From Politics as Vocation to Politics as Business: Populist Social Performance and Narrative Fusion in Trump Rallies

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Populist movements seek to bolster the power of "the people" and undermine elites. In the United States a businessman, Donald Trump, has convinced a significant portion of the population that he is a man of the people. We answer three inter-related questions about what may be Trump's biggest "win": the transformation of populist discourse for a new century. How does Trump embed himself inside his followers' own deep story? How does he fuse their story with a tale of American restoration? And how does he delegitimize politics as a vocation and valorize politics as business? Drawing on a systematic analysis of Trump/MAGA rallies held in four different regions from 2015 to 2021, we analyze how Trump used his performance to crystalize a distinctly American style of populism. We focus on the cultural accomplishment of his performance, particularly the creation of a business-friendly rhetoric that leverages popular cultural idioms to legitimate politics not as a vocation, but as a business. We find that Trump uses the popular idioms of standup comedy and competitive sports culture. This performance contributed to his 2016 win, yet framing politics as a game to be won runs the risk of reducing deliberative democratic process to election-night outcomes, makes political parties into opposing teams, and divides voters into winners and losers.

Populist leaders seek to bolster the power of "the people" by focusing on "the moral vilification of elites and the veneration of ordinary people, who are seen as the sole legitimate source of political power" (Bonikowski 2017:184). The purity, simplicity, and directness of ordinary people are contrasted with the elites' corruption and lack of trustworthiness (Canovan 1999; Mudde 2004). The would-be populist leader's conundrum is, thus, how to attain political power but avoid association with the corruption and dishonesty of politics. An authentic representative of "the people" must have outsider status.

In the United States, businessman Donald J. Trump (hereafter Trump) has succeeded in convincing a significant portion of the population that he is a

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man of the people—no mean feat given that his wealth and connections with political insiders place him at marked odds with earlier populist movements' vilification of business and businessmen (Gerteis and Goolsby 2005; Kazin 2017). Populist support swept Trump into the White House in 2016, where he maintained his populist style as president. Others have analyzed what motivates his core constituencies, especially white working-class Midwesterners and white evangelical Christians (Edgell 2017; Gorski 2017; Lee 2020; Marti 2020; Whitehead and Perry 2020). We focus, instead, on the cultural accomplishment of Trump's populist performance, particularly the leveraging of popular cultural idioms in a restoration narrative that casts Trump as a hero-figure. The result is an emerging expression of American populism that legitimates politics not as a vocation (Weber 2004), but as a business.

We answer three inter-related questions. How does Trump embed himself inside his followers' deep story? How does he fuse their story with a tale of American restoration? And how does he delegitimize politics as a vocation and valorize politics as business? Drawing on a systematic analysis of Trump/-MAGA[1] rallies from 2015 to 2021, we argue that Trump evoked the "deep story" of loss that motivates many of his white working-class base and transformed the standard narrative arch of that story from a lament (Hochschild 2016, Polletta and Callahan 2017, Feinstein and Bonikowski 2019) into a triumphalist adventure (Cawelti 1976). We focus on the mechanisms through which he crafted his performance as the people's hero and sustained a convincing narrative arch centered on American restoration (MAGA): the use of sports culture to highlight competition, winning, fun, and pride, and the use of humor drawn from stand-up comedy and outrage culture (Sobieraj, Berry, and Connors 2013) to ridicule bureaucratic elites and those outside the movement. These mechanisms fuse winning, domination, masculinity, and fun in the persona of Trump as the businessman-politician-hero figure.

Our analysis sheds light on a key moment in political and cultural transformation, as a new form of populist rhetoric emerges and coalesces around Trump, manifesting and facilitating a shift from politics as a vocation to politics as a business (Weber 2004). The MAGA rallies bring the "bussinessification" of politics from behind the scenes to front-and-center, making Trump the personification of a shift already under way in the right-wing media (Kazin 2017; Skocpol and Williamson 2012; Peck 2014, 2019), and fostering a new form of populism that will have deleterious consequences for American democracy for years to come.

Populism and Weber's Prophecy

Populism is a performative political style (Alexander 2010; Moffitt and Tormey 2014) that draws a sharp moral contrast between *the people* and *the elites*, cast as necessarily hostile to the people's interests (de la Torre 2000; Jansen 2011; Kazin 2017; Ostiguy 2017). Populist leaders appeal to the people, create of an atmosphere of threatening crisis, and display outsider-style bad manners (Canovan 1999; Moffitt and Tormey 2014; Taggart 2000).

Not all populist styles showcase nationalist or ethno-nationalist tendencies (Bonikowski 2017; Mudde 2010) but contemporary populism in the United States is part of a worldwide revival of ethno-nationalism. Rogers Brubaker (2017a, 2017b, 2020) defines the wave of political mobilization that swept Trump to power as national-populist (2017:1192), and Gorski (2017) argues that Trump's campaign propelled a nationalism built on "conquest, apocalypse, ethno-religious boundary-making, and Golden Age nostalgia" (2017, 342). If populism is the "project of repair and restoration" (Mast 2021, 255), ethno-nationalist populism is about repairing weakened social and political boundaries.

Political boundary making is the most effective when it consolidates racial, religious, and cultural dimensions of belonging, offering a sense of peoplehood based on insiders' valued identities (Edgell 2017; Lamont, Park and Ayala-Hurtado 2017; Gerteis, Hartmann, and Edgell 2019 cf. Feinstein and Bonikowski 2019; Müller 2016). Trump's rhetoric centers America's redemption and exceptional mission (Bonikowski, Feinstein, and Bock 2019; Karakaya 2020; Smith 2003) as "us" and "them" become self-evident categories: white, regressively ethno-nationalist (Gerteis and Goolsby 2005), masculine/strong, and Christian (particularly evangelical) vs. everyone else.

A discursive contrast between "producers" and "parasites" has anchored political discourse in the United States since the 19th century (Kazin 2017). This binary, which historically identified the working classes and farmers as producers and the bourgeoisie as parasites, has been reworked by right-leaning movements like the Tea Party, whose supporters identify as "productive citizens" in contrast with "people who don't work" (Skocpol and Williamson 2012), and by conservative, pro-business culture-producers including Fox News since the Great Recession (Peck 2014, 2019). This paved the way for Trump's populist performance as a businessman-turned-populist leader, a champion of the people and a bringer of jobs and prosperity; and through the MAGA rallies, Trump diffused this new business-friendly rhetoric to a mass populist movement.

Trump's rhetoric did not only place businessmen on the "producer" side of this political cultural binary; it placed experts and political insiders in the "parasite" category. Late-modern democracies are complex and require experts to function, but bureaucratic experts become mediators between the people and the rulers; concerns about a lack of democratic accountability are endemic to late-modern democracies, leading people to mistrust an increasingly unaccountable "political establishment" (Brint 1994; Schudson 2006, 502). Trump's populist style is a radical contrast with technocratic expertise, and Trump's MAGA rally performances highlight the endemic corruption of the insider political class. In radical contrast to Trump's populist style, experts and technocrats have good manners, present themselves professionally, and use dry scientific language (Moffitt 2019, 55). Ridiculing experts and political insiders was a key element of the "full performative package" that Trump displayed at his rallies, a package which was "attractive, emotionally resonant and relevant" (Moffitt 2019, 59) to many US voters.

Trump's rise as a populist leader and a businessman critic of insider politics urges us to revisit political dynamics Weber first examined over a century

ago: the relationship between rationalization, capitalism, bureaucracy, and the ideal politician. For Weber, rationalization meant that politics would become dominated by bureaucratic rules and market efficiencies. As societies underwent rationalization, the only way to maintain democracy was to elect an anti-bureaucracy figure who chose politics as a calling or vocation (Weber 2004). With a balance of "passion, a feeling of responsibility, and a sense of proportion" (Weber 2005, 115), this ideal politician would act both ethically and empathetically (Waters and Waters 2015), a heroic public servant, saving politics from being imprisoned in the iron cage of rationalism. But populism is also a way to revivify politics, hold bureaucratic elites accountable, and challenge rationalization with a politics centered on emotion and identity. Trump helped to bring about a cultural shift, legitimating political leadership rooted not in a calling, and not in bureaucratic expertise, but in the success of the entrepreneur—the employer who brings jobs and dignity and pride. Rallies have been crucial performances, fostering the emotions required to bring about this cultural shift.

Emotions, Performance, and Forging a New Populist Narrative

Hochschild (2016) argues that support for first the Tea Party and, later, Trump is motivated by a deep story of the white working class stripped of their American Dream (cf. Polletta and Callahan 2017). Narrative owes much of its cultural and political power to its capacity to transform emotions (Jasper 2018), and emotional expression is intrinsic to political performance (Jasper 2018; 2020b) and to Trump's populist success (Moffitt 2016). Many have noted the "dark" emotional cast of Trump's rallies[2], and the evocation of anger and fear (Gorski 2017; Wahl-Jorgensen 2018). But in reworking his followers' deep story, and inserting himself as the strong male hero figure (Johnson 2020,23), Trump rallies also *transformed* emotions, shifting "despair to hope, depression to elation and shame to pride" (Hochschild 2019, 12; cf. Johnson 2020).

Political rallies evoke the emotions that mobilize followers by fusing personal experiences, emotions, and narratives with larger collective stories (Polletta and Callahan 2017; Polletta 2009). Trump's rallies are performative spectacles that create intense social density (Berezin 2006), reinforced through common gestures and chants (Collins 1985, 2004, 2012; Durkheim 2001), and allowing people to make emotional connections between "little stories" about specific events with "big stories" about the nation (Berezin 2006, Berezin 1994; cf. Manning and Holmes 2014). As participants "take home" emotions like pride, fear, and enthusiasm (Berezin 1991, 1994; Taylor and Whittier 2013), their attachment to political leaders tightens.

Below, we show how Trump drew on two popular cultural idioms to create rallies that were "compelling, seductive and energizing" spectacles (Wagner-Pacifici and Tavory 2017, 308) that created and amplified his supporters' emotional attachment (Manning and Holmes 2014). The first cultural idiom is the type of humor found in stand-up comedy and outrage culture

(Peterson 2008; Sobieraj, Berry, and Connors 2013; Webber 2013, 4). By trolling his opponents and insulting elites and career politicians—by making fun of the political insiders like the late-night comics do—Trump solidified his status as an outsider (Webber et al. 2018, 295). Like a comic who works their material on the road, presenting bits and "perfecting" the routine, Trump's comedic performance became a signature (Brooks 2020) of his rallies, letting followers to bond in a fun atmosphere, to air their resentments by laughing at the elites (Berezin 2017). This aspect of Trump's performance is markedly masculine; female politicians cannot afford to be seen as lighthearted, funny, or rude (Johnson 2015, 17). Trump also used a second idiom, sports culture, as a source of entertainment and to create the positive feelings associated with winning. Sports, business and entertainment are interlinked financially and culturally in the U.S., where many argue the pursuit of wealth is itself a sport (Weber 2004, 245). Rallies, usually located at stadiums, are a suitable venue to materialize and embody this link by re-creating the effervescent atmosphere of a tournament championship.

At his rallies, Trump's supporters willingly accepted his performance as the people's champion, and his promises to "Make America Great Again." This narrative alignment—Trump's ability to convincingly land this heroic performance—is not inevitable. Performances can fail (Alexander 2004, 2011). At a time when Bernie Sanders could run two enthusiastically supported, populist-style campaigns that attacked businessmen like Trump, it was not obvious a businessman could make himself a populist hero. Below, we analyze why this performance effectively ushered in a new era of "politics as business."

Methods

We analyzed 21 of Trump's populist rallies from 4 regions (Northeast, West, Midwest, and South) across the 2016 and 2020 election cycles. For the 2016 campaign, we analyzed rallies in New York, Michigan, Texas, and Nevada; in 2017, in Alabama, Pennsylvania, Iowa, and West Virginia; in 2018, Ohio, Arizona, Mississippi, and Pennsylvania; in 2019, Florida, New Hampshire, Minnesota, and New Mexico; and for the 2020 election, Wisconsin, Oklahoma, New Hampshire, and Arizona. We chose different states every year to increase variability in geographic cues. In addition to coding these rally transcripts, we watched YouTube recordings of rallies in New York (2015), Minnesota (2019), Wisconsin (2020), and Texas (2015) to code for mise-en-scène (Alexander, Giesen, and Mast 2006) and symbolic production. To our knowledge, this is the first study to analyze Trump's rallies over a four-year time span with systematic regional sampling.

Our analysis focuses on Trump's performance as the populist hero figure, examining what Trump said and how he said it, and how he interacted with the audience. We use critical discourse analysis to identify shared understandings of how the world works and to "reveal the kinds of ideas, absences, taken-for-granted assumptions and power interests buried in texts" (Machin and Mayr, 2012, 5). We attend to the elements of a successful political performance

as described by Alexander (2004, 2011), especially the actor, the script, mise-en-scène, and symbolic production, using multimodal approach that accounts for setting, lighting, and gestures.

Narrative is "a central cultural resource through which social actors interpret, navigate, and (re)constitute the social world" (Edgell et al. 2016, 3), and our focus is on narrative fusion of Trump as a hero of his followers' deep story and of their story with a tale of American restoration. We analyzed Trump's story-telling, understanding a story as an account told to make a particular point, with characters and events occurring in a particular order (Polletta and Lee 2006; Polletta et al. 2011). This form of analysis relies on hermeneutic techniques for uncovering common themes or plots (Polkinghorne 1995, 177; Polkinghorne 1988).

Practically, we proceeded through an iterative process of coding and drafting analytical memos. From initial sessions of watching rallies, memoing, and noting potential codes, we developed focus questions to guide subsequent analysis: How does Trump consolidate his outsider status? What are the elements of his performances that make him "one of the people?" What are the cultural scripts and practices he taps into to inculcate and harness emotions? How does he keep his outsider status after the election? We developed 30 codes for our final coding scheme, then wrote analytical memos for three overarching themes: politics as a business, the people's movement, and cultural idioms: stand-up comedy and professional sports.

Politics as business

How does Trump, an elite businessman emblematic of generational wealth, make a successful claim to outsider status? First, he emphasizes that, aside from making donations, he stayed out of politics until he became too disgusted with endemic corruption and ineptitude and stepped in to fix it and "drain the swamp." In other words, he sets himself apart from politicians and politics by denigrating both:

> . . . politicians—they're not businessmen, they don't know how to make a deal, and they're all bought . . . The politicians are bought and paid for . . . . With me, it's not gonna happen. (Buffalo, NY, 2016)

Trump does not claim the same outsider identity as his followers—he is not powerless—but nor is he a "crooked politician." He undermines trust and confidence in technocrats' supposed dedication to public service through broad, nonspecific corruption accusations (Weber 2004).

Trump further distances himself from insider politicians by suggesting they look down on him because he is not "Presidential." His "roughness" and bumbling nature are coded as honestly masculine (Johnson 2015) against a Presidential ideal that is mannered, slick, and effete—nothing like the "real Americans." By this circular logic, Trump makes the case that he is a good leader because he will fight for his supporters.

Certain themes, like gendered family talk, showcase Trump's non-presidential persona. At rallies, he tells stories where the women in his family tell him to be more *presidential*, but this wise *pater familias* knows better. From our notes on an early rally in the Northeast:

> He tells his wife Melania "I wanna make this call" to Carrier, to yell at them, because they are carrying their business abroad. His wife responds "You must act more Presidential" and he says "no, I don't wanna do that till I'm President, ok?" Fist-pumping, he says: "More presidential is easier than working, working, working like I do." (Buffalo, New York, 2016)

Women may value ("unnecessarily," even "frivolously") the politeness Trump sees as implicit in the demands to be "presidential," but Trump tells the crowd he corrected Ivanka in another instance by telling her, "Look, if they hit me in the debate, we've gotta hit them back." To him, "being presidential" is the opposite of being businesslike, which is to say hard-working, hard-hitting, *winning*. Political elites might make the time for feminine distractions like following the rules, but real men and real Americans get down to business. Even his body language and general demeanor consolidate his outsider status vis-à-vis the presidential ideal (Berezin 2017).

Trump next blames politicians for America losing on the global stage and for the people of Buffalo suffering as middle-class stability withers. This is typical; in all his rallies, Trump goes back and forth between the "big story" about what is happening in the country as a whole, and specific local stories of decline and loss, presenting himself as the hero figure across this fused narrative. At the Buffalo rally, he is loud and confident, but controlled and focused as well, when he paternally reassures the crowd:

> Don't get scared, and don't feel guilty, 'cause it's not your fault. It's politicians' who represent us at the highest level, including President of the United States. (Buffalo, NY, 2016)

Trump the business mogul begs dissection: There are many businessmen, so why is *Trump* the right man for the job? Because he claims to be a particular *kind* of capitalist. Rally audiences are inundated with what he is not: Trump tells them repeatedly that he is not a venture capitalist or a hedge-fund baby, he is not a multi-national corporate CEO who moves capital around the world sacrificing American jobs for bigger profits. Not every businessman could effectively graft business into populism, convincingly aligning himself with the "producers" in the binary revived by right-wing media (Peck, for example, argues that Mitt Romney's campaign failed partly because he was associated with finance [2014]).

So what kind of capitalist is Trump? In his rallies, he aligns with real estate and construction, economic sectors associated with post-war capitalism and more easily framed as production. Trump's *brand* has gone global, yet Trump the populist presents himself as "a man who builds things," who got his start building housing in and around New York—hiring real Americans to build those houses and hotels, affecting people and their communities in tangible ways. This

rhetoric appeals to his supporters who believe that capitalism has changed for the worse, and that "the deal" that their parents had—a working-class job that could support a family, a mortgage, and even an annual vacation, all with a high school degree—is no longer available (Alexander 2017). At the rallies, he tells his story as a builder helping his local community, then prominently features businessmen, civic leaders, and sports heroes local to the rally's community—men who elevate civic pride, contribute to the local economy, and lend Trump a relatable air.

Trump uses narrative, particularly a set of featured stories about his business acumen and negotiating power, across rallies to illustrate why his kind of businessman should be in charge. One of the most frequently deployed is an imagined Oval Office call in which Trump, the president, calls the CEO of Carrier, a company planning to move their business to Mexico:

> I'll get him on the phone, I'll say, "Congratulations on your move to Mexico, I hope you have many years of health and prosperity … but here's the story… Every single air conditioning unit that you make, and you wanna send them across our very, very powerful border… you're gonna pay a 35% tax on that unit." …The next day, the lobbyists and special interests will call, but I don't care, because I'm working for you! …And… the Chairman of Carrier will say, "Sir! We've changed our mind." (Buffalo, NY, 2016)

When Trump does become President, his rhetoric shifts to support his outsider claims in a new way. His performances begin to underline his dislike of his current status and his disbelief at how bad things are in Washington. In a rally before the 2018 midterm elections in Mississippi, Trump says:

> When I was in the private sector—I can't believe I'm not in the private sector. Now they call me a politician. I'm a politician. I can't stand it. (Biloxi, Mississippi, 2018)

During his 2020 reelection campaign, his followers learn he needs four more years because the swamp is hard to drain, harder than he imagined:

> Swamp creatures, I have—I can't even believe it. I thought, I thought it would be a lot easier. They're tougher, smarter, more vicious, and we're beating the hell out of them. (Manchester, New Hampshire, 2020)

Trump the President is distressed to find himself an insider, he sighs, but it gives him a better view of how bad things actually are, allowing him to sharpen his challenge to career politicians. Like a business consultant who delivers the bad news about a company in peril, he diagnoses this rot and assures he can still fix it. In four more years, he will drive out the "swamp creatures." Trump turns incumbency into an advantage, drawing on his lived experience to back his earlier suspicions regarding technocrats, while his rough manners continue to signal that his insider status has not changed his outsider identity.

If Trump is the outsider hero in this dramatic war for America, he has cast politicians and political leaders as the villains. Disregarding the possibility of sincerely dedicated and effective public servants and devoted career politicians who see politics as a vocation, Trump vilifies politicians and technocrats as universally corrupt. Trump offers a narrative of restoration of American greatness in which the hero, Trump himself, does not reign in bureaucracy and technocratic logics, but demolishes the corrupt Washington establishment and replaces it with a financially attuned organization. As he promises to replace bureaucratic-rational politics with another logic—that of business, competition, and winning—Trump positions his continued power as an antidote to his followers' economic hardship and disenchantment.

Bureaucracy, Weber believed, was the mechanism that brought about the historical transformation by which the economic-rational and legal-rational had come to dominate the political. The problem, as Weber (2004) warns, is that, to make political bureaucracy accountable, democracies need a leader who has the charisma to connect with followers, the capacity for understanding their concerns on a human level, and an ethical commitment to service (c.f. Owen and Strong 2004). A century later, Trump would frame this political bureaucracy as "the swamp" and himself as the charismatic businessman ready to force a faceless technocratic elite, a soulless political class, to its knees. He promised to save politics from itself—using his business skills to do it. With Trump politics as business becomes deeply connected to Trump's brand and to his cult of winning at any cost (including rational competence).

A tool in a People's movement

Trump's campaign is framed as a people's movement. By underlining that he is an instrument, any attack on him is rendered an attack on the people—and, as he tells rally-goers in Orlando, his foes are constantly on the attack, because he is an imperfect but willing leader for a perfect people's movement:

> They went after my family, my business, my finances, my employees, almost everyone that I've ever known or worked with, but they are really going after you. That's what it's all about, not about us, it's about you. (Orlando, Florida, 2019)

Opening a 2015 rally in Dallas, Trump's national spokeswoman, Katrina Pierson, tells the crowd they represent not only a movement but a revolution:

> The Republican Party has failed its base. For decades, we have voted consistently for those candidates who cut and paste their policies from their popular think tank—they get elected, and they forget about everybody in this stadium! So it's not a 'phenomenon.' It is a revolution! (Dallas, 2015)

Like populist leaders before him, Trump self-styles as the mere figurehead of the movement, putting a face and a fight to the authentic will of the people.

Trump holds onto this theme after his inauguration. His presidential campaign had turned the election into a referendum—would "real Americans" vote him into office? His presidency only made his performances more nationalist and divisive:

> A movement made up of hard-working patriots who love their country, love their flag, love their children, and who believe that a nation must care for its own citizens first. Together, we stared down a corrupt and broken political establishment and we restored government of, by, and for the people. (Orlando, Florida, 2019)

The nationalist rhetoric of Trump's reelection campaign is more specific, with the candidate/incumbent identifying "enemies" within the country, often converting his personal enemies into his followers'—in fact, the entire nation's. In this sense, events like the Mueller investigation[3] and Trump's first impeachment trial were not really about Trump, they were about the enemy (primarily Democrats and foreigners) who had laid siege to the United States:

> For the last two and a half years, we have been under siege, and with the Mueller report we won, and now they want a do over, they want a do over . . . Our Radical Democrat opponents are driven by hatred, prejudice, and rage. They want to destroy you and they want to destroy our country, as we know it. (Orlando, Florida, 2019)

The choice of strong words antagonizes and fuels the binary oppositions necessary for a populist's power. The swamp symbolizes the bad people—the un-American threat—while the good people (the real Americans) attending Trump's rallies come from beautiful natural formations such as valleys and mountains:

> You know, it's really we, it's not me. We're doing it together. They came from the hills. They came from the mountains, from the rivers. They came from all over the place and they showed up and they voted like nobody's seen before. (Manchester, New Hampshire, 2019)

As but a mere tool for a perfect movement, Trump is recast as an aligned embodiment of his followers' national, political, racial, and class identity. In delivering this message to a base of evangelical Christians, Gorski (2017) claims, Trump evokes the savior stories of the Old Testament, whose imperfect kings nonetheless deliver God's will on earth just as Trump's supporters hope he might. The hero's flaws are strengths, because he will do what "polite" rule-followers will not or cannot (Cawelti 1976). Strong and pure in comparison with the weak and corrupt system, everything Trump's "haters" hate actually affirms him as a fit representative of the people. In this new performative populism which rallies for a people's movement, winning is all that matters, and winning means running everything like a successful entrepreneur.

Most fun and the funniest: standup politician performing for the most fun crowd

Trump rallies often evoke the fun and excitement of other big arena events like football games, rock concerts, revivals, and stand-up comedy. A regional sports figure or a famous local pastor kicks things off, preparing the rally-goers for a hyper-effervescent event. Bobby Knight, bombastic basketball coach, introduced candidate Trump at a 2016 rally in Michigan, for instance, declaring to thunderous applause, "Let me take a moment to explain Trump to you: Trump is a tough son of a bitch!" In Dallas, Katrina Pierson gave the introduction by yelling,

> Dallaaasss!! Do we Know how to Throw a Party or What? … if you are here tonight, you are here for one of two reasons"—Number one, you, too, want to MAGA, or Number two: you came to experience the Trump phenomenon. (Dallas, Texas, 2015)

Trump rallies tend also to include an opening blessing, in which a pastor lends a moment of gravitas to assure the public that, perfect or not, Trump is the man for the job. Here Trump thanks Rev. Robert Jeffress, senior pastor of First Baptist Church, Dallas, who has just given a blessing:

> I really wanna thank you … 'cause you've been so good. He said, 'You know, he may not be *perfect*, but he's gonna make this country great, he's a *leader*, that's what we need!' (Dallas, 2015)

Self-conscious spectacles, the rallies we analyzed were savvy mixes of religion, sports, comedy, and the masculine national pride of a country rock concert.

It is his comedic persona that proves key to the success Trump's rallies, demonstrating that he knows how to have fun, is irreverent about politics in a way that sets him apart from political elites, and is disdainful of the same elites (Webber *et al.* 2018). Stand-up comedy, a quintessential American performance genre, is a politically useful form for Trump, who avoids nuanced satire and uses his proudly combative, rough-hewn jokes to solidify the binary between "people who we laugh at" (the cultural elites and people outside the ethno-national boundary) and "we," real Americans, who know "how to take a joke" without becoming one.

Humor builds solidarity among his followers and provides cover whenever Trump goes off-script and says something violent, false, or outrageous. In this example, where he shares an idea for putting solar panels on his infamous border wall, the crowd seems to assume the amusing tale is a joke:

> We're talking about the southern border, lots of sun, lots of heat. We're thinking about building the wall as a solar wall so it creates energy and pays for itself. [Applause] And this way, Mexico will have to pay much less money. And that's good, right? Is that good. [Applause] You're the first group I've told that to, a solar wall … Let's see. We're working it out … Solar wall, panels, beautiful. I

> mean actually think of it. The higher it goes, the more valuable it is . . . [Laughter] (Cedar Rapids, Iowa, 2017)

It may have been a joke, or, reading the room, Trump declared it one. Either way, the format works in his favor. Dan Brooks directly compares Trump's rally style to a nightclub comic, especially because Trump works his material on the road, presenting bits and "perfecting" the pieces over time—lending credence to the rumor that Trump came up with the border-wall idea during the campaign (Brooks 2020).

Always aggrieved, Trump tells his supporters at a different rally that they get the joke, but outsiders do not:

> . . . I was joking. I was at a, a roast actually, but I was joking and I said, "Ha, President for life, that sounds good. Maybe we're gonna have to try it. President for life." But I'm joking, but I'm joking. And they knew I was. Everybody there was laughing, everybody's having a great time, I'm joking about being President for life. A couple of who went back, "Donald Trump with his dictatorial attitude. Now wants to be President for life." You know, straight fake news. Fake. Horrible. (Moon Township, Arizona, 2018)

COVID-19 brought on an array of ambiguously "humorous" comments, like his recommendation that the public might cure the disease by drinking or injecting bleach (a joke, he clarified later, divesting from responsibility as the CDC reported poison control calls from people who took his advice). At one rally, he joked about his own COVID-19 diagnosis with a sort of racist skit involving his relationship with his wife:

> I said, "Sean, tell me, what does that mean? Tested positive for what?" "Sir you tested positive for the China plague." No, he used it much nicer, he said, "COVID." . . . It's got about 37 names, you know that we could name it. I always like to have a China in there because I like to be accurate . . . " I said, "I'm in the middle of the campaign, I can't be positive for COVID." And so, anyway, so I was, and I didn't feel too good. And the First Lady had it, at least now you know that all those rumors is that she lives in Virginia separate, I mean, at least now you know she lives in the White House. Because she got it probably from me or whatever, I don't know, what the hell? One thing when you're president, you get a lot of doctors. And each doctor grabbed a different part of my body. And I said, "I don't like this at all." (Kenosha, Wisconsin, 2020)

Trump combines elements of nativism and populism through humor, in this case fueling anti-Asian sentiment as he makes the more general point that outsiders of all kinds are to be feared and mocked. Name-calling serves a similar purpose, and is often deployed vis-à-vis specific political rivals who are well-known enough that the personal caricatures stick:

> So now the Democrats are making a pathetic bid to save sleepy Joe, sleepy Joe Biden. And you know what, I'd love to run against him to be honest. (Minneapolis 2019)

At a Huntsville Alabama rally in 2017, he calls Kim Jong-un "little Rocket Man," and over time, he builds up his "Pocahontas" nickname for Elizabeth Warren, a Democrat who claimed Native American heritage, into another gag.

In his 2020 campaign, Trump began making fun of Joe Biden at rallies by showing a compilation video of the former Vice President's campaign-trail *faux pas*. He would mock Biden a bit, then direct the crowd's attention to enormous projection screens, perfecting his comedian persona and his outside hero status as he and his followers laugh *together* at anyone who would judge them. The Biden gaffes video was six minutes long, and Trump genuinely had fun watching and laughing along with rally goers as it played. After the showing, he gathered himself, then spoke directly to the crowd.

> That was just a small little sampling. We have many more. Some were too rough to put on, we just decided... Look. This is not what our country needs... We can't have this. One thing I'll tell you I learned, President Xi of China, President Putin of Russia, Kim Jong-un of North Korea and many others, all of them, they're very sharp. They're very smart. They're very sharp. He wasn't sharp 25 years ago, and now it's not... You can't let this happen to our country. (Kenosha, Wisconsin, 2020)

In Goodyear, Arizona, he told the audience his campaign staff only brings the big monitors and special equipment to *special audiences*, though, of course, he shows it at all the rallies and tells them the same things.

Rallies are the perfect venue for the use of humor to consolidate a sense of "us" versus "them" and sharpen nationalist boundaries. They also help with the narrative fusion of Trump as the hero figure in his supporters' story. Through humor, Trump gives rally-goers permission to ignore "feeling rules" and embrace the "ecstatic high" of shared emotion (Hochschild 2016, 226; cf. Berezin 2017). The sense of a release from political correctness, in other words, creates a sense of elation and effervescence, mobilizing a deep identification between Trump and his followers (Manning and Holmes 2014). Shared laughter is pleasurable, synchronizes social interaction, builds collective effervescence in high intensity rituals (Collins 2004, 66), and creates symbolic boundaries. Trump's brand of humor reinforces nationalism and nativism, which raise followers' sense of threat and crisis—the same sense that populist leaders have long used to justify the need for sweeping change—and affirm Trump's status as an authentic political outsider (even after he's inaugurated). The relational nature of the ensuing laughter affirms the success of this social performance and nouveau populist style (Arthurs and Little 2016).

Smith (2019) argues comedians, who mostly happen to be hegemonic subjects (white males), must position themselves as outsiders to power, and thus escape their oft-powerful real-world selves. Comedy in American politics predates Trump (Peterson 2008) and, especially since Ronald Reagan, presidential candidates have worked hard to seem affable and witty, like one of the people. (Male) candidates also compete to be funnier than their foes, a way to be in on the joke instead of the subject of the joke (Peterson 2008, 171; cf. Johnson 2015). Thus Trump lampoons other politicians, purporting to lighten up politics and

tell it like it is, performing as a winner whose buffoonish manner nonetheless signals he is also an outsider to the world that produced political correctness (J. Lee 2019).

Sports and winning

Weber argues "in the United States, the pursuit of wealth, stripped of its religious and ethical meaning, tends to become associated with purely mundane passions, which often actually give it the character of sport" (Weber 2006, 245). In other words, as business activity is decoupled from any sense of a calling or vocation rooted in religion or other middle-class ethical systems, it is allowed to morph into a winner-take-all game. In his rallies, Trump evokes the cultural affinity between business and sports by emphasizing winning, by showcasing the support of local sports figures, and by sprinkling the win-loss record of the rally city's home team into his "act."

Because his audiences know how it feels to win in sports, and to identify with a team, sports-talk is excellent way for Trump to tee up the joy of a win in politics. Rex Ryan, the Buffalo Bills' football coach, introduced Trump at a Buffalo rally in 2015:

> "We all know I'm not a politician. I'm not a public speaker. I'm just a football coach." He, then goes on to tell a football story about "back in the day" when Donald Trump was the owner of the New Jersey Generals in the USFL. "One of the coaches, Palmer coached for Mr. Trump's team … Generals back then had two backs … Maurice Carthon and Herschel Walker … The coach says "Let's trick the defense" and gives the ball to Maurice Carthon who "gets smashed" and then the phone rings. It's Trump, "The next time you give the ball to Maurice Carthon instead of Herschel Walker, you're fired!" [People roar and cheer here]. He smiles and says "That is a true story." He continues; Trump will "say what's on his mind"—other people are thinking it but "they don't have the courage to say it" and "that's what I respect and you know what? So do the people of New York." "This man is one of the greatest businessmen that we can ever remember, there's no question about that." … He's "also smart enough to give the ball to Herschel Walker."

Rex Ryan is a big, older white man in a baggy suit who speaks plainly to the mostly white crowd. Then Trump strides out, not smiling or glad-handing the crowd; stiff and pained, he looks very much like a businessman in a suit at a rally. From our notes on the visual analysis:

> Trump starts complimenting Rex Ryan who's a "Great football coach"—and says "You're going to have a great season this year, you watch" (crowd roars—Bills fans are rabid). Great coach, "and he's also a terrific guy." "Something a lot of people don't know, I bid $1,000,000,000 for the Buffalo Bills." (Crowd roars) "Which tells you, I love Buffalo, right?" (Buffalo, 2016)

Then Trump pivots, describing Ryan as a great businessman who made a great deal when he sold off his fracking rights at the right time, enabling him to invest

his proceeds in the NFL. It is, Trump says, a "great deal and great for Buffalo." This rally's opening found charismatic appeal in the successful, competent, senior white male who gets things done, who gets the win. There's also team appeal, in which the fans, the team, and the coach all contribute to the win.

Trump, in fact, often comments that the noise of the rallies reminds him of a football game; he links his rallies with the collective effervescence of sports (especially when the home team wins):

> You know, the only thing is the noise, because you can't imitate it. It sounds like a Penn State football game, it sounds like an Ohio State football game, right? [Cheering]. (Moon Township, Pennsylvania, 2018)

Football and basketball are the most mentioned sports at MAGA rallies, though boxing, wrestling, car racing, and golfing have all made their appearances either through representative figures or in metaphors for winning and losing. Below, Trump teaches a life lesson about hard work and refusing to quit as he metaphorically links politics and boxing:

> You know, it's like a boxer, they get knocked down, get up, get knocked down, get up, get knocked down, and then the bad ones they stay on the stool and they say we quit, we quit. The great ones get up and they end up winning. That's what we're going to do. [Applause] … But the most we'll be is one or two votes short. You can't quit when you have one or two votes short, you can't do it. (Huntsville, Alabama, 2017)

In another instance, a golfing metaphor showcases Trump's willingness to change his strategy when the political terrain shifts:

> But when you hear all this nonsense, when you're a golfer and you have match play or you're a golfer and you have stroke play, different tournament, you train differently. Same with runners, same with lots of other things. [Applause] (Huntsville, Alabama, 2017)

Notably, Trump's sports metaphors are not all about portraying him as a winner. Trump also uses sports-talk to draw boundaries, solidifying an "us versus them" mindset. In the following, he introduces Jim Jordan, an NCAA champion wrestler, with elaborate praise where both laminate sports rivalries to right- and left-wing politics:

> Here's a guy I love because he's a champion … the NCAA champion in wrestling, his record is crazy like 128 and one—some crazy record. And you know why? Not because of just the muscle. [points to his head] It's because of this right here, because of this … Congressman Jim Jordan, where is he? He's a champ. I love him defending me on television, he is a bulldog. He doesn't give a damn—boom, boom, boom, point after point. Right?
> Jim Jordan:

> So the . . . the President . . . the President is exactly right, the choice tomorrow could not be more clear. The left has gone completely crazy, they applaud Kaepernick when he disrespects the flag, they cheer on Governor Cuomo when he says America was never that great and they embrace Maxine Waters when she says go out and harass anyone who supports our President. (Cleveland, Ohio, 2018)

Jordan uses an NFL quarterback's symbolic protest of police brutality as evidence of what's wrong with Trump's political opponents—and to evoke racial resentment. Sports accomplish multiple things in these rallies. Sport is a great tool to convey the corporate business ethos of winning, being part of a team, and having opponents. The majority of the audience most likely has supported a team, and knows what it feels like to be at a game—and is able to draw from that embodiment in engaging with Trump. Winning here is a zero-sum, masculine game. It is not the process of the play that matters, or being sportsman-like, but dominating and driving the other out. The losers of this game will not belong to the people, and they cannot partake in the spoils of the victory. This performance undoubtedly contributed to his 2016 win, yet, framing politics as a game to be won also subsumes the deliberative democratic process to elections, and voters to parties of opposing teams; it takes away the idea of politics as a dialogue and compromise—and moves politics from vocation to business.

Trump and the new American Populism: It is a Businessmen's World

Trump used his rallies to convince his followers to accept him as a hero in *their* own stories—a successful businessman champion ready to restore what has been lost to his supporters and to America as a whole. In these spectacles, Trump performed as the outsider with an advantage: a rich, powerful, pugilistic champion for the disenfranchised, the independent manly brawler forcing politicians to remember the people—the *forgotten ones*. Using the solidarity and collective effervescence created during the rallies, Trump changed the people's story from a lament to an adventure, and in so doing, gave his followers pride, hope, and a chance to win. He directly tied the restoration of the white working class to American revival (cf. Feinstein and Bonikowski 2019), a story in which he was the protagonist. In the process, Trump helped to usher in and solidify a cultural shift delegitimizing politics as a vocation, policy-making as a matter of bureaucratic expertise, and even the democratic process as a whole.

Trump drew on historic themes in American populism, promoting ethno-nationalist boundaries, which has manifested in earlier waves as a "nationalist project and included some radical xenophobic aspects" (Gerteis and Goolsby 2005, 204–205). In his rallies, Trump borrows from this historic nativism and ethno-nationalism, draws boundaries between the rally goers and those *absent* (people of color, experts, and activists), those actively excluded (foreigners, the Democratic Party), and those who are mocked (multi-cultural urban elites, career politicians).

However, Trump's populism diverges from the American populist mobilization in the late 19th-early 20th century, which was rural, agrarian-based, and anti-business (Goodwyn 1976; Gerteis and Goolsby 2005). Drawing on right-wing media discourse familiar to his followers (Peck 2014), Trump's populism repurposes the distinction between "producers" and "parasites" to include businessmen ("job creators") among the producers, and "career politicians" among the parasites. He plays to his supporters' experiences with de-industrialization and financialization by reminding his supporters that he is not a financier or money-mover, but a doer and builder who creates good jobs for working-class people. He tells them he will stand up to career politicians, who are bought and paid for by financial interests, and to snobby cultural elites. Trump's populism promises that businessmen like him can bring back working-class jobs and pride (Alexander 2017).

Trump draws on popular cultural idioms, particularly sports and stand-up comedy, to insert himself as a hero into his supporters' story, fusing it with a larger story of American restoration. Rallies are the crucial performative arena in which these narrative amalgams form, because they generate the emotional responses that motivate people to identify their experiences with the new, triumphant story of Trump's reworked American populism. To our knowledge, Trump is the only US president who held no elected office prior to his first term; there are plenty of politicians with business links, but Trump is the sole simulacrum of business-logic displacing political acumen at the highest level.

Trump's populism fits Jansen's (2011) description of populism as a mobilizing style. Its power comes from spectacle and performance, the fun of laughing at political and cultural elites and promises of winning, of sports talk and stand-up comedy—not from any concrete policy platform constructed to benefit supporters. Trump's populist style legitimates ethnonational and authoritarian tropes of the radical Right while creating a sense of solidarity infused with optimism and hope for his supporters. Politics as a business presents a vision of a revitalized future in which the white working class is thriving again, and his supporters can relax, be themselves, and have fun, like they do at Trump's rallies. There, Trump performs, but so does the audience as they collectively imagine and affirm the future vitality of the social order they fear losing. No wonder a Trump rally holds the same electric sense of fun as a rock concert or football game.

The fact that Trump's appeal is rooted in a political style and not a policy agenda or ideology should be a warning for champions of liberal democracy. By tapping into his followers' deep story and fusing it with a story of national pride and redemption built on a us/them dichotomy, Trump's populism has already paved the way for escalated forms of authoritarianism and ethnonational exclusion. Framing a political campaign as revolution, where the leader becomes an elected embodiment of a sacred people, runs the risk of absolving the president from any number of culpabilities—including what might be the most serious threat to American democracy to date, Trump's continued assertion that the 2020 election was stolen from him. With a simple call to action, Trump was able to ignite a siege on the US Capitol, where, on January 6, 2021, by interrupting the certification of Joe Biden's election, Trump's supporters attempted a coup.

Max Weber was wary of the human consequences of states run by experts and unelected technocrats, who prize efficiency over responsiveness and care little for the culture and traditions that are meaningful to citizens. Weber thought the solution was a leader who treats politics as a vocation, balancing the iron cage of rationalism with ethics and empathy (Weber 2004) and grace (Owen and Strong 2004, liii). But a leader who captures the hearts of his followers can just as easily turn out to be the authoritarian leader of a totalitarian order. What appeared as a counter to bureaucracy in 2015 turned out to be a personification of business, delivered in a package of sports-like winning and stand-up-like fun. So, bureaucratic democracies dominated by a capitalist logic retain an omnipresent paradox: if like Weber says, we need a politician to bend the iron cage, how do we ensure that the strongman does not become totalitarian, but competently leads a government and oversees the democratic process?

Notes

1. Make America Great Again.
2. For just one example see T.A. Frank, "Trump's Dark, Raw Inauguration Speech Shocks Washington," in *Vanity Fair*, published January 20, 2017, available at: https://www.vanityfair.com/news/2017/01/trump-inauguration-speech-shocks-washington.
3. The Special Council Investigation, investigated the collusion between Russia and Trump during the 2016 elections, and possible obstruction of Justice.

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