier it is to fire again. Trump repeats. *Win, Win, Win. We’re gonna win so much you’ll get tired of winning*’.<sup>103</sup> Under Trump, the US will ‘win again’. No longer led by ‘losers’ (i.e. weak negotiators), the country’s decline will be reversed, its status restored as other countries do the losing.

The winning/losing frame dovetails with Trump's longstanding penchant for 'deal making'.<sup>104</sup> If his 1987 book *Trump: The Art of the Deal* is any indication, Trump's business-oriented understanding of deal-making focuses on instincts and leverage; it is a skill that is inherently 'in the genes' of born-and-bred deal-makers, he writes.<sup>105</sup> Winners win because they make good deals; they make good deals because they are winners. Losers are suckers. They are taken advantage of by winners, who use salesmanship and imagination to 'think big', and who aren't 'afraid of winning'.<sup>106</sup> A cornerstone of Trump's campaign, this framing carried over into his presidency. Speaking to the CPAC in February 2017, he said: 'We inherited a foreign policy marked by one disaster after another. We don't win anymore. When was the last time we won? Did we win a war? Do we win anything? Do we win anything? We're going to win. We're going to win big, folks. We're going to start winning again, believe me. We're going to win'.<sup>107</sup> This preceded a wide-ranging discussion on border security, immigration, crime, energy, jobs, terrorism and trade. Trump's vision in this regard is transactional and zero-sum, creating obvious tensions. The negotiated 'deal' can only produce one clear 'winner' and one clear 'loser', yet, paradoxically, must be agreed upon by both parties to constitute a true 'deal'.

Trump frequently calls trade agreements 'deals'. In withdrawing the US from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), an unratified 12-nation trade pact negotiated by the Obama administration, the White House released a statement:

It is the policy of my Administration to represent the American people and their financial well-being in all negotiations (sic), particularly the American worker, and to create fair and economically beneficial trade deals that serve their interests.

Additionally, in order to ensure these outcomes, it is the intention of my Administration to deal directly with individual countries on a one-on-one (or bilateral) basis in negotiating future trade deals.<sup>108</sup>

A turn toward bilateral agreements is a key plank of the administration's foreign economic policy. In Trump's mercantilist view, they provide the US with more acute leverage to 'win'. Speaking to CPAC, Trump pledged:

We are going to make trade deals, but we're going to do one-on-one, one-on-one. And if they misbehave, we terminate the deal. And then they'll come back, and we'll make a better deal. None of these big quagmire deals that are a disaster. Just take a look—by the way, take a look at NAFTA (the North American Free Trade Agreement), one of the worst deals ever made by any country having to do with economic development. It's economic undevelopment as far as our country is concerned.<sup>109</sup>

The dominant framing of TPP and NAFTA is that they were/are 'bad deals', not because they privilege corporations over labour, but because the US 'loses' such agreements. In announcing new enforcements of Buy American provisions and new protections for US steel producers in April 2017, Trump stated: 'For decades, America has lost our jobs and our factories to unfair foreign trade. And one steel mill after another has been shut down, abandoned, and closed, and we're going to reverse that. Other countries have made a living taking advantage of the United States in so many ways, as you know, and I've been talking about that for a long time'. Trump's executive orders would 'stop foreign countries from stealing contracts from American companies and, essentially, from American workers'.<sup>110</sup>

The administration's protectionism follows this framing. The Office of the US Trade

Representative pledged a ‘fundamental change’ in approach, with more focus on ‘better’ bilateral deals, enforcement, rectifying unfair practices, defending national sovereignty and using increased leverage to open markets for US goods and services.<sup>111</sup>

On (inter)national security, much has been made of Trump’s coolness toward the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), the linchpin of the West’s postwar security order, which he referred to as ‘obsolete’. Traditional NATO allies were framed as free riding on US military power. As Trump stated during the first debate with Hillary Clinton:

The 28 countries of NATO, many of them aren’t paying their fair share. We’re defending them, and they should at least be paying us what they’re supposed to be paying by treaty and contract... I want to help all of our allies, but we are losing billions and billions of dollars. We cannot be the policemen of the world. We cannot protect countries all over the world where they’re not paying us what we need.<sup>112</sup>

Trump advocates charging host governments for the American military presence: ‘I’m going to renegotiate some of our military costs because we protect South Korea. We protect Germany. We protect some of the wealthiest countries in the world, Saudi Arabia’. He added: ‘We protect everybody and we don’t get reimbursement. We lose on everything, so we’re going to negotiate and renegotiate trade deals, military deals, many other deals that’s going to get the cost down for running our country very significantly’.<sup>113</sup> Trump reactivated the frame at numerous points during his first year in office. During an address in Poland, for example, widely viewed as one of his more traditional speeches, he noted that his administration ‘has demanded that all members of NATO finally meet their full and fair financial obligation’,

claiming that, ‘as a result of this insistence, billions of dollars more have begun to pour into NATO’.<sup>114</sup>

The ‘bad deal’ frame justified actions to roll-back policies of the Obama administration. This included ending *rapprochement* with Cuba and withdrawing from the Paris Accord on climate change and the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (the Iran nuclear agreement). The constant references to these ‘bad deals’ reinforced the notion that the US was ‘losing’. In his speech announcing the US withdrawal from the Paris Accord, Trump repeatedly hinted at the possibility of renegotiating a ‘better’ deal.<sup>115</sup> Announcing changes to US policy toward Cuba, Trump stated: ‘It’s hard to think of a policy that makes less sense than the prior administration’s terrible and misguided deal with the Castro regime. Well, you have to say, the Iran deal was pretty bad also. Let’s not forget that beauty... They made a deal with a government that spreads violence and instability in the region and nothing they got—think of it—nothing they got—they fought for everything and we just didn’t fight hard enough. But now those days are over. Now we hold the cards’.<sup>116</sup>

## **Conclusion**

Donald Trump’s rise was facilitated by his rhetorical emphasis on declinist themes. His appeal stemmed in part from his framing of economic uncertainty in the US heartland, which he attributed to ‘globalism’ and the establishment ‘swamp’. A declining America couldn’t ‘win’ anymore. The people of the (racialised) folk community had been ‘forgotten’ by hapless and ‘crooked’ elites. By creating ‘bad deals’ on trade and security, in Trump’s framing, the US was ‘losing’ to others. In response, Trump famously pledged to ‘make America great again’ by putting ‘America first’. This discourse is interwoven with a

Jacksonian ideology that has coloured his White House's approach to foreign affairs. It fuels a reactionary and illiberal project, partly through appeals to the purity of 'the people' in opposition to their normative other(s)—primarily 'globalist' elites.

Understood as a discursive style rather than an ideology or model, populism serves as a useful conceptual foundation for examining US grand strategy under the Trump administration. It helps relate Trump's idiosyncrasies to deeper traditions and processes. It fosters an acute understanding the administration's foreign policy and grand strategic rhetoric. Trump's populism frames a nationalistic and mercantilist posture, one that attempts to leverage coercive power in the service of a narrower understanding of national interests. This is likely to contribute to a more ad hoc and transactional foreign policy over the course of Trump's presidency, with further emphasis on bilateral relations rather than multilateral institutions. The administration's early tenure revealed a combative approach to security issues and a more protectionist trade policy. Trump's framing, which is repetitive, binary and antagonistic, hides the complexities underpinning the US's 'declining' hegemonic position. The instrumentality of this framing connects this 'losing' to troubling socio-economic conditions among Trump's targeted audience. Trump's populism both shapes and, to an extent, obscures the Jacksonian ideology at the heart of his administration's approach to international relations.

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