Duke University

The Road to the White (Nationalist) House:
Coded Racial Appeals in Donald Trump’s Presidential Campaign
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Preface

This thesis is about Donald J. Trump’s historic presidential campaign. It is an analysis of how a prominent businessman with virtually no political experience exploited widespread racial animus to emerge from a field of seventeen Republican candidates as the G.O.P. nominee and ultimately to become the forty-fifth President of the United States. Though hardly the first political candidate to engage in race baiting—indeed, I will show that racial appeals are an American political tradition—Trump nonetheless ran an unusually racially freighted presidential campaign. In an era largely governed by the norm of racial equality, Trump made racial pandering the foundation of his campaign and broke new ground in normalizing rhetoric and policy typically reserved for the radical right. His coded racial appeals, their targets, and what made them so effective are the focus of my research.

The 2008 Presidential Election was the first that I can vividly remember. I proudly wore my “Cleveland Baracks” shirt and cheered as Ohio turned blue on the televised electoral map. At twelve, I was old enough to recognize that Barack Obama was making history. I, like many Americans, was excited to live in a country that had elected a black president. I believed that racial equality was achievable, and imminent. I believed that progress was linear.

In 2016, I voted in my first presidential election. At twenty, I no longer felt as hopeful about American racial progress. Two years spent living away from the liberal stronghold of Shaker Heights, Ohio, building close relationships with peers from radically different backgrounds, and studying racial justice movements had enabled me to assess the state of the union more pragmatically. But I remained eager to exercise my right to vote, and particularly proud to vote for a woman. When I mailed my absentee ballot from Cape Town, South Africa, I

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firmly believed that the candidate I had voted for would become the first woman president of the
United States.

Trump’s election left me reeling, as I tried to imagine the consequences and define my
own resistance. This research became my attempt to understand the coalescence of factors that
propelled Trump to victory and make sense of the confusing climate surrounding my political
coming of age. How did Trump pull off this astounding win, seemingly against all odds? How
could a candidate who seemed to me so overtly racist appeal to so many voters? How did
Trump’s rise to power fit into the greater political and racial history of the United States? I
needed to know more.

Methodology

I relied on multiple methods in answering these questions. The bulk of my analysis draws
from Trump’s own campaign communication, accessed through the American Presidency
Project’s (APP) aggregated database. Hosted at the University of California, Santa Barbara, the
non-profit and non-partisan APP is a leading source of web-based presidential documents. The
APP’s collection of 2016 Presidential Election Documents includes seventy-four speeches and
remarks delivered by Trump across the campaign trail. I excluded one of the documents because
its news conference style differed significantly from the other campaign remarks and speeches;
this yielded a total body of seventy-three speeches. While the APP collection doesn’t represent a
comprehensive compendium of Trump’s campaign documents, these seventy-three speeches
spanning the course of the campaign—from when Trump announced his candidacy on June 16,
2015 to when he accepted election as the forty-fifth President of the United States on November
9, 2016—can certainly be considered a representative sample.
The primary limitation of relying on the APP collection lies in discrepancies between spoken and written speeches. While some of the speeches are transcription-based, more often they are uploaded to the website “as prepared for delivery.” There may be significant discrepancies between a speech as prepared and a speech as delivered. In an effort to compensate for this weakness, I selected three significant speeches to watch and listen to in their entirety: “Remarks Announcing Candidacy for President in New York City,” “Address Accepting the Presidential Nomination at the Republican National Convention in Cleveland, Ohio” and “Remarks in New York City Accepting Election as the 45th President of the United States.” While these speeches, admittedly, constituted a small subset of the total number, they represented important milestones in the campaign. In addition to providing a more accurate depiction of Trump’s campaign rhetoric, studying them as delivered enabled me to look beyond language alone and better understand tone, performance, and audience reaction (though my interpretation of such elements was inherently subjective).

I conducted my analysis of the seventy-three campaign speeches using NVivo 11 for Mac, a software package produced by QSR International to support researchers in organizing, analyzing, and uncovering insights in qualitative data. After importing the corpus of campaign communication into NVivo, I manually read through each of the speeches, highlighting and coding words, phrases, and paragraphs into thematic categories, called “nodes.” I developed these nodes as I coded the speeches, creating new nodes until I reached saturation and no longer identified new themes. Though “coding” gives the suggestion of a quantitative and highly technical procedure, the process is similar to organizing notecards into thematic piles or using a color-coded system when highlighting a text.
Using NVivo differs from these “old school” methods of thematic analysis in the ability to code the same text into more than one category or node. Consider this excerpt of a June 2016 speech: “Hillary Clinton can never claim to be a friend of the gay community as long as she continues to support immigration policies that bring Islamic extremists to our country who suppress women, gays and anyone who doesn’t share their views.” I coded this sentence as having multiple nodes, including Anti-Clinton and Islamic Terrorism. The NVivo package allows for such depth of analysis by accounting for overlapping categories, which can illuminate thematic connections within the text. The software also recognizes hierarchical relationships between nodes—in the example above, the Islamic Terrorism node is actually a “child node” or subset of the overarching Dog Whistles node. Finally, I frequently used the software’s many query functions, which allowed me to search for specific words and phrases, conduct word count and word frequency calculations, and produce visual representations of the results of these queries. To my knowledge, this is the first qualitative analysis of such a large sample of Trump’s speeches.

While the APP’s collection of campaign documents formed the foundation of my research, I also relied on a wide range of other sources. Brendan Brown’s Trump Twitter Archive, an aggregated online database updated hourly, offered a searchable collection of Trump’s more than 33,000 tweets. Given the contemporary nature of this subject, I made extensive use of newspaper and magazine articles, empirical reports, and various online media. The interdisciplinary nature of this research is, I believe, one of its strengths. I drew on history,

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political science, sociology, anthropology, linguistics, and more to explore and explain the weaponization of race in Trump’s campaign.

Outline

Chapter one briefly recounts the history of racial pandering in American politics. It documents the shift from explicit racial appeals to implicit racial appeals, or dog whistles, as a result of changing social norms, and considers how George Wallace practiced both forms of race baiting. It then traces the evolution of dog whistles in Republican electoral politics, from Richard Nixon’s “forced busing” and “law and order” to the Tea Party’s anti-establishment fervor and blazing racial resentment. Finally, it explores how Trump’s campaign built on this longstanding tradition of coded racial appeals and explains how dog whistle racism functions in the current era.

The second chapter delves into how Trump sounded racist dog whistles across the campaign trail. By examining three main racial or racialized targets of Trump’s antagonistic dog whistles—Latino immigrants, Muslims, and African Americans—it chronicles the variation of Trump’s racial pandering and situates his demagoguery within a contemporary context. First, it explores how Trump’s repeated criminalization of immigrants as rapists, murderers, and drug traffickers formed a Latino threat narrative⁴ that undergirded his campaign and capitalized on anxieties concerning the opioid crisis and the economy. Next, it examines Trump’s persistent focus on “Radical Islamic Terrorism” and the need for national security as a means of justifying anti-Muslim policies and legitimizing bigotry. It also considers the anti-Muslim animus fueling Trump’s unrelenting “birtherism.” Lastly, it addresses Trump’s manipulation of anti-black

racism through the abiding dog whistle frames of “law and order” and manipulative welfare recipients, as well as his rhetorical strategies for “otherizing” African Americans and his personal history of anti-black prejudice.

Chapter three attempts to understand what made Trump’s racist rhetoric so effective. It locates Trump’s politics in an emerging ideology of “white nationalist postracialism,” which paradoxically promotes white nationalist ideals while denying racist motivations, and examines how he combined dog whistle racism with strategic political “incorrectness,” nostalgia, and pledges to “Make America Great Again” to construct this ideology. It also explores how the politics of white nationalist postracialism enabled Trump to appeal both to avowed white nationalists and to purportedly post-racial voters who were nonetheless at some level racially motivated.

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and greatly strengthened my capacity for research and writing. I am thankful for the mentorship of such an accomplished scholar and particularly glad to look up to such a brilliant and thoughtful woman. I am also grateful to William Chafe, who, alongside Professor Shapiro, introduced me to the real history of the American Civil Rights Movement and deepening my understanding of the complexities of racial progress. I would like to thank Eduardo Bonilla-Silva for his vital scholarship on race in the United States, his willingness to discuss this research with me, and his powerful book, *Racism Without Racists*, which has proved both an academic and personal resource. I am grateful to Stephen Smith and Kerry Haynie for helping give shape to my ideas, particularly in the early stages of this research, and for their willingness to serve on my faculty committee. Both Ryan Denniston introduced me to the American Presidency Project and provided invaluable training in using the NVivo software. I am much beholden to Carson Holloway, who has provided a wealth of research support, from finding key sources to constructing an organized bibliography. I would also like to thank Katja Hill for her consistent communication and help with the more logistical aspects of this process.

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I would not have been compelled to study race, disparity, and social justice had I not had a community of family, friends, educators, and mentors who encouraged me to think and care about these matters. For challenging, supporting, and inspiring me: thank you all.
Chapter 1

“Dog Whistle Politics”:
Coded Racial Appeals in American Political Discourse

dog whistle

noun
a high-pitched whistle used to train dogs, typically having a sound inaudible to humans.
  • a subtly aimed political message which is intended for, and can only be understood by, a particular demographic group.

Racial entreaties have helped political candidates win elections for decades. Overt expressions of white supremacy were effective when white men constituted the entirety of the electorate. Politicians like Andrew Jackson, who served two presidential terms and remained very popular despite viewing African Americans and indigenous Americans as subordinate, were able to freely express their bigoted beliefs. As recently as 1948, South Carolinian and Dixiecrat Strom Thurmond captured four states and thirty-nine electoral votes as a third party candidate spouting racial slurs on the campaign trail. But as voting rights expanded and socio-cultural developments shifted the limits of acceptable speech, politicians largely abandoned the public use of explicitly racist language. This mid-twentieth century shift did not mark the end of racial appeals in American politics, however. Rather, politicians turned to an equally effective, albeit more subtle, form of racial pandering: the dog whistle.

Though scientist Francis Galton invented physical dog whistles in the nineteenth century, the “dog whistle” did not become a figure of speech until the late twentieth century. Richard Morin, director of polling for The Washington Post, is credited as first using the metaphor in 1988 to describe the “dog whistle effect” in opinion polling: “Respondents hear something in the
question that researchers do not.”¹ Since then, the dog whistle has become a widely used metaphor for describing coded political speech, particularly when publically discussing potentially provocative issues like immigration and race.

In his pioneering work *Dog Whistle Politics*, author and legal scholar Ian Haney López examines racial dog whistling in contemporary American politics. In a persuasive analysis, López traces the emergence and evolution of dog whistle politics, which he defines as coded talk centered on race. This coded speech is a manifestation of “strategic racism,” or the deliberate leveraging of racial animus for social, material, or political gain.² Dog whistle politics, therefore, are the “strategic manipulation of racial ideas in pursuit of political power and…material wealth.”³ This definition differs from popular understandings of racism as individual or ideological, instead acknowledging the widespread practice of exploiting racial prejudice for personal or party gain. I will rely on this definition throughout the thesis. I also draw heavily on López’s scholarship in tracing the emergence and development of the dog whistle in contemporary American politics.

Dog Whistling Dixie: George Wallace and his Political Descendants

Race and American politics have been intertwined since the nation’s beginnings. But the history of dog whistle politics begins with George Corley Wallace, four-term Alabama governor and four-time presidential candidate. Described as the “most influential loser in modern

³ Ibid., 49.
American politics,”^4 Wallace demonstrated the electoral value of campaigning as a racial reactionary, powerfully shaping contemporary political rhetoric. Wallace first ran for governor in 1958, emerging as a front-runner in the Democratic primary. Having served on the board of trustees of the Tuskegee Institute and known for civil treatment of blacks, he earned the endorsement of the NAACP. Yet in late-1950s Alabama, as the national climate shifted toward integration, maintaining a strict color line became the primary concern of white southerners.\(^5\) Despite running with a staunch segregationist platform, Wallace lost to John Malcolm Patterson, his more fervently white supremacist adversary who had the support of the Ku Klux Klan. Years later, Patterson explained the central role that race played in his defeat of Wallace. The “primary reason I beat… [Wallace] was because he was considered soft on the race question at the time. That’s the primary reason.” When it came to race, Patterson said, “It was political suicide to offer any moderate approach.”^6 And while Wallace tried to downplay the centrality of race in the gubernatorial contest, Patterson’s lesson was certainly not lost on him. “Well, boys,” Wallace reportedly quipped after his defeat, “no other son-of-a-bitch will ever out-nigger me again.”^7

Four years later, Wallace again ran for governor of Alabama—this time, as a racial conservative and arch-segregationist with Klan backing. Campaigning on this reactionary platform, Wallace was elected. In January 1963, Wallace bellowed his infamous inauguration speech, written by Ku Klux Klansmen Asa Carter. Invoking Confederate leader Jefferson Davis in the “Heart of the Great Anglo-Saxon Southland,” Wallace called for segregation “in the name

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^6 Ibid.

^7 Ibid., 96. Though the legitimacy of this quote is contested, it nonetheless defines the strategy that Wallace used to rise to power. See Carter, 96 for an evaluation of the quote’s authenticity.
of the greatest people that have ever trod this earth.” Equating segregation with freedom, Wallace demanded “segregation now...segregation tomorrow...segregation forever.” He articulated an unequivocally white supremacist message sated with direct racial references and appeals to a Confederate legacy. This staunch white supremacist declaration may have galvanized white voters in the deep South, but Wallace’s political ambitions extended beyond the confines of the former Confederacy and he sought to generate broader support.

While Wallace’s first two gubernatorial campaigns highlight the power of campaigning on the radical right, they also represent a more overt brand of racial pandering. These explicit racial appeals were characteristic of the nineteenth and part of the twentieth century as politicians conformed to what political scholar Tali Mendelberg has termed the “norm of racial inequality.” Remarkably constant across campaigns, unambiguous racial appeals drew on deeply rooted stereotypes and fears about African Americans, including supposed sexual immorality, criminality, economic dependency, and laziness. Yet the norm of racial inequality began to erode in the 1930s, spurred in part by the Great Migration and heightened political activism of groups like the NAACP. Influential institutions, including the media, in turn began to reject the norm of racial inequality. “The national press was the first mainstream institution to take sides in what became a national conflict between African Americans and their white allies on one side and a majority of southern whites on the other,” Mendelberg explains. Articles criticizing white southerners and emphasizing similarities between the races began to appear in the 1930s, increasing in number and intensity by midcentury. Mounting civil rights activism further undermined the norm of racial inequality—by the 1960s, Mendelberg argues, it was replaced by

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8 Ibid., 11.
10 Ibid., 69.
a new standard: the norm of racial equality. But as racial tensions went unresolved, a role remained for racial appeals in political discourse. “Two forces—one compelling [political] elites to endorse the new norm of racial equality, and the other compelling them to appeal to racial stereotypes, fears, and resentment—generate the now-dominant strategy of implicit racial appeals,” Mendelberg writes.\textsuperscript{11} By relying on coded racial appeals rather than overt expressions of white supremacy, politicians could exploit racial animus while still conforming to the norm of racial equality.

As the national climate shifted toward the norm of racial equality and overt expressions of racism became increasingly taboo, Wallace recognized the need to distance himself from white supremacist language. By 1967, Wallace had replaced his more explicit calls for segregation with an emphasis on more subtle appeals to “states’ rights.” Arguing in favor of states’ rights rather than the explicitly racist “segregation forever,” he could express old bigoted ideas using a new vocabulary.\textsuperscript{12} As a Wallace biographer explains, “Wallace pioneered a kind of soft porn racism in which fear and hate could be mobilized without mentioning race itself except to deny that one is a racist.”\textsuperscript{13} In this “soft porn racism” lie the origins of dog whistle politics. Using seemingly non-racial language, Wallace skillfully exploited racial animosities. A contemporary of Wallace emphasized the power of Wallace’s coded rhetoric, explaining that Wallace could mask his racial agenda through seemingly nonracial issues like law and order and property rights. “But people will know he’s telling them ‘a nigger’s trying to get your job, trying to move into your neighborhood.’ What Wallace is doing is talking to them in a kind of a

\textsuperscript{11} Ibid., 66.
\textsuperscript{12} López, \textit{Dog Whistle Politics}, 16.
shorthand, a kind of code,” he described.\textsuperscript{14} With this coded language, Wallace launched himself into the political mainstream, winning the governorship three more times and making four consecutive runs for the presidency, in 1964, 1968, 1972, and 1976.

The 1968 presidential race solidified the critical role that Wallace’s brand of dog whistle politics would play for the next several decades. That year, Republican moderate Richard Nixon ran against Johnson’s vice president, Hubert Humphrey. But when Wallace entered the race as an independent candidate he posed a serious threat, polling more support in the South than either Humphrey or Nixon. His messaging was resonating in other regions, too—Wallace held massive campaign rallies across the country, drawing tens of thousands of voters to events in the seemingly liberal fortresses of New York City and Boston.\textsuperscript{15} His loud cries for “states’ rights” and “law and order” attracted the more conservative voters who otherwise would have preferred Nixon. In fact, Republican operatives estimated that fully eighty percent of Southern Wallace voters and a near majority of Northerners would have supported Nixon had Wallace not entered the race.\textsuperscript{16}

Hoping to woo Wallace’s Southern backers, Nixon adopted what has come to be known as the ‘Southern strategy,’ a practice of exploiting anti-black racism to win increased support among white voters in the South. He had secretly brokered a deal with Dixiecrat leader Strom Thurmond, promising to limit federal enforcement of school desegregation in the South in exchange for Thurmond’s support. As Wallace’s following grew, however, Nixon took his racial pandering public. Just a month before the election, Nixon came out against “forced busing.” Much like “states’ rights,” the issue of school busing had little to do with race on the surface.

\textsuperscript{14} Retrieved from López, \textit{Dog Whistle Politics}, 17.
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., 23.
\textsuperscript{16} Carter, \textit{The Politics of Rage}, 347.
But, as López explains, so-called forced busing had become “an increasingly potent euphemism for the system of transporting students across the boundaries of segregated neighborhoods in order to integrate schools.” White Southerners recognized Nixon’s language as parroting the coded speech of their beloved Wallace and understood the racist subtext to his words. But this language also appealed to white voters above the Mason-Dixon line, including those who outwardly opposed white supremacy. Data from the late 1960s suggested that while whites outside of the South might support federal action to further civil rights, they largely resisted change in their own neighborhoods. Thus, while they may not have noticed the racist undertones of Nixon’s promises, they nonetheless appreciated his pledges to leave their communities alone.

Taking another cue from Wallace, Nixon also moved to make “law and order” the centerpiece of his campaign. These demagogues were not the first to weaponize such language; rather, they employed a rhetorical frame born out of opposition to the Civil Rights Movement. The language of “law and order” emerged in the late 1950s as Southern officials sought to mobilize white opposition to civil rights activism. White Americans often labeled civil rights protests criminal and blamed Martin Luther King Jr.’s philosophy of civil disobedience for rising national crime rates. Riots erupted in New York in 1964 and swept across the nation after King’s assassination in 1968, fueling the narrative that increased civil rights for black Americans led to increased crime. By the time Nixon became the self-proclaimed “law and order” candidate in 1968, the phrase had become a euphemism for opposition to the Civil Rights Movement laden with anti-black racism.

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17 López, Dog Whistle Politics, 23.
18 Carter, The Politics of Rage, 349.
Unlike Wallace, Nixon sought to appeal to both the Northern Republican establishment, who proudly claimed the Party of Lincoln, and the intransigent segregationists of the South. Walking a thin line between discretion and demagoguery, Nixon promised to speak for, in his words, the “forgotten Americans…the non-shouters, the non-demonstrators, that are not racists or sick, that are not guilty of crime that plagues the land.” He later called these same Americans the “silent majority,” a term that fell out of the public lexicon until Trump resurrected it in the 2016 campaign.

Nixon’s election in 1968 solidified the realignment of the dominant political parties along distinctly racial lines. In 1972, Nixon defeated opponent George McGovern with an impressive seventy percent of the white vote. Leading Nixon strategist Kevin Phillips published *The Emerging Republican Majority* several years earlier, hypothesizing that racial issues, which he termed “ethnicultural cleavages,” would prove central in party realignment. From 1960 to 1968, the Democratic Party lost significant support among white voters while gaining among non-whites—the party of New Deal progressivism was rapidly being reshaped because of race. Roosevelt’s New Deal coalition had forged alliances between groups with diverse interests: southern whites, trade unionists, liberal intellectuals, and racial and ethnic minorities. But nascent issues in the 1960s, including civil rights, the Vietnam War, and rising crime—both real and perceived—drove the fracturing of the coalition. Phillips identified race as the impetus behind this breakdown. “The Negro problem,” Phillips bluntly explained, “having become a national rather than a local one, is the principal cause of the breakup of the New Deal

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coalition.”

Given Phillips’ major role in Nixon’s campaign, the strategic implications of his predictions suggest that the Republican Party’s rise as “the White Man’s Party,” as political commentator Robert Novak put it, was not the result of ordinary bigotry as much as the conscious exploitation of racism to broaden electoral appeal.

This strategic manipulation of racial prejudice rapidly became the norm. In his 1980 campaign, Ronald Reagan pursued aggressive race baiting framed largely as fiscal conservatism. Trump often invoked Reagan in the context of economic issues, promising “the greatest tax cut since Ronald Reagan” in nearly a third of the speeches I analyzed. Yet in mobilizing support for his fiscal policy, Reagan relied on distinctly racist rhetorical frames. Most infamous was the imagery of a “Chicago welfare queen,” which Reagan deployed across the campaign trail to generate anger at supposed welfare cheats and build support for his welfare reform policies. Reagan described a woman with “eighty names, thirty addresses, twelve Social Security cards [who] is collecting veterans’ benefits on four non-existing deceased husbands…. And she’s collecting Social Security on her cards. She’s got Medicaid, getting food stamps and she is collecting welfare under each of her names. Her tax-free cash income alone is over $150,000.”

Though this depiction was based loosely on forty-seven-year-old Chicago welfare recipient Linda Taylor, Reagan’s narrative was exaggerated for rhetorical impact. He also criticized the food stamp program, alleging that it enabled “some fellow ahead of you buy a T-bone steak” while “you were standing in a checkout line with your package of hamburger.” Reagan described this man as a ‘strapping young buck’ in Southern states, where the phrase connoted a

22 Ibid.
large black man, but muted that to ‘some fellow’ in places where this racial rhetoric was unacceptable. These highly racialized portrayals framed black and white Americans as competitors, signaling to white voters that supposedly undeserving black Americans were taking advantage of whites’ hard-earned tax dollars.

Reagan coupled these coded appeals with the classic dog whistle rhetoric of states’ rights and law and order. When Reagan won the Republican Party’s nomination for president 1980, he chose to kick off his general election campaign at the Neshoba County Fair. The white supremacist stronghold of Neshoba County, Mississippi was best known as the site of the 1964 murders of young civil rights activists James Chaney, Andrew Goodman, and Michael Schwerner. Sixteen years later, Reagan took the stage and told the crowd, “I believe in states’ rights.” By invoking states’ rights in a place steeped in white supremacist legacy, like Neshoba County, Reagan sent a coded message of support to his white voters. New York Times columnist Bob Herbert spelled out the subtext of Reagan’s dog whistle: “When it comes down to you and the blacks, we’re with you.”26

Reagan’s racist dog whistles appealed to disaffected whites who viewed the Democratic Party’s push for civil rights as a betrayal. His messaging about the undeserving welfare cheats carried a quiet subtext of whites deserving more than they received. The 1980 election confirmed the efficacy of Reagan’s racially coded rhetoric, as twenty-two percent of Democrats defected from the party to support Reagan. Race loomed large—the defection rate was significantly higher among Democrats who believed civil rights progress was moving too quickly, with over a third of such voters supporting Reagan.27

Just a year after Reagan’s election, key strategist Lee Atwater—who would later rely on racist dog whistles while managing George H. W. Bush’s 1988 campaign—confirmed the strategic nature of Reagan’s coded appeals. “You start out in 1954 by saying, ‘Nigger, nigger, nigger,’” Atwater explained, highlighting a period in which overt racial slurs were widely acceptable. He then illustrated the emergence of dog whistles as the social norms dictating acceptable racial discourse shifted: “By 1968 you can’t say ‘nigger’—that hurts you. Backfires. So you say stuff like forced busing, states’ rights and all that stuff.” Atwater emphasized that while these issues were framed economically, they still harmed black Americans more than they affected whites. “Obviously sitting around and saying, ‘We want to cut taxes and we want to cut this,’ is much more abstract than even the busing thing, and a hell of a lot more abstract than ‘Nigger, nigger,’” Atwater said. Yet regardless of the specific language used, he recognized that “race [was] coming in on the back burner.”28 Atwater’s candid account illustrates the effectiveness of dog whistle politics. As the norms dictating acceptable racial discourse changed, politicians turned to coded speech that obscured the racist undertones while still stimulating strong reactions among certain constituencies.

The Republican Party’s use of dog whistles did not stop with Reagan. Rather, the practice of racial pandering—while denying any investment in white supremacy—became wholly ingrained in political discourse. At Lee Atwater’s suggestion, Reagan’s vice president and 1988 presidential candidate George H.W. Bush embraced racial demagoguery through a “get tough on crime” stance. Civil rights litigator and scholar Michelle Alexander explains Bush’s notorious 1988 dog whistle, the Willie Horton ad. The ad “featured a dark-skinned black man, a convicted murderer who escaped while on a work furlough and then raped and murdered a white woman in

her home.” Because Bush’s opponent, then-governor of Massachusetts Michael Dukakis, had approved the furlough program, the ad blamed Dukakis for the white woman’s death. And though the ad was controversial, it was “stunningly effective,” destroying Dukakis’ shot at the presidency.29 The ad exploited longstanding notions of black violence and criminality, particularly the threat that black men posed to white womanhood. Though Horton’s race was never explicitly mentioned—which protected against any charges of racism—the ad included his mug shot and a photograph from his arrest, making clear racial implications.

Hoping to generate some support from nonwhites, George W. Bush kept racial appeals to a minimum in his campaign in 2000. Yet following the tragic attacks of September 11, 2001, “dog whistle racism surged anew, though with much of its hysterical focus shifting from African Americans to brown immigrants, both Muslim and Mexican.”30 After the collapse of the World Trade Center towers, the government channeled widespread shock, terror, and rage into targeted Justice Department investigations of Middle Eastern Muslims who had recently entered the country. This practice of racial profiling gave racial character to the threat facing the United States. “That threat ostensibly came from a new racial spook, the ‘Arab Muslim,’” López explains.31 The racialization of Islam constructed Muslims as racial subjects and assigned phenotypical characteristics—brown, bearded, veiled—despite significant racial and ethnic diversity within the religious group. Muslims were often targeted through coded terms, as politicians condemned religious beliefs, cultural differences, and extremist behavior rather than the entire racialized group.

30 López, Dog Whistle Politics, 115.
31 Ibid., 118.
The 9/11 attacks also added fuel to a longstanding low flame: the “illegal alien.” Though fear and distrust of Latino immigrants had been brewing for decades—I will delve deeper into the “Latino threat narrative” in the next chapter—the attack lent legitimacy to the notion that Latinos constituted a threat to national security. Throughout his two terms, Bush capitalized on the highly racialized notion of the “illegal immigrant,” heightening border security, ending the “catch-and-release” policy, and advocating for mandatory assimilation through English language education. Yet such policies are seemingly race-neutral, pointing instead to cultural or linguistic differences and concerns of legality and security. Conservative politicians publicly avoided the old racial language of “spics, greasers, and wetbacks,” instead relying on the supposedly race-neutral language of national security and cultural conflict.\(^{32}\) In a break from GOP dog whistles past, George W. Bush relied less on anti-black racism, instead directing racial animosities toward Muslim and Latino immigrants.

When Barack Obama became the first black president of the United States in 2008, many hoped that his victory heralded a post-racial utopia and signaled the end of Republican control. Few could have predicted the rise of the Tea Party, an unlikely coalition of grassroots organizers and opportunistic politicians—including Americans for Prosperity, FreedomWorks, Sarah Palin, and David Koch—that has pushed the Republican Party sharply to the right. In a powerful study, Harvard scholars Theda Skocpol and Vanessa Williamson found that Tea Partiers mostly approve of Social Security, Medicaid, and generous veterans benefits, seemingly in conflict with their fierce opposition to big government.\(^{33}\) Yet López understands the apparent contradictions of the Tea Party platform as the outcome of dog whistle politics. According to López, four hatreds

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\(^{32}\) Ibid., 121.

\(^{33}\) Theda Skocpol and Vanessa Williamson, \emph{The Tea Party and the Remaking of Republican Conservatism} (Oxford University Press, 2012).
fueled the Tea Party movement: welfare, undocumented immigrants, Arab Muslims, and Barack Obama. “Tea Partiers could oppose big government yet insist that Social Security and Medicaid were sacrosanct because they continued to see ‘welfare’ as something liberals doled out to lazy nonwhites,” as dog whistle rhetoric has claimed for decades. Programs that white Americans knew that they benefited from directly—Social Security and Medicaid—were, tellingly, understood as separate from welfare. Racial animosities largely drove Tea Party opposition to welfare; the professed desire to cut social spending merely served as the justification for a racially motivated platform. “The pervasive concerns about welfare, crime, illegal aliens, Arab Muslims, and a black president,” López summarized, “strongly suggested that it was racial anxiety that provided the heat roiling the many disparate currents within the Tea Party.” The demographics of the Tea Party supported the hypothesis that racial resentment drove the movement more than economic concerns. Supporters of the Tea Party movement were more likely to be men, over the age of 45, white, married, and either employed or retired—few were unemployed. Tea Partiers were also more affluent and more educated than most Americans.

Within this moment of anti-establishment fervor and racial resentment, Donald Trump launched a political career. In many ways, the Tea Party paved the way for Trump, a candidate who loudly voiced anger and frustration with the political establishment, disregarded fact, stoked conspiracy, and frequently appealed to racial resentment even more forcefully than the Tea Party had. Harnessing the swelling currents of white frustration and building on decades of

Republican race baiting, Donald Trump represented the most recent chapter in a long tradition of racial demagoguery in American electoral politics.

**Donald Trump: Dog Whistle or Dog Scream?**

Scholars and pundits increasingly suggest that the Trump campaign abandoned coded racial appeals altogether, representing a national retreat to more overt expressions of racism. In an era of supposed racial colorblindness, Trump’s hardly-hidden attacks of racial and religious groups feel explicitly racial to many, particularly progressive, Americans. While Trump’s racial demagoguery has certainly increased in brazenness since the inauguration, his presidential campaign still maintained at least a thin façade of race neutrality.

In “From the Dog Whistle to the Dog Scream,” Luiza-Maria Filimon asserts that Trump won the presidential nomination by “openly and devoutly proselytizing against minority groups that allegedly threaten the fabric, integrity, and security of the United States.” In a break from veiled racism of the past, Filimon argues, “Trump served his supporters unfiltered, unpolished, anti-political correctness, and anti-diplomatic rhetoric.” Her sentiments are reflected in news media, perhaps magnified by journalistic sensationalism. “It appears that the GOP has traded in its dog whistle for a bullhorn when it comes to bigotry in the 2016 race for president,” begins

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37 The term “colorblind” originated from Justice John Marshall Harlan’s dissent in *Plessy v. Ferguson*, the 1896 case that established “separate but equal.” Today, colorblindness serves as both a vision of a world in which race is no longer relevant and a tool for dismissing affirmative action and other race-based policies as discriminatory solely for taking race into account. For a more detailed description of colorblindness in the contemporary U.S., see López, 77-103.

one opinion piece.\textsuperscript{39} Referencing the dog whistle metaphor, another journalist expresses bitter appreciation for Trump’s seemingly blatant racism: “For once, nobody is pretending that racism is at a frequency so high they can’t make it out.”\textsuperscript{40} The categorization of Trump’s rhetoric as a rejection of the subtle dog whistle extended beyond the course of the campaign. “Trump Won by Turning Bigoted Dog Whistles Into Megaphones,” asserts a post-election headline in Rolling Stone. The subtitle follows: “Trump supporters like him because he forcefully says the prejudicial stuff they believe.”\textsuperscript{41}

These straightforward interpretations are appealing, but they fail to recognize what makes dog whistle racism so effective. The strength of coded speech as political strategy has always been its duality: the literal language employed and the latent message implied. The dog whistle metaphor illustrates two levels on which racial pandering operates.\textsuperscript{42} In one range, dog whistle racism is inaudible and easily denied. Though critics may recognize and condemn such implicit appeals, both whistlers and listeners can deny malicious intent. Yet in another range, coded messages still stimulate strong reactions.

The plausible deniability of dog whistle racism proves critical in a society where the charge of being racist tends to carry social ignominy. In part, this stems from a near total avoidance of race talk in the contemporary moment of ostensible colorblindness. Scholarship over the past thirty years has suggested that more blatant expressions of prejudice have been

\textsuperscript{42} López, \textit{Dog Whistle Politics}, 3.
replaced by a more subtle vocabulary and discourse. Sociologist and race scholar Eduardo Bonilla-Silva defines and explores a new racial ideology termed “color-blind racism that subtly and systematically uses allegedly nonracial dynamics to explain contemporary racial inequalities.” A central stylistic component of color-blind racism is the avoidance of direct racial language, even when talking about race—“racism without racial epithets.”43 For many white people, the avoidance of explicit racial language constitutes color-blindness; to mention race at all is to be racist.

While many progressive Americans critiqued Trump’s demagogic language as explicitly racist, he in fact relied heavily on coded speech. “Trump’s racial rhetoric is certainly inflammatory, but he constantly has to genuflect to the color-blind norms of the period,” writes Bonilla-Silva, rejecting claims that Trump expedited a reemergence of racism.44 Trump publicly avoided racial epithets and rarely mentioned skin color. Indeed, though I searched for occurrences of explicit “race language” in seventy-three speeches, there were almost none. The only time Trump used the adjective “white,” for example, was in reference to the White House. Trump’s dog whistles reached a white audience without mentioning whiteness at all. Though he received the endorsement of several notorious white supremacists, like former Klan grand wizard David Duke and father of the alt-right Richard Spencer, the norm of racial equality dictated that he could not publicly embrace their support. Instead, Trump relied on coded messages that won him the support of the radical right.

Trump did not seem to mind if his critics condemned his racial demagoguery. In a move that energized his alt-right followers, he even appeared to goad the media with his barely-

44 Ibid., 222.
disguised bigotry, but he still sought to hide it from the majority of his supporters. “Trump pushes the boundaries of acceptable racial speech, but still carefully uses language that allows his ardent followers to reassure themselves that they are not motivated by racism,” López explains in a 2016 piece. At times, Trump even reassured his supporters himself. Just two months before the election, Trump addressed a crowd in Baltimore:

People who want their immigration laws enforced, and their borders secured, are not racists. They are patriotic Americans of all backgrounds who want their jobs and families protected. People who warn about Radical Islamic Terrorism are not Islamophobes. They are decent American citizens who want to uphold our tolerant values and keep our country safe. People who support the police, and who want crime reduced, are not prejudiced. They are concerned and loving citizens whose hearts break every time an innocent child is lost to preventable violence.

By framing racist and xenophobic beliefs as merely the justified concerns of fair-minded Americans, Trump absolved his supporters of any responsibility for their prejudices. Trump normalized their bigotry while simultaneously vilifying anyone who dared critique him or his followers. In this sense, Trump represents a reversal of the dog whistle metaphor. “Sometimes dog whistling works like a secret handshake, benign to outsiders but clearly understood by those in the know,” López explains. “But when seeking to appeal to widely condemned group animosities—such as racism, sexism, and homophobia—dog whistling works differently. The most important goal becomes to hide the full ugliness of the underlying message from the target audience itself.”

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47 López, "This Is How Trump Convinces His Supporters They’re Not Racist."
Candidate Trump challenged our understandings of socially acceptable political rhetoric, but still maintained the plausible deniability central to dog whistle racism. Racial dog whistles allowed Trump to deftly appeal to both the majority of white voters who believe their political beliefs to be anything but racially motivated, and the minority of white voters who staunchly support white supremacy. But how did Trump blow the dog whistle? In the next chapter, I will examine the specific rhetorical strategies Trump used to manipulate racial resentment and build white support.
Chapter 2

Sounding the Dog Whistle:
Anti-Immigrant, Anti-Muslim, and Anti-Black

Donald Trump’s presidential campaign represented the most recent iteration of a half-century Republican tradition of racist dog whistles. But while his predecessors largely invoked anti-black racism with their rhetoric, Trump’s demagoguery was hardly confined to a single racial—or racialized—group. Though his campaign’s dearth of well-defined policy raised questions among both advocates and opponents about what exactly he is for, what he galvanized his supporters against is far clearer. In this chapter, I’ll examine three main targets of Trump’s antagonistic dog whistles: Latino immigrants, Muslims, and African Americans.

Anti-Immigrant: “The Latino Threat”

Trump’s campaign attacked immigrants of varying racial groups and national origins, but Latino immigrants in general and Mexicans in particular undoubtedly bore the brunt of his vitriolic dog whistles. This played to overall perceptions of who immigrants are, as “immigrant” has become a racialized concept in the American imagination. In 2012, several political science researchers found that mentions of Latinos in news coverage of immigration had outpaced mentions of other groups since 1994. This media representation was correlated with public opinion on immigration: from 1994 to 2008, attitudes towards Latinos accounted for nearly all of the impact of ethnocentrism on immigration policy opinions. “When Whites think of
immigration, they think of Latinos,” the researchers concluded.48 Thus, the conflation of Latinos and immigrants was not specific to Trump, but consistent with national understandings.

Trump quickly established immigration as his signature issue—and appealing to racist, nativist sentiments as his signature strategy—when announcing his candidacy for president on June 16, 2015. Lamenting the current state of the nation, he was met with applause when labeling the United States “a dumping ground for everybody else’s problems”—in this metaphor, such “problems” are Latino immigrants. Infamously, Trump proclaimed, “When Mexico sends its people, they're not sending their best. They're not sending you. They're not sending you,” he said, pointing out individuals in the crowd. He explained that the Mexican immigrants entering the U.S. had “lots of problems” that they brought into the country. Then Trump specified these supposed problems. “They’re bringing drugs. They’re bringing crime. They’re rapists. And some, I assume,” he added, “are good people.” Citing his conversations with border guards as evidence, Trump emphasized that these problematic immigrants hailed not only from Mexico, but all over South and Latin America. As Trump demanded an end to such immigration, his audience cheered.49

Trump criticized Mexican and other Latin American immigrants with sweeping generalizations, casting these immigrants as inherently problematic. But while such blanket criticisms of Latino immigrants could appear overtly racist, the particulars of Trump’s rhetoric helped maintain the appearance of racelessness. In claiming that Mexican immigrants are not the “best” that the country has to offer, Trump differentiated between supposedly “good” and “bad”

immigrants, a time-honored rhetorical strategy for remaining within the bounds of acceptable racial speech. As the norm of racial equality solidified and overt expressions of white supremacy became increasingly unacceptable, politicians could no longer call for exclusionary immigration policies on the basis of biological, cultural, or racial inferiority. Rather, as race scholar Paula Ioanide explains, immigration discourse since the civil rights era has emphasized “the removal of ‘bad’ immigrants, depicted as engaging in various forms of illegality.” Criminalizing immigrants and their behaviors allowed politicians to advocate for nativist immigration policy on the basis of criminality rather than race or ethnicity. “The bad immigrant crosses national borders without documentation, participates in informal labor economies that do not contribute to income taxes, engages in criminal activities, refuses to speak English and to adopt American values, and expropriates public resources meant for legal residents and U.S. citizens,” Ioanide writes. And while the bad immigrant is constructed through the lens of illegality, a seemingly colorblind concept, they are exclusively imagined as nonwhite. By focusing on and condemning the “bad immigrant,” Trump presented immigration as an inherently negative process while simultaneously using the language of illegality and behavior to cloak the racism and nativism of his rhetoric and policy.

We can further understand how this abhorrent attack on immigrants functions as a dog whistle using López’s punch, parry, and kick framework. According to López, dog whistling involves three basic moves:

…a punch that jabs race into the conversation through thinly veiled references to nonwhites, for instance to welfare cheats or illegal aliens; a parry that slaps away charges of racial pandering, often by emphasizing the lack of any direct reference to a racial

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group or any use of an epithet; and finally a kick that savages the critic for opportunistically alleging racial victimization.\textsuperscript{51}

In announcing his campaign, Trump’s punch was powerful. Though his language technically condemned criminals, his generalized attack of Latino immigrants carried a distinctly racial weight. He was careful to avoid overtly racial terms or slurs, but his vague “they’s” and “it’s” nonetheless conjured images of drug-smuggling brown masses stealing across the southern border—the “thinly veiled references to threatening nonwhites.” Trump prepared to parry in his speech, with an aside acknowledging that not all Mexicans are criminals: “And some, I assume, are good people.” This discursive buffer helped absorb the shock of such a broad generalization and allowed for easy disavowal if accused of racism.

In his first interview following his bold announcement, Trump told ABC’s George Stephanopoulos that Oprah Winfrey would be a “great” vice president. Trump had floated Winfrey as a potential running mate in 1999 while considering a presidential bid as the Reform Party candidate. “I think Oprah would be great. I’d love to have Oprah. I think we’d win easily, actually,” he replied, when asked if Winfrey was on his short list for vice president. “She’s great, she’s talented, she’s a friend of mine.”\textsuperscript{52}

In praising a high-profile black woman just after a speech that many regarded as racist, Trump employed a common rhetorical strategy to parry away any accusations of racial prejudice. His

\textsuperscript{51} López, Dog Whistle Politics, 4.
language was parallel to “Some of my best friends are black,” a popular phrase in post-civil rights racial speech that acts as a buffer against charges of racism.\textsuperscript{53} One observant Twitter user (Figure 1) recognized Trump’s rhetorical strategy, explaining that Trump’s interest in Winfrey, a black woman, as a running mate served only to counter any allegations of racism following his campaign announcement full of dog whistles.

Trump parried further three days after the infamous speech, asserting that his comments were not meant to disparage Mexicans. “I like Mexico and love the spirit of Mexican people, but we must protect our borders from people, from all over, pouring in the U.S,” he tweeted.\textsuperscript{54} In emphasizing the need to limit immigration of people “from all over,” Trump deflected any accusation that his anti-immigrant sentiments were racially motivated. Trump didn’t need to complete the dog whistle trinity with a kick himself—his supporters leapt to his defense and did it for him. During the vice presidential debate in October 2016, Mike Pence, Trump’s running mate and then-Governor of Indiana, tried to kick the attention back toward his opponent. Vice presidential candidate Senator Time Kaine criticized Trump’s infamous anti-Mexican comments, as well as his misogynistic language. “Senator, you whipped out that Mexican thing again,” Pence replied, minimizing the severity of Trump’s bigoted words while framing Kaine’s comments as opportunistic.\textsuperscript{55}

While Trump parried and kicked away accusations of racism, he also managed to maintain an air of plausible deniability by appealing to widely held but often unacknowledged anti-immigrant sentiments. If Trump’s supporters agreed with his portrayal of Mexican

\textsuperscript{53} Bonilla-Silva, \textit{Racism Without Racists}, 8.
\textsuperscript{54} Donald J. Trump, Twitter Post, June 19, 2015, 8:15 PM, https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/612066176294866945.
immigrants, they were far less likely to recognize his words as racial demagoguery. Consider what anthropologist Leo R. Chavez terms the “Latino Threat Narrative.” This discourse holds that Latinos, unlike previous immigrant groups, are unwilling or incapable of assimilating; they represent an invading, criminal force seeking to re-conquer land that was formerly theirs and destroy the American way of life. Recall Trump’s parrying tweet about immigrants of various nationalities “pouring in” the United States. Water metaphors abound in media coverage and political discourse on immigration, but have been criticized in migration studies for their dehumanizing and panic-inducing nature.\(^{56}\) Trump’s campaign speech overflowed with hydraulic imagery—he described immigrants and drugs as “pouring” and “flowing” into the country twenty-seven and twenty-one times, respectively, and condemned the “flood of illegal immigrants” at least once. This language of deluge dehumanized immigrants, created a sense of urgency surrounding immigration, and capitalized on the Latino threat narrative’s notion of Latinos as an invading force. Central to the narrative is the (fictitious) notion that Latinos reproduce at alarming rates, threatening the demographic majority of white Americans.\(^{57}\) Thus, the Latino threat narrative posits Latino immigration as inherently at odds with the interests of Anglo-Saxons. Reproduced through media channels and political discourse, the Latino threat narrative and its many fictions have become naturalized in the public imagination, leaving many Americans predisposed to accept Trump’s racist analyses of Latino immigrants.

Rightwing media outlet Fox News played a central role in perpetuating the Latino threat narrative and reiterating messages of immigrant criminality. As a leader of cable news, Fox


News is a powerful influencer of public opinion. The notoriously conservative network boasts massive day and primetime viewership, besting other cable news networks for over fifteen years. Fox News averaged 1.72 million total day viewers in the first quarter of 2017, more than double that of second-place finisher CNN. The network’s viewership is overwhelmingly older and white, with a median primetime viewer age of sixty-eight and an audience that is ninety-two percent white. Fox News also engages in what López calls “incessant race-baiting.” In addition to racially charged attacks on former president Barack Obama—including the accusation that he is “a racist” and the insinuation that he may not be an American citizen—Fox News repeatedly links Islam to terrorism and immigrants to crime. The network “views immigration through the prism of illegality and crime,” with seventy-eight percent of immigration discussions focusing on border security, immigration enforcement, and crime. This alarmist broadcasting persists despite downward trends in both illegal border crossings, which have decreased by two-thirds since peaking in 2000, and crime in border states, playing to viewers’ feelings rather than facts.

The network’s depiction of immigrants as criminals likely plays a role in shaping public opinion on immigration. A 2017 study concluded that media exposure is significantly correlated with public opinion on illegal immigration. When controlling for education, income, ideology,

60 López, Dog Whistle Politics, 157.
and other demographic characteristics, the team of researchers found that individuals watching Fox News were significantly more likely than those watching CBS to oppose the legalization of undocumented immigrants. While partisan self-selection of media channels accounts for some differences in opinion on immigration, the content of regularly consumed news media likely influences political views as well. As the main source of election news for forty percent of Trump voters, dominating all other channels, Fox News undoubtedly influenced Trump voters’ perceptions of immigration. Many Trump supporters likely accepted the network’s narrative of immigrants as criminals.

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Trump’s presidential announcement and subsequent campaign capitalized on deeply, though perhaps unconsciously, held beliefs about Latino immigrants. If popular knowledge assumes—and media echoes—that Latino immigrants are inherently criminal, have pathologically high fertility rates, and challenge the so-called American way of life, then white

65 As concern surrounding the rising global population entered public dialogue in the 1960s and sparking an alarmist discourse about population growth, Latinas were quickly framed as hyper-fertile and major contributors to rapid population growth. These stereotypes were magnified by the post-1965 wave of immigration, and Latina fertility and reproduction became not only pathologized but also politicized. Yet empirical data comparing Latina and non-Latina women in Orange County, California repudiated widespread claims about Latina hyper-sexuality and hyper-fertility. The study found that white women began sexual relations on average one year before than Latinas; white women had a mean of 6.3 sexual partners compared to a mean of 2.5
Americans would tend to find increased Latino immigration threatening. White Americans overall view immigrants’ impact on U.S. society as slightly more negative than positive, and forty percent of whites believe that immigrants weaken the country. Throughout the campaign, Trump’s language played to these widely held fears. His rhetoric propagated a three-pronged narrative about “the Latino threat”: that Latino immigrants are violent criminals who rape and kill American citizens; that Latino immigrants are responsible for the influx of drugs into the country; and that Latinos represent an economic threat, stealing jobs from deserving (white) Americans and burdening public resources.

“Countless Americans are killed by illegal immigrants”: Latino violence and criminality

From the moment he declared his candidacy, Trump labeled Latino immigrants as violent criminals. This narrative formed the basis of his campaign, providing the justification for his anti-immigrant platform while supporting its colorblind façade. Linking a racial group to criminality is a time-honored dog whistle technique, most often used to appeal to anti-black racism—recall Wallace, Nixon, and Reagan’s calls for law and order and the racist undertones of Bush Sr.’s Willie Horton campaign ad. But like George W. Bush and many Tea Party enthusiasts, Trump adapted this rhetoric of criminality and applied it to Latino immigrants in addition to African Americans.

among Latinas; and Latinas on average had 1.84 children, not dramatically higher than the national average of 1.27. For more on the methodology of the data collection and the ability to extrapolate to a national scale, see Chavez, 81 - 91.  
Trump’s partnership with anti-immigration group the Remembrance Project, one of several right-wing radical groups that supported his candidacy, added weight to his claims of undocumented immigrants as threatening. Founded by Maria Espinoza, the non-profit organization “highlights the deaths of Americans by undocumented immigrants in order to advocate nativist immigration policies,” according to the Southern Poverty Law Center’s (SPLC) Hatewatch blog.\(^{67}\) The organization’s fearmongering and nativism are clear in its tagline: “Educating and raising awareness of the epidemic of killings of Americans by individuals who should not have been in the country in the first place.”\(^{68}\)

Just weeks after his presidential campaign announcement in which he infamously alleged that Mexican immigrants are drug dealers, criminals, and rapists, Trump privately met with Espinoza and several families affiliated with the Remembrance Project. In a scene that repeated itself throughout the campaign, Trump then joined several families in a news conference as they shared stories of their losses and photographs of their deceased loved ones.\(^{69}\) Trump spoke at a fundraising luncheon for the Remembrance Project—where tickets sold for as much as $10,000 per table—just two months before the election, praising the families’ courage while condemning Clinton’s immigration plan. Promising to curb undocumented immigration and protect American lives, Trump declared, “Your cause, and your stories, are ignored by our political establishment because they are determined to keep our border open at any cost. To them, your presence is just

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\(^{68}\) Ibid.

\(^{69}\) Kenneth P. Vogel, "‘We Were Used, Abused and Exploited’: Victims of Immigrant Crime Say They Were Taken Advantage of by Trump and a Nonprofit Group Backing Him," *Politico*, June 1, 2017.
too inconvenient.” He promised to “deliver justice” for American families in the form of heightened border security, swearing to “prevent the next thousand American parents from suffering the same fate as the people in the room today.”

Trump capitalized on the pain of heartbroken families to brand undocumented immigrants as threats to American lives. This narrative intensified throughout his campaign—in several later speeches, he recited a series of cases that illustrate the supposed violence of illegal immigrants. In an October 29, 2016 speech in Phoenix, Arizona, Trump condemned Clinton’s support of “open borders.” Trump argued that such policies place American citizens at risk, asserting, “Countless Americans are killed by illegal immigrants because our government won't do its job.” He deplored the deaths of Sergeant Brandon Mendoza and Grant Ronnebeck, two Arizonians killed by undocumented immigrants with criminal records.

For an Arizona audience, such tragedies likely hit close to home. Yet recitations of crimes committed by undocumented immigrants seemed to resonate with audiences in other regions of the country as well. Just the day before, Trump had given a similar speech at the Radisson Armory in Manchester, New Hampshire. “Countless Americans who have died in recent years would be alive today if not for the open border policies of this administration,” he declared. Taking his cue from the Remembrance Project, he then listed five murder victims—Sarah Root, Grant Ronnebeck, Kate Steinle, Earl Olander, and Marilyn Pharis—and blamed the Obama administration and current immigration policy for their deaths. “In California, a sixty-four-year-old Air Force veteran, Marilyn Pharis, was sexually assaulted and beaten to death with a hammer,” he explained. “Her killer had been arrested on multiple occasions but was never

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71 “Remarks at the Phoenix Convention Center in Phoenix, Arizona.” Ibid.
deported. People asked please, please deport him. This is what happened. This is a crime wave that never ends. I can tell you it's thousands of cases like this.”72 Trump gave no time or geographic parameters, so his claim that undocumented immigrants have killed thousands of Americans may well have been true. But the extent of violent criminality among undocumented immigrants that Trump portrayed was unsubstantiated. A growing body of research suggests that immigrants are less likely to engage in criminal behavior than the native-born population.73 Yet like Fox News, Trump depicted Latino immigrants as violent, criminal, and threatening to American lives, despite data indicating the opposite.

These recitations of violent crimes not only played to existing fears of criminal immigrants, but also offered evidence—however anecdotal—in favor of Trump’s anti-immigration policies. He was able to both condemn the “Obama-Clinton open borders policy” and make the case for his nativist stance on immigration, all while maintaining seemingly race-neutral language. By focusing on the violent behavior of so-called illegal immigrants rather than their race, Trump repeatedly sounded an anti-immigrant dog whistle—and was met with applause.

“They’re bringing drugs”: Latino immigration and the opioid crisis

Trump’s Latino threat narrative also blamed undocumented immigrants for the influx of drugs into the country. By linking illegal immigrants not only to violent crime but also drug trafficking, his message of exclusion resonated with audiences in states like Maine and New

72 “Remarks at Radisson Armory in Manchester, New Hampshire.” Ibid.
Hampshire that lie far from the nation’s southern border but struggle with widespread drug addiction. In the same Manchester, New Hampshire speech, Trump linked the state’s drug problem to Mexican immigrants. “And yes, on the border, we have no choice, we will build a wall and Mexico will pay for the wall. Got to stop the drugs,” he proclaimed to a cheering audience. “Got to stop the drugs. Remember my pledge to everybody but in particular to New Hampshire, because I know what you’re going through with the drugs.” With one of the highest overdose death rates in the country, New Hampshire has been referred to as “ground zero for opioids.”

Though much of the heroin in the United States does originate in Mexico and other South American countries, synthetic opioids like fentanyl—which is responsible for far more overdose deaths in New Hampshire than heroin—are thought to originate in China. Nonetheless, Trump framed undocumented immigrants as responsible for the American opioid epidemic in a striking political maneuver, thus justifying his exclusionary immigration policies and border wall.

Not only will a wall keep out the dangerous cartels and criminals, but will also keep out the drugs, remember New Hampshire, and the heroin poisoning our youth. Our youth is being poisoned before they get a chance…I promised the people of New Hampshire that we would stop drugs from pouring into your community and I guarantee you we will.

With opioid overdose rates rising steeply nationwide, devastating counties in the Northeast and Midwest in particular, Trump’s promise to keep drugs out of these communities was hugely appealing. He repeated this pledge across the campaign trail, from Arizona and Texas to Ohio.

and Pennsylvania. While speaking in Chester Township, Pennsylvania, for example, Trump blamed weak border security for the nation’s opioid epidemic. “We lose thousands of our fellow Americans every year to opioid use. I will stop the drug inflow from our borders. These drugs come over the border and make their way into our urban and rural communities, and into our suburbs. This must change.”

Again, Trump attached criminality to immigrants by blaming them for drug trafficking—though he avoided explicit mentions of immigrants or Latinos, his references to drugs crossing the border signaled that immigrants were to blame. Even though his language was devoid of any explicit mention of race, Trump nonetheless spread a highly racialized message about those responsible for the nation’s drug problem.

“They take your jobs”: the racialization of economic anxiety

To complete the Latino threat trifecta, Trump employed a time-honored dog whistle technique: disguising coded racial appeals in the language of economic anxiety. This practice has been common in immigration debate, as nativist sentiments often swell during economic downturns. Politicians and public commentators alike scapegoated Mexican immigrants following the economic recession of the mid-1970s, blaming them for “stealing American jobs” and burdening social services. Yet this scapegoating of undocumented immigrants isn’t limited to times of fiscal crisis. As the nation undergoes significant demographic shifts—the majority of population growth over the next five decades is projected to stem from new Asian and Hispanic immigration, and the nation will not have a single racial majority by 2055—nativist ideologies

77 “Remarks at a Rally at Sun Center Studios in Chester Township, Pennsylvania.” Ibid.
78 Ioanide, The Emotional Politics of Racism, 129.
promoting white supremacy are surging, despite relative economic prosperity. The population growth of nonwhites, and the threat that that growth poses to white hegemonic power, is instigating “widespread desires to stop immigration through border militarization, restrictive immigration policies, and the deportation of undocumented immigrants from within national borders.”

Trump exploited anxiety about this impending threat to white dominance by framing Latino immigrants as an economic threat. “Hillary Clinton supports open borders,” Trump incorrectly claimed while addressing a crowd in Dimondale, Michigan, “which means many things but it means people pouring in and they take your jobs. Whether you like it or don’t like it. They take your jobs.” Trump posited immigrants as the direct competition of supposedly more deserving American workers, while again capitalizing on the invasion imagery of the Latino threat narrative. He often invoked Mexico in these portrayals, lamenting the factories and jobs supposedly leaving the country in search of lower taxes and lower-wage labor in Mexico. While speaking in Phoenix, Arizona, Trump argued that undocumented immigrants prevented hardworking Americans from finding work. “While there are many illegal immigrants in our country who are good people, many, many, this doesn't change the fact that most illegal immigrants are lower skilled workers with less education, who compete directly against vulnerable American workers,” he explained, alleging that such undocumented workers unfairly burden social welfare programs and siphon public resources away from deserving citizens.

But these claims of economically threatening immigrants had little basis in fact. Research suggests that immigrants typically do not compete for jobs with native-born workers. Even

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80 Ioanide, The Emotional Politics of Racism, 130.
82 “Remarks on Immigration at the Phoenix Convention Center in Phoenix, Arizona.” Ibid.
among workers with no high school diploma, immigrant and native-born workers hold different low-skilled jobs. The top three occupations with the largest number of immigrants without a high school diploma are maids/housekeepers, cooks, and agricultural workers, while the top three occupations for native-born workers of the same educational attainment are cashiers, truck drivers, and janitors.\textsuperscript{83} Undocumented immigrants also pay billions of dollars in taxes each year while remaining ineligible for federal public benefit programs,\textsuperscript{84} suggesting that they contribute to social welfare programs more than they utilize them. Trump did not need his economic justifications for anti-immigrant policy to be backed up by empirical data, however. By drawing on the broadly held biases produced by the Latino threat narrative, Trump was able to exploit racial anxieties under the guise of legitimate economic concern.

Trump generated support for his nativist immigration policies by pushing the narrative, however fallacious, that Latino immigrants place an economic burden on native-born citizens. Using the seemingly race-neutral language of legality, employment, and public assistance, Trump sounded an anti-immigrant, anti-Latino dog whistle. Through these coded racial appeals, Trump justified proposed immigration restrictions with economic pragmatism and a desire to keep “state resources in the hands of deserving, hardworking taxpayers.”\textsuperscript{85} The strength of such nativist rhetoric was its ability to appeal not only to avowed white supremacists, but also to more moderate Americans. By conceptualizing immigration as an issue of economy and security, Trump enabled these voters to “identify and support exclusionary policies and outcomes based

\textsuperscript{85} Ioanide, The Emotional Politics of Racism, 131.
on their sense of economic loss and … moral righteousness of being law abiding and self-sufficient.\(^{86}\)

The racist undertones of Trump’s economic dog whistles were further obscured by the tendency of pundits to locate Trump’s broad appeal in the economic anxieties of working class whites, rather than the ideological investment that most white people have, whether consciously or not, in white supremacy. Though much post-election commentary focused on the disaffected working class voters who supposedly played a decisive role in Trump’s election, a wealth of research suggests that racism and racial resentment, not economic anxiety, drove Trump to victory. A survey of millennials emphasized the economic similarity of white Trump voters and white non-Trump voters—eighty-six percent of white millennial Trump voters were employed, a rate comparable to white non-Trump voters, and Trump voters were fourteen percent less likely to be low income than white voters who did not support Trump.\(^{87}\) Another study found that even after controlling for factors like partisanship and political ideology, voters’ measures of racism correlated much more closely with support for Trump than economic dissatisfaction.\(^{88}\) By condemning immigration in economic terms, Trump exploited racial animus while masking the white nationalist subtext of his rhetoric and policies.

\(^{86}\) Ibid., 131-32.
“Build that wall”: responding to the Latino threat

After establishing the threat posed by Latino immigrants and the urgent need for a solution, Trump offered just that. As he announced his campaign for president, Trump proposed his plan to halt the flow of “drugs,” “crime,” and “rapists” across the U.S.-Mexico border, which became a foundational promise of his campaign. “I would build a great wall, and nobody builds walls better than me, believe me, and I'll build them very inexpensively,” he announced with characteristic hubris, highlighting his often-cited real estate experience and business acumen. “I will build a great, great wall on our southern border. And I will have Mexico pay for that wall.”

After this first proclamation, Trump continuously repeated his promise to build “a big powerful wall” throughout his campaign. Repetition is one of Trump’s rhetorical strengths; he referenced the wall at least sixty-eight times across forty percent of the sampled speeches. Discussion of the border wall became part of Trump’s performative spectacle. The specific command to “build that wall” was emblematic of Trump’s campaign, morphing into a “cultural icon, rallying cry and, at times, punchline.” The particular phrase was used thirty-five times in the sampled speeches, always accompanied with a demand that Mexico fund the construction of the wall.

Trump frequently energized his crowds with call and response antiphony, leading the audience in chants of “build that wall.” While speaking to a particularly animated crowd in Springfield, Ohio, Trump’s promise to “build a wall” was met with applause. “Build that wall. Build that wall,” chanted the audience. “And who is going to pay for the wall?” asked Trump,

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90 Jenna Johnson, "’Build That Wall’ Has Taken on a Life of Its Own at Donald Trump’s Rallies — but He’s Still Serious," The Washington Post, February 12, 2016.
immediately gratified by loud cheering and shouts of “Mexico!”

Always the entertainer, Trump even gestured that he could not hear the audience’s replies, generating an even louder response (Figure 3).

![Figure 3. Trump dramatically listens for audience response after asking who will pay for the border wall (Jenna Johnson, “'Build That Wall' Has Taken on a Life of Its Own at Donald Trump's Rallies — but He's Still Serious,” The Washington Post, February 12, 2016.).](image-url)

Trump’s controversial wall is not unprecedented in American political discourse or physical reality. Unbeknownst to many Americans, a series of walls and fences totaling nearly 700 miles already exists along the country’s border with Mexico. Politicians have proposed heightening border security through physical barriers—Herman Cain advocated for an electric fence while campaigning for the Republican presidential nomination in 2011. Public opinion on the border wall has been mixed, with about forty-one percent of Americans in favor of the wall at the time of Trump’s election and thirty-six percent supporting the wall one year later. However, the wall was a starkly partisan issue, with nearly three-quarters of Republicans in favor of

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construction compared to just twelve percent of Democrats.\textsuperscript{93} Most strikingly, fully eighty-four percent of Trump supporters favored building a wall on the Mexican border, while just fourteen percent of Trump voters opposed the construction.\textsuperscript{94}

For Trump, the wall became the central rallying cry of his campaign. Yet the wall was also loaded with racist, nativist, and xenophobic sentiment. Though calls to build a border wall were ostensibly about national security, the implications remained racially fraught. Trump only demanded the construction of a wall on the southern border, largely ignoring the U.S.-Canada border, which is more twice as long. Given Canada’s predominantly white population, immigration across the U.S.-Canada border was not perceived as threatening white racial dominance. By only demanding the construction of a massive physical barrier between Mexico and the United States, Trump’s campaign framed Latino people as dangerously threatening to the American way of life. Through coded speech, Trump condemned the violence, criminality, and economic theft of Latino immigrants, calling for a border wall to limit their invasion. His racist dog whistles reverberated even within cries to “Build that wall.”

Anti-Muslim: “Radical Islamic Terrorism”

Latinos bore the brunt of Trump’s anti-immigrant rhetoric, but they were not the only group frequently and fervently targeted by his campaign. Trump’s anti-immigrant dog whistles extended to Muslims as well. Masking his anti-Muslim rhetoric in the language of safety and security, Trump called for a complete ban on Muslim immigration. He conflated Islam with


violent extremism—which he termed “Radical Islamic Terrorism”—and repeatedly suggested that Barack Obama had strong personal ties to Islam. Trump’s anti-Muslim rhetoric exploited Americans’ fear, harnessing discrimination toward the racialized group and encouraging voters to support Trump in the interest of national security.

The decade following the violent attacks of September 11, 2001 signified a split from the prevailing policy of maintaining a distinction between terrorism and Islam. A substantial faction of political and social conservatives conflated al-Qaeda and radical jihadist groups with the entire religion of Islam, broadly classifying Islam as a national security threat. This discourse not only sought to prevent violent attacks, but also warned of Islamization—the plan to topple the U.S. Constitution with sharia, or Islamic law. American Islamophobia hardly originated in the post-9/11 era—the 1970s oil crisis, the occupation of the American embassy in Iran, and the fall of the Soviet Union had introduced “a threatening Middle Eastern figure” to the American racial imagination, López explains. Orientalism and Arabophobia were blended into new forms of political Islamophobia, as Arabs were identified as the source of all things evil within Islam and Islam was imagined as inimical to the West. Following 9/11, however, animosities typically reserved for brown Arab Muslims were directed toward Muslims more broadly.

Orientalism and Islamophobia alone do not fully explain the expansion of anti-Muslim sentiment in the post-9/11 era, and scholars have increasingly relied on a racialization framework for understanding the widespread prejudice and discrimination against Muslims in the United States. Islam is one of the fastest growing religions in the United States, with Muslims projected

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96 López, Dog Whistle Politics, 117.
to replace Jews as the nation’s second-largest religious group after Christians by 2040. There were an estimated 3.45 million Muslims in the U.S. in 2017, comprising about 1.1 percent of the total population. Like Christians, Muslims are ethnically, racially, and phenotypically diverse. Yet Muslims in the United States are treated more like a racial minority than a sizeable religious group. The racialization framework explains this construction of the Muslim as a racial other through processes of cultural racism, which frames cultural, religious, or civilizational differences as natural and absolute. Despite racial and ethnic diversity, Muslims are nonetheless singled out and constructed as a “Muslim race.” The racialization of Islam then inscribes a “visible archetype of ‘Muslim’”—brown, bearded, veiled—onto Arab, Middle Eastern, and South Asian bodies, making them more vulnerable to both institutional and interpersonal racial violence.

This violence intensified after 9/11, with a rise in anti-Muslim hate crimes and increased racial profiling in government surveillance. And while some of the brazen targeting of Muslim and Arab American communities begun under the Bush presidency has slowed, policy grounded in anti-Muslim sentiment outlived that administration. “Private hate acts, policies of profiling, surveillance, entrapping and prosecuting Muslim Americans and immigrants…and spurious, vague and broad charges of ‘material support for terrorism’ continue regardless of the change in presidency,” academic Stephan Sheehi argues. Yet, in typical fashion, Trump distinguished

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100 Sheehi, Islamophobia, 34.
himself from other candidates with his readiness to embrace anti-Muslim policies that went far beyond what other politicians—even other Republicans—would endorse.\textsuperscript{101} The racialized opposition to Muslims became a central pillar of Trump’s policy platform, as he called for a halt of Muslim immigration, decried so-called radical Islamic terrorism, and reaped the rewards of a conspiracy he had helped sow: that President Obama was secretly a Muslim.

\textbf{“Immigration is a privilege”: bigotry as national security}

On December 2, 2015, fourteen people were killed and twenty-two others were injured in a shooting and attempted bombing in San Bernardino, California. After it emerged that the perpetrators, Syed Rizwan Farook and Tashfeen Malik, a married couple of Pakistani descent, had posted a pledge of allegiance to the leader of the Islamic State, the media and authorities focused on their religious and ethnic background. Trump too emphasized the pair’s ties to Islam, using the attack to further his anti-immigrant agenda by focusing on another racialized group: Muslims. Less than a week after the shootings, Trump called for “a total and complete shutdown of Muslims entering the United States,” arguing that Muslims held anti-American hatred “beyond comprehension.” His press release failed to explicitly distinguish between Muslims and terrorists, representing all Muslims as “people that believe only in Jihad, and have no sense of reason or respect for human life.”\textsuperscript{102}

Despite a significant Muslim-American population, Trump continued to represent Muslims and Islam as inimical to the United States. In an interview three months after calling for a ban on Muslim immigration, Trump claimed, “Islam hates us.” The next day, when pressed on

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\textsuperscript{102} Donald J. Trump Statement on Preventing Muslim Immigration (2015).\
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whether he meant all Muslims, Trump clarified: “I mean a lot of them.” After another mass shooting by a Muslim American, this time of Afghan descent, in June 2016, Trump’s anti-Muslim rhetoric heated up. He framed the shooting as proof that a Muslim immigration ban was necessary:

I called for a ban after San Bernardino, and was met with great scorn and anger but now, many are saying I was right to do so. …We cannot continue to allow thousands upon thousands of people to pour into our country, many of whom have the same thought process as this savage killer.

Again, Trump alleged that “many” Muslims are motivated to commit acts of terror by their religion. The language with which he described Muslim immigration is strikingly parallel to his talk about Latino immigrants—he portrayed both groups as threatening, invading forces, “pouring” into the country. “Immigration is a privilege,” Trump announced in the same speech. “How does this kind of immigration make our life better? How does this kind of immigration make our country better?”

Again, Trump distinguished between “good” and “bad” immigrants to superficially disguise the racist underpinnings of his policy platform. His demand for a complete ban of Muslim immigration came dangerously close to an explicit expression of anti-Muslim animus. But by rooting his proposal in issues of national security rather than race or religion, Trump justified his discriminatory policy to his supporters. His occasional admissions that not all Muslims are to blame and reassurances that the ban would only be temporary—until an effective Muslim immigration protocol was established—further stressed, however unconvincingly, that the ban was motivated by security concerns rather than bigotry.

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103 Greenberg, “Donald Trump and Islam.”
105 “Remarks at Saint Anselm College in Manchester, New Hampshire.” Ibid.
“Radical Islamic Terrorism” and the exploitation of fear

Even as he sought to camouflage the anti-Muslim animosity guiding his policy, Trump emphasized the supposed conflict between Islam and American values. According to Trump, Islam, or at least the radical interpretation of Islam, is inherently anti-American:

Many of the principles of Radical Islam are incompatible with Western values and institutions. Radical Islam is anti-woman, anti-gay and anti-American. I refuse to allow America to become a place where gay people, Christian people, and Jewish people, are the targets of persecution and intimidation by Radical Islamic preachers of hate and violence.\textsuperscript{106}

Here, Trump framed Muslim immigration not only as a potential source of violence, but also as a destructive force threatening American values and institutions. By placing the interests of women and members of the LGBTQ community, for example, as inherently at odds with Islam, Trump camouflaged his anti-Muslim prejudice with concern for other marginalized groups. The hypocrisy of Trump, who had bragged about sexually assaulting women and suggested that women who have abortions should be punished, lambasting the treatment of women in Islam is salient. Similarly, the notably anti-gay record of his running mate Mike Pence raised doubts about the sincerity of Trump’s concern for the LGBTQ community. Though Trump claimed to want to protect these marginalized groups, they primarily served as a vehicle for his anti-Muslim agenda and crusade against so-called radical Islam.

The term “radical Islam” is so commonplace in contemporary political discourse that it hardly triggers a reaction. Yet the term has not always carried the association with terrorism perpetrated by non-state actors or organizations that it does today.\textsuperscript{107} The term was first referenced in January 1979, when then-U.S. Senator Henry Martin Jackson (D-WA) described

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\textsuperscript{106} Ibid.
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Ayatollah Khomeini’s rhetoric as “radical Islam.” Over the next several years, “radical Islam” became associated with violence, but remained confined to Iran and Khomeini’s distinct religious ideology.\textsuperscript{108} The term soon expanded in both geography and meaning, describing a wide range of extremist ideologies connected to Islam. Today, “radical Islam” is employed as a justification for “state-sanctioned abuses to curb or contain its influence and potential power.”\textsuperscript{109}

The most effective language for discussing religious extremism, largely in regards to Islam, was hotly contested during the 2016 presidential election cycle. Trump and fellow presidential candidate Marco Rubio (R-FL), among others, criticized then-President Obama and former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton for avoiding the term “radical Islam.” Obama and Clinton argued that such language was stigmatizing and alienating, as it conflated the entire religion of Islam with the acts and ideologies of several terrorist organizations. The ideological divide concerning the use of the term is largely along partisan lines, mirroring American public opinion about Islam—seventy-three percent of Republicans, for example, hold unfavorable opinions about Islam, while fifty-two percent of Democrats view the religion positively. Tellingly, sixty-eight percent of Republicans believe that Islam is more likely to encourage violence among its followers than other religions.\textsuperscript{110}

Trump hardly shied away from the contested term “radical Islam,” using the term thirty-three times in the speeches that I analyzed. He spoke about “Radical Islamic Terrorism” even more frequently, using this exact phrase forty times across twenty-two of the speeches that I analyzed. Additionally, Trump referenced several variations—radical Islamic terror, radical Islamic terrorist, and radical Islamic terrorists—bringing the count to a stunning ninety-nine.

\textsuperscript{108} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{109} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{110} Ibid.
Trump didn’t limit his excoriation of so-called radical Islam to his campaign speeches, tweeting variations of the phrase at least forty times since November 2011.

Explicit mentions of “radical Islam” were not necessary to stimulate strong anti-Muslim reactions. Trump spoke often of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, commonly known as ISIS or ISIL, which became synonymous with Islamic terrorism. Trump mentioned ISIS in 181 tweets dating back to 2013. Even more potently, Trump used the word “ISIS” 188 times in the speeches that I analyzed, compared to 170 uses of “Obamacare,” 135 of “wall,” and 114 of “emails,” other common themes in the campaign. His continuous fearmongering stoked anti-Muslim sentiments, as he only discussed Islam in the context of violence and terror. In this sense, Trump’s references to ISIS and “radical Islam” functioned as racist dog whistles, prompting powerful responses while outwardly avoiding any racial reference.

**Capitalizing on conspiracy**

Trump first propelled himself into mainstream political discourse—and began to garner a fringe following—by propagating the conspiracy that then-President Barack Obama was not an American citizen. In a brazen display of what is now termed “birtherism,” Trump first began publicly questioning Obama’s birthplace in 2011. Over the next several years, he regularly took to Twitter to question the legitimacy of Obama’s birth certificate, college records, even religion and name. In August 2012, Trump claimed that “an extremely credible source” had informed him that Obama’s birth certificate was a fraud,

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*Figure 4. Donald Trump promotes “birther” conspiracy on Twitter (Donald J. Trump, Twitter Post, August 6, 2012, 3:23 PM.)*
through a tweet that earned nearly 19,000 likes and 24,000 retweets.\footnote{Donald J. Trump, Twitter Post, August 6, 2012, 3:23 PM. https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/232572505238433794.} Two months later, Trump promised to donate five million dollars to a charity of Obama’s choice if Obama would release his college and passport records. Though no credible evidence ever suggested that Obama’s citizenship was in question, Trump “nurtured the conspiracy like a poisonous flower…as he weighed his own run for the White House,” as López put it.\footnote{Michael Barbaro, "Donald Trump Clung to ‘Birther’ Lie for Years, and Still Isn’t Apologetic," The New York Times, Sept. 16 2016.} This repeated questioning of Obama’s nationality was not an expression of Trump’s individual idiosyncrasy, but rather a racist dog whistle. Though asking for a birth certificate is hardly a racial slur, it still carries a strong suggestion of racial foreignness.\footnote{Ian Haney López, "Campaign 2016 Vocabulary Lesson: ‘Strategic Racism’," Moyers & Company, last modified September 27, accessed. http://billumoyers.com/story/dog-whistle-politics-racism/.}

Given Obama’s blackness and African father, Trump’s birtherism indeed represents an anti-black dog whistle. But the context surrounding Trump’s propagation of the conspiracy theory suggests a convergence of anti-black racism and mainstream hatred of Muslims. Early in 2008, a conservative blogger claimed that Obama was 43.75 percent Arab, alleging that Obama not only counterfeited his citizenship, but also that he fabricated his African American heritage in order to garner black votes. Seized and spread by right-wing figures eager to defame Obama, these absurd claims took root, and McCain voters openly expressed their anger and fear that Obama was an Arab and a Muslim.\footnote{Sheehi, Islamophobia, 195.} By the time Trump began openly pushing the birther narrative, questions about Obama’s national and religious heritage abounded. Throughout 2011 and 2012, at the height of his birther conspiracy, Trump repeatedly probed Obama’s relationship with the Muslim Brotherhood and subtly intimated that Obama was a terrorist-sympatizer, if not
a terrorist or closet Muslim himself. Even then, Trump’s strongest supporters were people who thought Obama was a Muslim. Political scientist Michael Tesler found a strong relationship between thinking Obama was a Muslim and support for Trump in 2011—“respondents who knew that Obama was a Christian had an overwhelmingly negative opinion of Trump (-65) in 2011, but those who said Obama was a Muslim had a favorable rating of Trump (+20),” he explains. Even after controlling for partisan, ideological, and demographic factors, this relationship persisted. \(^{115}\) Tesler compared these results to 2015 data, which suggested a similarly strong relationship between voters rating Trump favorably and thinking that Obama is a Muslim. Trump played a prominent role in fueling birtherism long before he ran for president, and was able to capitalize on the conspiracy during his campaign.

**Anti-Black: Crime, Welfare, and the African American Other**

Dog whistle politics has historically exploited anti-black racism, from Wallace’s calls for segregation to Reagan’s denunciation of the “Chicago welfare queen.” Though contemporary politicians have adapted dog whistle techniques and applied strategic racism to other racial and religious groups, they continue to exploit anti-black prejudice as well. In addition to attacking Latino immigrants and Muslims, Trump manipulated broadly held, though often unaddressed, animosity towards black Americans. Trump drew on the abiding dog whistles frames of law and order and welfare recipients, while using subtle rhetorical strategies to portray African Americans as a uniform group—the “other.” His half-hearted attempts to draw black voters more served to strengthen his post-racial façade than reflected an investment in the conditions of

African Americans. And while dog whistle rhetoric reflects political strategy more than personal prejudice, Trump’s long history of anti-black racism suggests a predisposition to espouse the language of white supremacy.

“The law and order candidate”: on blackness, racism, and crime

Blackness and criminality have long been linked in the white American imagination. Following the Civil War, white Southerners scrambled to maintain the exploitable labor force that comprised the backbone of the Southern economy, turning to the criminal justice system to establish another form of social control. White officials passed discriminatory Black Codes and vagrancy laws soon after Emancipation, criminalizing poverty and unemployment and selectively prosecuting black people. Following the brief respite of Reconstruction, Jim Crow laws reintroduced *de jure* oppression and popularized the practice of convict leasing to exploit black labor. Yet even after Jim Crow had died, the racial caste system had not. The systematic criminalization of black people served to maintain their subjugated status, disenfranchise voters, and fill prisons with an exploitable, disproportionately black labor force. As civil rights scholar Michelle Alexander explains, “Proponents of racial hierarchy found they could install a new racial caste system without violating the law or the new limits of acceptable political discourse, by demanding ‘law and order’ rather than ‘segregation forever.’”116

Initially emerging in opposition to civil rights activism, “law and order” has proved an enduring dog whistle phrase. Building on the Republican Party’s tradition of urgent calls for law and order, Trump used the phrase frequently, mentioning “law and order” thirty times across fourteen different speeches. He boasted that he was “the law and order candidate” and a proud

Like Republican politicians past, Trump tended to use law and order when condemning civil rights activism—in this era, the movement against police brutality. Trump accepted the Republican presidential nomination on July 21, 2016. Earlier that month, the fatal police shootings of two unarmed black men—Philando Castile in Minnesota and Alton Sterling in Louisiana—added momentum to the previous two years of mainstream organizing against deadly police brutality and injustice. But a peaceful demonstration in Dallas turned violent when a heavily armed sniper fired at local police officers, killing five officers and wounding several more. That the shooter was black and expressed a desire to kill as many white policemen as possible fueled the narrative that protests against police brutality are criminal, dangerous, and anti-white. The father of one of the victims sued Black Lives Matter, an organization that intervenes in anti-black state and vigilante violence, calling the organization a “violent and revolutionary criminal gang” and claiming that it incited a “war on police” that led to his son’s death.  

When Trump took the stage at the Republican National Convention later that month, he exploited the Dallas tragedy to sound anti-black dog whistles. He theatrically described the nation as in crisis, condemning the “violence in our streets” and “the chaos in our communities.” “The attacks on our police,” Trump announced, “and the terrorism in our cities, threaten our very way of life.” After this very bleak portrayal of the state of the union, Trump called for “law and

order” and pledged to bring an end to this proliferation of violence. But this call for law and order illustrated that the violence Trump was concerned about was not the endemic police violence against predominantly black and brown citizens, but the shootings of law enforcement officers. His language of urban violence, crime, and terrorism reinforced racist tropes of black people as pathologically violent and criminal, reframing police officers as the real victims.

Even when Trump overtly expressed the desire to improve the lives of African-American citizens, he incorporated subtle insinuations about black criminality in his words. He claimed to want safety for black children and harnessed the language of civil rights, all while calling for heightened policing. A late October speech in Charlotte, North Carolina offered one example. “I want every poor African-American child to be able to walk down the street in peace,” Trump said, adding that safety is a civil right. “The problem is not the presence of police but the absence of police,” he continued, promising to invest in law enforcement operations to “remove the gang members, drug dealers, and criminal cartels from our neighborhoods.” He finished by condemning Clinton’s “war on police” and asserting the need to “work with our police, not against them.”

Despite appearing to value the well being of black Americans, Trump’s rhetoric still carried a racist weight. In addition to implying that only largely black communities experience high crime rates, Trump conflated blackness and poverty by lamenting the condition of the “poor African-American child.” Highlighting seemingly ubiquitous “gang members, drug dealers, and criminal cartels,” he characterized African Americans as violent and depraved, drawing on decades of racist stereotypes. Further, he dismissed valid concerns about police

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120 “Remarks at McGlohon Theatre at Spirit Square in Charlotte, North Carolina.” Ibid.
brutality as a “war on police,” indicating only a superficial concern about the wellbeing of black Americans.

Even when avoiding this kind of race language (which was rare in his campaign speeches) and the traditional dog whistle rhetoric of law and order, Trump managed to send a highly racialized message about the nature of crime and violence in the United States. This excerpt from a July 11, 2016 speech in Virginia Beach is representative of much of his discussion of crime:

We must discuss, as well, the ongoing catastrophe of crime in our inner cities. According to the Chicago Tribune, there has already been more than 2,000 shooting victims in Chicago this year alone. This epidemic of violence destroys lives, destroys communities, and destroys opportunity for young Americans. Violent crime has increased in cities across America. The New York Times described “a startling rise in murders,” in our major cities.121

In this excerpt, Trump never mentioned race in explicit terms, but his use of “inner cities” was telling. After the white flight of the 1950s and 1960s—the large-scale migration of white families from the cities to the suburbs in an effort to avoid incoming minorities—urban areas became associated with black Americans. The terms “inner city” and “urban” are now commonly used as code words for black and applied in a critical or derogatory manner, as with Trump’s reference to inner city crime.122 Though Trump’s language was colorblind on the surface, he nevertheless sounded a racist dog whistle about black criminality. His reference to Chicago sent a similar message. Over one-third of Chicago’s population is black, and the highly segregated city has suffered from corrupt policing, discriminatory housing, and a lack of investment in education and infrastructure. Ignoring the city’s history of racist policing and the link between

121 “Remarks in Virginia Beach, Virginia.” Ibid.
poverty and crime, Trump invoked Chicago only to reinforce notions of black criminality and lawlessness. “Obsessively name-dropping Chicago isn’t about achieving inner-city reform,” reporter Lincoln Blades asserted. “It’s Trump pretending to care about the conditions of black people for the purpose of reassuring his white voting base that he is taking serious steps toward ‘fixing’ the inherent criminality that so many of them believe persists among African-Americans.” 123

Trump referenced several other cities with large black populations when discussing violent crime. “Homicides are up nearly fifty percent in Washington, D.C. and more than sixty percent in Baltimore,” he warned crowds in several cities. Again, such comments were racist dog whistles, packaging insinuations about black violence in feigned concern for the well being of African Americans. Trump assured his supporters that their candidate was far from racist, while simultaneously reinforcing anti-black prejudices.

“People that have no incentive to work”: the new welfare queen

Trump’s campaign-trail exploitation of anti-black racism was not limited to issues of crime alone. The Republican candidate drew on the dog whistle tradition of linking black Americans not only to violent crime, but also to welfare. Opponents of liberal government have long vilified the so-called undeserving poor as abusing government support. This narrative has been strategically racialized since the New Deal era—when white Americans were led to believe that benefit programs were exclusively or largely supporting minority groups, opposition to welfare increased. “We have people that aren't working. We have people that have no incentive

123 Lincoln Anthony Blades, "Trump's Obsession with Chicago, Explained," Teen Vogue, July 6, 2017. Blades is a journalist and political commentator who has contributed to Rolling Stone, Ebony, JET Magazine, and Huffington Post, among others.
to work,” Trump explained while announcing his candidacy. “But they're going to have incentive to work, because the greatest social program is a job. And they'll be proud, and they'll love it, and they'll make much more than they would've ever made… I will be the greatest jobs president that God ever created.” Trump made no explicit mention of race, but still drew on the racialized notion of black Americans as the primary recipients of public assistance.

Recall Reagan’s exaggerated 1980 portrayal of the “Chicago welfare queen,” a woman who made her livelihood through cheating the welfare system. With an alleged yearly income of $150,000 through government checks, she had no incentive to work. Though not representative of most black women’s experiences—most continued to work as public assistance funds alone could not make ends meet—this narrative helped the neoliberal discourse against the social welfare state that emerged in the 1970s and 1980s gain traction. Claiming that the social safety net stagnates American development and rewards laziness, proponents of neoliberalism argued that public assistance allows recipients to remain childlike, unable “to grow out of their dependency on state-subsidized goods and into economically self-reliant adults.”

Though poor white Americans were shamed by this neoliberal ideology, black and Latina mothers receiving public assistance bore the brunt of such demonization and were broadly accused of being overly dependent on social welfare. And while whites were, and continue to be, the biggest beneficiaries of public assistance, the racialization of welfare dependence has persisted in the public imagination. In 2013, Democrats, black Americans, and Hispanic Americans were the most likely groups to report that “people like them” receive a lot of help from the government, while only seven percent of Tea Party members, ten percent of

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126 Ibid., 117-18.
Republicans, and twelve percent of white working-class Americans said that “people like them” receive a lot of help from the government.\textsuperscript{127} Trump himself seemed to believe the fiction that black Americans are the predominant, if not only, recipients of public assistance. When members of the Congressional black Caucus met with Trump shortly after his inauguration, one member expressed that potential welfare cuts would harm her constituents, “not all of whom are black.” Trump responded: “Really? Then what are they?”\textsuperscript{128} Thus, by referencing “people that have no incentive to work,” Trump is drawing on tropes of African Americans as lazy as well as a decades-long conflation of black Americans with welfare recipients. His seemingly nonracial language is loaded with racial prejudice.

\textbf{“The” African Americans: othering and tokenizing}

Trump certainly dehumanizes African Americans by portraying blackness as a monolithic experience of poverty and crime. But he also manages to “other” black Americans in a subtle, grammatical way. During the second presidential debate on October 9, 2016, Trump stressed his commitment to African Americans. In an unusual grammatical structure, Trump prefaced the minority group with the definite article “the.” “I’m going to help the African-Americans. I’m going to help the Latinos, Hispanics. I am going to help the inner cities. [Clinton has] done a terrible job for the African-Americans.” His atypical use of “the” did not go unnoticed, sparking frustrated and sarcastic comments under the trending Twitter hashtag #TheAfricanAmericans.

His use of the definite article was hardly an innocent peculiarity. One linguist examined the racist tone Trump’s seemingly harmless promises took on: “‘The’ makes the group seem like it’s a large, uniform mass, rather than a diverse group of individuals. This is the key to “othering”: treating people from another group as less human than one’s own group. The Nazis did it when they talked about die Juden (‘the Jews’).” Hardly, innocuous, Trump’s use of “the” functions as a racist dog whistle. “At the very least, he is demonstrating to [white voters] that he is keeping other groups distanced,” explains linguist Lynne Murphy. Trump’s use of the article signaled to white voters that “like them, he sees African-Americans and Latinos as something over there, in the inner cities, rather than as millions of individual Americans with as much invested in the future of this country as its white citizens.”

Even when Trump avoided the definite article “the,” he still had a penchant for portraying African Americans as a monolithic entity. He often blamed the Democratic Party in general, and Obama and Clinton in particular, for poverty, unemployment, and crime facing African American communities. Consider his speech to a Michigan crowd:

> Detroit tops the list of most dangerous cities in terms of violent crime, number one. This is the legacy of the democratic politicians who have run this city. This is the result of the policy agenda embraced by crooked Hillary Clinton… Look at how much African-American communities are suffering from Democratic control. To those I say the following, what do you have to lose by trying something new like Trump? Look, you're living in poverty. Your schools are no good. You have no jobs. 58% of your youth is unemployed. What the hell do you have to lose?

Trump painted black Americans as a uniform, impoverished, unemployed group. He believed the conditions of African Americans were so poor that they had nothing left to lose. And as Trump

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lamented the supposed depravity of black communities, he confirmed the biases that many of his white supporters held. In this sense, his sweeping generalizations of black communities again served as a sort of absolution for white supporters. They received the reassurance that their candidate cared about the (supposedly singular) plight of black Americans, and therefore that they could not possibly harbor racist sentiments themselves. Trump, on the other hand, earned increased white support, a method for plausibly denying any accusations of racism, and the votes of a handful of disaffected black citizens.

Even as he portrayed African Americans as a uniform, impoverished group, Trump tried to woo black voters. In particular, Trump sought the support of black celebrities and religious leaders, earning the endorsement of figures like boxing promoter Don King, boxer Mike Tyson, Detroit Bishop Wayne T. Jackson, and former presidential candidate Ben Carson. Trump received a warm welcome when he spoke at Bishop Jackson’s predominantly black church in September 2016; Carson, a Detroit native, also attended the service. “The African American faith community has been one of God’s greatest gifts to America,” Trump said, calling the black church “the conscience of our country” and praising its role in the Civil Rights Movement. He professed his pride to be a part of the Party of Lincoln and lambasted the political establishment that had, he claimed, failed African Americans. “We're all brothers and sisters and we're all created by the same God. We must love each other and support each other and we are in this all together,” Trump proclaimed, invoking the colorblind rhetoric of unity and sameness.

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But nowhere was Trump’s stated commitment to civil rights reflected in his policy platform. His 100-day “action plan” did not include any proposals specifically geared toward supporting African Americans or reducing racial disparity.\textsuperscript{133} Few black voters found Trump’s platform and its superficial nod to African Americans appealing, and only eight percent of African Americans voted for Trump.\textsuperscript{134} But perhaps drawing black voters was not his ultimate goal. Rather than reflecting a deep commitment to the improving the condition of black citizens, Trump’s alleged civil rights agenda and courtship of black celebrities and voters merely strengthened his ability to deflect accusations of racism. “Don King, and so many other African Americans who know me well and endorsed me, would not have done so if they thought I was a racist!” Trump tweeted in June 2016.\textsuperscript{135} Much like expressing his desire to have Oprah as a running mate, invoking Don King’s endorsement of his candidacy ostensibly refuted any allegations of racial prejudice. In this sense, Trump used his African American supporters as props to strengthen his post-racial performance. He even singled out a black voter in the crowd at a June 2016 campaign rally. “Look at my African American over here. Look at him!” Trump exclaimed.\textsuperscript{136} These black Americans and their proximity to Trump served as a buffer against any allegations that he was campaigning as a racial reactionary.

\textsuperscript{133} “Remarks on Proposals for the First 100 Days in Office at the Eisenhower Complex in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania.” Ibid.
\textsuperscript{135} Donald J. Trump, Twitter Post, June 11, 2016, 5:00 AM. https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/741600981251657728.
Nothing New: Trump’s history of anti-black racism

Given Trump’s track record of racial prejudice and the abundance of racial pandering in his campaign, the ability to deflect accusations of racism would prove crucial. Though my analysis of Trump’s coded racial rhetoric emphasizes political strategy rather than personal prejudice—and I make no claims about his individual beliefs—I must also note that Trump’s history of racist speech and action is not limited to his presidential campaign. In particular, Trump has a personal and professional history of anti-black racism. Arguing that Donald Trump “has been obsessed with race for the entire time he has been a public figure,” New York Times columnists David Leonhardt and Ian Philbrick compiled a “definitive list” of Trump’s racism.137 For example, the Justice Department sued Trump and his father twice in the 1970s for discriminatory rental practices; their real-estate firm tried to avoid renting apartments to blacks while giving preferential treatments to whites. He has made several publicly-known, disparaging comments about blacks that suggest a white supremacist ideology, allegedly saying that “laziness is a trait in blacks,” while also claiming that black people have an advantage in our country. He openly advocated for the death penalty for the Central Park Five, five young black and Latino teenagers wrongfully convicted of the rape of a white woman, and maintained that they were guilty long after DNA evidence had exonerated them.

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Trump’s campaign highlighted the enduring power of racial animosities in this era governed by the norm of racial equality. Though societal norms frown upon explicit expressions of racial prejudice, coded race talk enables politicians to exploit the implicit biases that many

Americans continue to hold. In making dog whistle racism a central feature of his campaign rhetoric, Trump stimulated racial prejudices and fears while still remaining within the general bounds of acceptable racial speech. Trump avoided outright racial appeals while still stoking anti-immigrant, anti-Muslim, and anti-black sentiments in his supporters. But why was this bigoted racial pandering so effective? In the next chapter, I explain the power of Trump’s dog whistles by spotlighting not the scapegoats of his racial entreaties, but those with whom they resonated: white Americans.
Chapter 3
Why the Whistle Worked:
White Nationalist Postracialism and White Identity Politics

Like many candidates before him, Trump manipulated racial animosity for political gain. His racial pandering was subtler at some times than at others, yet he strategically exploited racial resentment without appearing so bigoted as to alienate his supporters. Racial dog whistles were key to this challenging task, allowing Trump to deftly appeal to both the majority of white voters convinced that their political beliefs were anything but racially motivated, and the minority of white voters who staunchly supported white supremacy. This difficult dance of espousing white nationalist ideals while simultaneously denying any ideological investment in white supremacy exemplifies an emerging kind of racial politics based in white racial resentment, which anthropologist Jeff Maskovsky terms “white nationalist postracialism.” After outlining this ideology, I will analyze how Trump exploited the attitudes it embodies and incorporated them into his campaign. How did white nationalist postracialism manifest in Trump’s language and campaign platform? What rhetorical strategies enabled him to transmit white nationalist ideology with postracial pretext and contemporary appeal? Having examined these questions, I will evaluate the effectiveness of Trump’s jingoistic rhetoric by analyzing two groups: the avowed white nationalists and the purportedly post-racial—but still distinctly racially motivated—white voters.

White Nationalist Postracialism

Numerous public commentators likened Trump’s ascent to the presidency to nationalist movements like the United Kingdom’s “Brexit” and dubbed his election a “Rightist Revolution.” Pundits have described him as the “perfect populist” and compared his politics to the likes of Dixiecrat demagogue George Wallace, fascist dictator Benito Mussolini, and Nazi tyrant Adolf Hitler—all of whom also practiced racial pandering to gain power. In the morass of political commentary and scholarship attempting to describe Trump and define his elastic ideology, anthropologist Jeff Maskovsky stands out for his compelling analysis of “Trumpism” in the context of dog whistle politics. He locates Trump’s ideology within a new form of racial politics that he labels “white nationalist postracialism.” According to Maskovsky, white nationalist postracialism is “a paradoxical politics of twenty-first century white racial resentment whose proponents seek to do two contradictory things: to reclaim the nation for white Americans while also denying an ideological investment in white supremacy.” The Atlantic’s Adam Serwer calls this paradox “the Nationalist’s Delusion,” arguing not only that racism was the driving force behind Trump’s campaign, but also that Trump’s mass appeal lay in his ability to frame discriminatory policies as necessary while vigorously denying that his policies would

141 Maskovsky, “Toward the Anthropology of White Nationalist Postracialism,” 433.
discriminate and expressing outrage at any such accusation.\textsuperscript{142} This “delusion” comprises the backbone of white nationalist postracialism, the political ideology undergirding Trump’s campaign and the strategy guiding his racial dog whistles. In an exemplary—if not defining—display of white nationalist postracialism, Trump’s campaign embraced many of the ideological principles of white nationalism while still largely abiding by the post-racial norms of the period.

Though white nationalism in the United States consists of many small groups with varied ideologies, the movement is united by a belief in the alleged inferiority of nonwhites. Neo-Confederate, neo-Nazi, racist skinhead, Ku Klux Klan (KKK), and Christian Identity groups all fall beneath the umbrella of white nationalism. White nationalists seek to prevent demographic shifts that would result in the loss of a white majority and see ending non-white immigration as an urgent priority.\textsuperscript{143} They also wish to return to an America that predates the implementation of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, which are seen as heralding so-called “white genocide.”\textsuperscript{144} The Alternative Right or “alt-right” is a recent expression of white nationalism that rose to prominence in late 2015 alongside Trump’s campaign. The Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) defines the alt-right as “a set of far-right ideologies, groups and individuals whose core belief is that ‘white identity’ is under attack by multicultural forces using ‘political correctness’ and ‘social justice’ to undermine white people and ‘their’ civilization.”\textsuperscript{145} The white nationalist movement in general and the alt-right movement in particular rely heavily on online platforms to propagate their messages.

\textsuperscript{144} Ibid.
Trump’s coded public speaking about race became central to the white nationalist postracialism project, enabling him to project a white nationalist message couched in outwardly innocuous language that convinced his followers that neither he nor his supporters were racist. But while coded race talk is cornerstone, several oratorical strategies contributed to this “racism without racists” ideology. By coupling dog whistle racism with the denigration of political correctness, nostalgia for a bygone era, and his famed campaign slogan “Make America Great Again,” Trump built a politics of white nationalist postracialism, trumpeting a white nationalist ideology ostensibly devoid of any white supremacist agenda.

Crucial to this complex political project was Trump’s denunciation of political correctness, a relatively recent concept and somewhat ambiguous term. Few Americans had heard the phrase “politically correct” and its many variations before 1990, when New York Times reporter Richard Bernstein warned of rising intolerance and the suppression of debate in American universities.¹⁴⁶ Bernstein’s article was one of several that thrust the concept of political correctness into mainstream discourse—a phrase that had rarely appeared before 1990 was mentioned in U.S. magazines and newspapers over 700 times that year, quadrupling to over 2,800 two years later.¹⁴⁷ This was in the midst of a robust conservative campaign against perceived left leaning tendencies within the academy, which dated back to the mid-1970s but gained momentum in the late 1980s. Leaders of the movement, including University of Chicago

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professor Allan Bloom, political journal editor Roger Kimball, and political commentator and author Dinesh D’Souza, criticized affirmative action admissions policies, cultural and identity-based “studies departments,” and what they saw as the dominance of liberalism in American universities. But these “skirmishes over syllabuses,” as journalist Moira Weigel explains, were part of a larger political project that used political correctness to divide working class people and the Democrats who claimed to represent them. Political correctness became a term that conjured notions of a “liberal elite” censoring the speech and thoughts of “ordinary people,” while also rebranding racism in socially acceptable ways in the post-civil rights era.

By the time Trump began his presidential campaign, the political right had been critiquing the nebulous enemy of political correctness for twenty-five years. Yet Trump took the crusade against political correctness to new levels, drawing on the proven methods of the early 1990s and introducing his own strategies. The anti-political-correctness narrative served several two key functions in Trump’s campaign. First, Trump’s incessant attacks of political correctness, sometimes abbreviated PC, made room for overt expressions of racism, homophobia, and other identity-based claims that had receded in post-civil rights public discourse. After he had paved the way using coded racial appeals, Trump, through his political “incorrectness,” ushered in the normalization of more overt racism, shifting the boundaries of acceptable political and social media discourse. Drawing upon a classic element of anti-political-correctness, Trump implied that while his opponents were driven by a political agenda, he was guided by truth, simplicity, and common sense. Trump’s followers interpreted his embrace of so-called political incorrectness as the ability to speak plainly rather than the expression of racist beliefs—analyses

148 Ibid.
149 Ibid.
150 Ibid.
of popular examples of Trump’s anti-PC rhetoric and the resulting social media response show that many voters were willing to support Trump based solely on his politically incorrect “truth telling.”

By normalizing expressions of racism as unfiltered honesty, Trump both absolved his supporters of any responsibility for their beliefs—they were not racist, just candid—and built a defense against any accusations of racism from his critics.

Here lies a second key function of Trump’s political incorrectness. In rejecting political correctness, Trump framed himself and his supporters as victims of liberal censure rather than perpetrators of racist bigotry. Political incorrectness thus represented not only honesty and truth telling but also a courageous readiness to resist the alleged free-speech violations of the left. Trump “stoke[ed] white nationalist sentiments, mobilizing supporters to be outraged by PC-induced free speech violations and in defense of white cultural worlds that, in this formulation, are perceived to be under constant attack by liberal accusations of racial insensitivity,” Maskovsky writes.

This denigration of political correctness, moreover, reinforced the perceived divide between the “liberal elite” and the white working class, which was used to explain Trump’s success in many post-election analyses. One Trump supporter’s impression of his remarks on race highlighted the power of political incorrectness. “I think the other party likes to blow it out of proportion and kind of twist his words, but what he says is

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153 The dominant narrative describing Trump’s rapid ascent to the presidency held that Trump’s unorthodox style and anti-establishment platform energized a working-class base that propelled him to victory. Recent studies, however, suggested that while the working class played a role in Trump’s victory, the Trump electorate actually mirrored the standard Republican coalition. For more, see Michael Knigge, "No, Most Working-Class Americans Did Not Vote for Donald Trump," (June 29 2017), http://p.dw.com/p/2fcD6.
what he means, and it’s what a lot of us are thinking,” she told journalist Adam Serwer. She not only understood Trump’s racially charged rhetoric as an expression of honesty, but also blamed the Democratic Party for misrepresenting his words and falsely charging him with racism. Divergent understandings of political correctness highlight the much-noted contemporary ideological divide. Trump’s opponents recognized his politically incorrect speech as racist rhetoric, denouncing his language as barely-concealed bigotry. At the same time, Trump’s supporters viewed their candidate as a victim of unfair liberal critique, reinforcing a sense of authoritarian censorship by the “liberal elite.”

Trump established himself as the politically incorrect candidate early in the campaign. Following the June 12, 2016 mass shooting at Orlando’s Pulse nightclub, Trump addressed a crowd at Saint Anselm College in New Hampshire. Though the shooter was an American citizen born in New York, news coverage following the attack largely focused on his Afghan heritage, Islamic upbringing, and proclaimed allegiance to ISIL. Trump too seized the tragic shooting as an opportunity to discuss so-called radical Islamic terrorism and condemn the Obama administration’s response to violence. Trump indirectly blamed Obama and Clinton for the Pulse shooting, arguing that their political correctness prevented an adequately forceful response to terrorism. “[Obama and Clinton] have put political correctness above common sense, above your safety, and above all else. I refuse to be politically correct. I will do the right thing,” he declared. He denounced then-president Obama, distinguished himself from his opponent

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154 Serwer, “The Nationalist’s Delusion.”
155 On June 12, 2016, 29-year-old Omar Mateen killed 49 people and wounded 58 others in a terrorist attack inside Pulse, a gay nightclub in Orlando, Florida. The majority of the victims were Latinx and members of the LGBTQ+ community. At the time, the Pulse shooting was the deadliest mass shooting in U.S. history.
Clinton, and fueled anti-Muslim prejudice, all while justifying his political incorrectness as “the right thing” to do.

While accepting the presidential nomination at the Republican National Convention, Trump reinforced the notion of political incorrectness as truth telling. He disparaged political correctness and pledged to be honest with the American people. “It’s finally time for a straightforward assessment of the state of our nation,” Trump proclaimed, asserting his willingness to speak plainly and honestly while distancing himself from purportedly politically correct leaders of the past. “We cannot afford to be so politically correct anymore,” he intoned, adding that voters looking for “corporate spin,” “carefully crafted lies,” and “media myths” would find them at the Democratic convention. This not only reinforced the notion of a liberal elite at odds with working class voters, but also nodded to the narrative that Clinton was beholden to her corporate backers. Trump often described Clinton—who fully embraced super PACs and accepted many millions of dollars from a small group of elite donors—as the puppet of “special interests” intent on controlling the government and stripping the nation of its wealth. Differentiating himself from his opponent, Trump promised to “honor the American people with the truth, and nothing else.”

Trump equated political correctness with lies and myths, establishing himself as the trustworthy, transparent candidate and the Republican Party as the party of truth. In presenting political incorrectness as truth telling, Trump framed his racist dog whistles as objective fact and unfiltered honesty. This representation of political incorrectness as truth telling has normalized backstage racism in the public sphere, allowing whites to more

157 “Address Accepting the Presidential Nomination at the Republican National Convention in Cleveland, Ohio.” Ibid.
comfortably champion racist language and policy while denying racist motivation.\textsuperscript{158} Trump’s dismissal of political correctness is thus central to the politics of white nationalist postracialism.

The rejection of political correctness was linked to a broader politics of nostalgia that undergirded Trump’s campaign. The concept of nostalgia emerged in the seventeenth century, initially used by physicians to describe crippling homesickness, and developed into a term for sentimental remembrance of a past period by the early twentieth century.\textsuperscript{159} Nostalgia has proved a powerful political tool for Democrats and Republicans alike, from Bernie Sanders’ advocacy for the social protections of the New Deal to Ronald Reagan’s 1984 “Morning in America” campaign ad, which harnessed patriotic sentimentality to sell hope and prosperity in a time of uncertainty. Trump’s particular brand of nostalgia reflects a desire to return to the manufacturing economy of the mid-twentieth century, an ostensible zenith of American industrial production in fact fraught with racist and sexist hierarchies.\textsuperscript{160} The end of World War II ushered in an era of economic growth—industry flourished, the nation’s GDP swelled, and the middle class expanded. Legislation like the Servicemen’s Readjustment Act of 1944—nicknamed the GI Bill—was critical, making education and homeownership accessible for millions of veterans. Yet not all Americans had equal opportunities to participate in this period of prosperity. In the case of the GI Bill, inequitable mortgage loans, segregated educational institutions, and discrimination in job placement prevented black Americans from fully accessing the benefits of the bill. Dishonorable and general discharges disproportionately prevented black veterans from qualifying for the GI Bill, while low educational attainment among African American servicemen left them ill-equipped to pursue secondary education. Black servicemen were

\textsuperscript{158} Shafer, “Donald Trump’s ‘Political Incorrectness,’” 8.
\textsuperscript{159} Samuel Goldman, "The Legitimacy of Nostalgia," Perspectives on Political Science 45, no. 4 (2016/10/01 2016), http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10457097.2016.1206787.
\textsuperscript{160} Maskovsky, “Toward the Anthropology of White Nationalist Postracialism,” 434.
primarily referred to unskilled jobs, even if they had more advanced skills, and were often denied the low-interest mortgages ostensibly guaranteed to veterans of all races.\textsuperscript{161} Women were largely excluded from post-war economic prosperity as well. Only one third of women participated in the labor force in 1950, and women were confined to specific service jobs that offered lower wages than other industries.\textsuperscript{162} American postwar prosperity was therefore primarily concentrated among, though not entirely exclusive to, white men.

Trump’s promises to usher in a new “industrial revolution” were therefore reminiscent of a period that favored white male workers. He advocated for the deregulation of industry, decried free trade, and emphasized Rust Belt manufacturing jobs. He frequently touted the example of the Carrier Corporation’s Indianapolis factory, which had laid off thousands of workers to build a new plant in Mexico. Trump promised to prevent such outsourcing, campaigning on stopping “the jobs from leaving America.”\textsuperscript{163} Soon after the election Trump helped negotiate a deal to keep the manufacturing plant open, again praising himself as the savior of jobs. This emphasis on the industrial economy, coupled with Trump’s support for Social Security and Medicare (while he lambasted other social welfare spending), defined white male workers as the righteous majority Trump supposedly represented.\textsuperscript{164}

Nostalgia is a familiar theme in American politics, but is particularly common in the Republican Party. Journalists have noted the party’s fixation on the word “restore,” citing examples ranging from Nixon’s 1976 campaign speech “To Restore America” to Marco Rubio’s

\textsuperscript{163} “Remarks at the Bayfront Park Amphitheater in Miami, Florida.” Retrieved from Peters and Woolley, \textit{2016 Presidential Election Speeches and Remarks}.
\textsuperscript{164} Maskovsky, “Toward the Anthropology of White Nationalist Postracialism,” 434.
newest book, *American Dreams: Restoring Economic Opportunity for Everyone.* Yet conservatives keep their nostalgia vague, rarely specifying the particular era they long to restore. For most marginalized communities—women, African Americans, and LGBTQ individuals, for example—romanticizing any past era means idealizing a time in which they enjoyed fewer rights, protections, and opportunities. But for older, heterosexual, white, male voters, promises to restore the past carry the subtle implication of bringing back “the good old days” during which their hegemony went unchallenged. By vaguely referencing the past, but rarely referencing the specific “golden” era they wish to restore, Republican politicians can appeal to the nostalgia of white—and often male—voters without overtly alienating others.

Trump’s particular politics of nostalgia was most clearly expressed through his infamous campaign slogan, Make America Great Again. Plastered across yard signs and red baseball caps—and shortened to the social media hashtag #MAGA, which was the second most popular political hashtag in 2017—Trump’s campaign slogan became a cultural icon and rallying cry. Trump referenced the phrase “Make America Great Again” and several variations well over 100 times across sixty-five speeches. He frequently exchanged “great” for other adjectives—strong, safe, rich, respected, prosperous, and proud. Trump also referenced the phrase and hashtag well

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167 White men are not the only voters supporting Republican candidates. A majority of white women have voted Republican for the better part of the last thirty years, with fifty-two percent of white women supporting Trump, according to CNN exit polls. Over sixty-percent of white women without a college degree backed Trump, along with more than four in ten college-educated white women. While many factors determine voting behavior among white women, I argue that white supremacy is principal—in other words, race supplants gender. Data support this statement, as the gap between black and white voters in modern elections is typically four to five times larger than the gap between male and female voters. For a developed hypothesis on white women’s support for Trump, see Julie Kohler, "The Reasons Why White Women Vote Republican—and What to Do About It," *The Nation*, February 1, 2018.
over 500 times on his infamous Twitter account, @realDonaldTrump, dating back to late 2011. When a Twitter user expressed a desire for Trump to be president two years later, Trump responded, “Well, I would make America great again.”

The phrase is laden with nostalgia, conjuring a time when America was more powerful and prosperous. But, as is the Republican tradition, Trump never defined when exactly America was great. His supporters were equally divided on the matter. Late-night political and news satire television program The Daily Show aired a segment in which reporters asked Republican National Convention attendees, “When was America last great?” While the most extreme responses were certainly selected for satirical effect, the answers are nonetheless telling. One man chose 1913, randomly citing the passage of the Seventeenth Amendment, which established the popular election of United States Senators. Another selected the period immediately following World War II. Two middle-aged white women responded that America was great when it was founded. When pushed by the reporter, one followed up: “Except for the slavery stuff, you know?”

Though they differed in their assessment of when the nation was last great, these voters remained nostalgic for a period in which people of color would have enjoyed fewer rights and privileges.

More empirical measures showed similar inconsistency when it came to defining America’s golden age. When asked on an online survey to select America’s greatest year, Trump supporters offered a wide range of answers with no clear pattern. The year 2000 was the most popular choice, but 1955, 1960, 1970, and 1985 were also popular. Their answers were similar to Republican voters overall, who justified their choice with explanations including “Reagan.”

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169 When Was America Great?, (2016), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uVQvWwHM5kM.
“Economy was booming,” and “Strong family values.” Democrats, in contrast, tended to pick a year in the 1990s or since 2000—many chose 2016. Their explanations included “We’re getting better” and “Improving social justice.” While Republican voters in general and Trump supporters specifically lacked a consensus on the year America reached peak greatness, nostalgia for the past was a consistent theme. In 2016, Republican and Republican-leaning voters were more than twice as likely as Democratic voters to be nostalgic, with two-thirds saying that life in this country had gotten worse for “people like them” over the past fifty years. A striking seventy-five percent of voters who supported Trump for the Republican presidential nomination reported that life for people like them had gotten worse. This overwhelming sentiment among Trump voters that “people like them” were being disenfranchised hints at the nationalist subtext within Trump’s campaign slogan. CNN contributor Marc Lamont Hill argued that the phrase was not merely an expression of American populism, but a white nationalist message. “When you say ‘Make America great again’ and you conjure up colonial nostalgia,” Hill said, “you conjure up moments in history where black people and brown people and Jewish people are disenfranchised and marginalized.” A campaign that promised to restore America’s greatest era—whenever that may have been—was, to many, implicitly promising to restore white hegemonic power and traditional hierarchies of race, gender, and religion.

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171 *Campaign Exposes Fissures over Issues, Values, and How Life Has Changed in the U.S.*, 1.
“Wink Wink Wink”: Coded Appeals to White Nationalism

That Trump would lead a resurgence of white nationalism in contemporary American electoral politics would have seemed unlikely to many avowed white supremacists just a few years earlier. In fact, even after Trump’s years of questioning President Barack Obama’s birthplace, white nationalist groups despised him, attacking his associations with “non-whites” in his entertainment work and alleging his secret Judaism or intimate ties to Jewish interests. Yet slowly, white nationalist communities across the nation and the web began to embrace Trump and his anti-immigration platform. As support for Trump grew, white nationalists started to pick up on coded appeals from Trump, dubbed “wink wink wink” communications. Journalist J.M. Berger tracked online content across white nationalist platforms populated by neo-Nazis, Klansmen, and other organized white supremacists. He traced Trump’s two-year rise to favor in these communities, identifying several key moments that solidified support for Trump among racist ideologues. Trump retweeted (or shared) a wildly inaccurate graphic that exaggerated black crime (Figure 5), followed by two separate retweets of content from the racist Twitter account @WhiteGenocideTM. But while Trump and his campaign team clumsily denied these incidents

as harmless mistakes, the online community of white nationalists understood them differently. “Obviously, most people will be like ‘obvious accident, no harm done,’” wrote Andrew Anglin, the first prominent alt-right activist to endorse Trump. “Meanwhile, we here at [white nationalist platform] the Daily Stormer will be all like ‘wink wink wink wink wink.’” Whether or not Trump’s campaign actively sought white nationalist support, the community interpreted these and other racist messages as old-school dog whistling.

Leaders of the white nationalist movement increasingly expressed support for Trump. In February 2016, Trump won the endorsement of David Duke, the former grand wizard of the Ku Klux Klan and arguably the most prominent white nationalist leader in the United States. “You have an absolute obligation to vote for Donald Trump, and to vote against Cruz and Rubio,” Duke proclaimed on his online radio program. “Trump is the only chance we really have right now to make a dent, plus Trump is waking up our people and energizing our people across America.” Duke had political experience himself—he captured a shocking forty-three percent of the vote (and fifty-five percent of the white vote) when in 1990 he challenged incumbent U.S. Senator J. Bennett Johnson in Louisiana. Just three days after Duke’s near-victory, Trump discussed Duke’s politics in an interview with CNN’s Larry King. Citing anger as a driving factor for strong Duke support, Trump predicted that Duke, if he ran for president, would attract voters otherwise supporting incumbent George H.W. Bush. Nearly twenty-five years before launching his own presidential campaign, Trump showed his hand in his understanding of the effectiveness of white nationalist appeals to the Republican base. With this comprehensive grasp of white nationalism as political strategy guiding his presidential run years later, Trump

174 Ibid.
175 Ibid.
176 Serwer, “The Nationalist’s Delusion.”
espoused white nationalist ideals while holding avowed white supremacists at arm’s length. When asked by CNN’s Jake Tapper to comment on Duke’s endorsement in 2016, Trump feigned ignorance. “I don’t know anything about David Duke. I don’t know anything about what you’re even talking about with white supremacy or white supremacists,” he scoffed, refusing to condemn groups like the Ku Klux Klan without additional research. Trump’s professed unfamiliarity with white supremacist circles is unconvincing, given that his own father may have had ties to the Klan—Fred C. Trump was arrested in 1927 when 1,000 Klansmen rioted in Jamaica, Queens. Trump’s absurd 2016 claim to be unfamiliar with the KKK was met with an almost immediate backlash, and he soon disavowed Duke. But for white nationalists across the country, his hesitation sounded a dog whistle heard loud and clear.

This loaded episode, coupled with Duke’s endorsement, spurred other white nationalist leaders to express their support for Trump. By September 2016, Trump had received praise and backing from the head of the American Nazi Party, three former Ku Klux Klansmen, and at least fifteen individuals affiliated with organizations classified as hate groups by the SPLC. These include people like Jared Taylor of the American Renaissance, which propagates pseudo-scientific research in an attempt to show that black people are inferior to whites, and William Johnson of the American Freedom Party, a self-proclaimed nationalist party that “represents the interests and issues of European-Americans.” Alt-right leader Richard Spencer praised the racist subtexts of Trump’s platform and believed that Trump was signaling white nationalist dog whistles: “There are these moments with Trump where he’s half-saying something, he’s half-

indicating a greater truth.” Avowed white nationalists continued to praise Trump. He renounced none of them.

Trump recruited the chairman of Breitbart News to lead his campaign in August 2016, dispelling any lingering doubts about his courtship of the radical right. At age sixty-three Stephen Bannon joined the Trump Campaign with no formal political experience. Bannon became a purveyor of conservative media in the early 2000s after a mélange of educational and professional pursuits, connecting with late Breitbart founder Andrew Breitbart and taking over the business after his death in 2012. With Bannon chairing Breitbart, the website became, in Bannon’s own words, “the platform for the alt-right.” It’s no wonder that white nationalists and other members of the alt-right were drawn to the site—it has published inflammatory and sometimes factually inaccurate articles targeting women, immigrants, minorities, queer people, and overweight people. With Bannon chairing Trump’s campaign, these fringe editorials helped shape a mainstream political platform. “Many of Trump’s positions in the campaign were taken from the Breitbart articles that [Bannon] had printed out for him,” writes journalist Michael Wolff, who interviewed Trump and most members of his senior staff. Trump and Bannon became close, as Bannon fed Trump’s proclivity for conspiracy theories and rejection of

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184 Wolff, Fire and Fury, 59.
all things politically correct—“both could be gratuitously foul-mouthed, viciously cutting to
their enemies and unapologetically politically incorrect,” wrote two *New York Times*
investigators.185 Bannon’s role as CEO of Trump’s campaign not only pushed Trump’s platform
sharply to the right, but also convinced white nationalists and other members of the radical right
to rally behind Trump.

Broad white nationalist support for Trump represented an unprecedented mobilization of
the otherwise fractured movement behind a mainstream political candidate. The purportedly
race-less façade of Trump’s politics of white nationalist postracialism didn’t alienate overt white
nationalists. Rather, they understood his racist messages—some more subtle than others—as a
call to arms. “Even as Trump supporters argue that the candidate isn’t a racist, when it comes to
the white-power movement itself, there’s no question how they see it,” Berger wrote. “More than
in any other modern presidential campaign, they believe they’re receiving clear and frequent
signals of support.”186

Empirical data also highlighted white nationalist support for Trump. In the month leading
up to the 2016 election, political scientist Ashley E. Jardina studied the relationship between
white identity and political inclination. She asked a representative sample of white American
adults to rate their feelings toward the KKK and toward Trump on a 0 to 100 scale. Eleven
percent rated the KKK at fifty degrees or higher, suggesting that about one in ten Americans
views the KKK in a positive light. Predictably, among white American adults Jardina found a
correlation between positive views of the KKK and supporting Trump’s presidential bid. Even

185 Jeremy W. Peters and Maggie Haberman, "Bannon Was Set for a Graceful Exit. Then Came
Charlottesville.," *The New York Times*, August 20, 2017,
186 Berger, “How White Nationalists Learned to Love Donald Trump.”

An early 2016 poll of Republican voters in South Carolina offered similar results. Sixteen percent of Trump supporters agreed with the statement “Whites are a superior race,” compared to ten percent of Republican primary voters overall. That is, one in six Trump supporters were comfortable telling pollsters that they believed in white superiority. An additional fourteen percent of Trump voters failed to oppose white supremacy, answering that they were not sure whether or not whites were a superior race. Further, when asked about Civil War support, nearly forty percent of Trump voters responded that they wished the South had won.\footnote{Trump, \textit{Clinton Continue to Lead in Sc} (Raleigh, NC: Public Policy Polling, 2016), \url{https://www.publicpolicypolling.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/PPP_Release_SC_21616.pdf}.} As a southern state with a legacy of slavery and segregation, South Carolina may not be representative of the nation as a whole. South Carolina demonstrated some of the most ardent resistance to the Union and fought vigorously to continue slavery. The Confederate flag flew at the South Carolina Statehouse until its controversial removal in 2015. But neo-Confederate ideology is hardly exclusive to the Palmetto State. Nationwide data from the Pew Research Center suggests that just thirty-eight percent of Americans believe that the Civil War was mainly caused by slavery, with thirty-six percent approving of public officials praising Confederate leaders. One in ten Americans reported having a positive reaction to the display of the Confederate flag, but an additional fifty-eight percent of Americans felt neutral about the flag, having neither a positive
nor a negative reaction. Given such widespread investment in neo-Confederate philosophy, it
would be negligent to dismiss the South Carolina data outright. Whether or not we can
extrapolate to the nation as a whole, the data suggests an alarming inclination toward neo-
Confederate and white supremacist ideology among Trump supporters.

The increase in hate crimes and lesser aggressions immediately following Trump’s
election further confirmed Trump’s role in a white nationalist resurgence. The Southern Poverty
Law Center (SPLC), which monitors hate groups and other extremists throughout the United
States, reported 1,094 bias incidents in the first thirty-four days after Trump’s election, with the
highest count on November 9, 2016, right after Election Day. Anti-immigrant incidents (315)
were the most reported, followed by anti-black (221), anti-Muslim (112), and anti-LGBT (109).
More than a third of incidents directly referenced Donald Trump, his campaign slogan, or his
infamous remarks about sexual assault. Mark Potok of the SPLC reported that the number of
hate groups operating in the U.S. rose from 892 in 2015 to 917 in 2016, representing a near-
historic high. Because these numbers only reflect organized extremist groups, as opposed to
the cyber communities increasingly populated by white nationalists, they certainly underestimate
the extent of hate in the United States. Seizing Trump’s campaign as an opportunity to further
their radical agenda, white nationalists rallied behind the candidate and became increasingly
prominent in the public sphere. “It is often said that Trump has no real ideology, which is not

\[\text{189} \text{ Civil War at 150: Still Relevant, Still Divisive (Washington, D.C.: Pew Research Center,}
\text{190 "Update: 1,094 Bias-Related Incidents in the Month Following the Election," Hatewatch,}
\text{December 16, 2016, accessed 2018, https://www.splcenter.org/hatewatch/2016/12/16/update-
1094-bias-related-incidents-month-following-election.}
\text{191 Mark Potok, "The Year in Hate and Extremism," Intelligence Report, February 15, 2017.}\]
true,” wrote author and journalist Ta-Nehisi Coates. “His ideology is white supremacy, in all its
truculent and sanctimonious power.”¹⁹²

White Identity Politics and the Post-Racial Illusion

Though Trump’s campaign certainly propelled the radical right to the forefront of American media and politics, the majority of his supporters could not be counted in the ranks of avowed white supremacists. Groups like the Ku Klux Klan remain acutely unpopular in the contemporary United States. In political scientist Ashley Jardina’s survey, white respondents rated the KKK at an average of thirteen points (on a 100-point scale), with nearly three-fourths of whites rating the KKK at ten points or below. Most white Americans do not affiliate with groups like the KKK.¹⁹³ Nonetheless, Trump’s inflammatory rhetoric was still appealing to the nearly sixty-three million Americans who voted for him,¹⁹⁴ only a fraction of whom would claim to be racist or to openly support alt-right groups. Even those who might have been turned off by Trump’s racism “held their noses and voted,” suggesting that, for many white voters, Trump’s appeal was more compelling than his bigotry was off-putting. By couching his appeals in coded dog whistles, Trump managed to agitate racial prejudice without alienating his more racially moderate supporters—that is, those who shy away from organized white supremacy. Trump’s dog whistles rang clearly in the register of avowed white nationalists like David Duke and Richard Spencer, but simultaneously exploited implicit biases and stimulated strong, if

¹⁹³ Jardina, “White Identity Politics Isn’t Just About White Supremacy.”
unconscious, reactions in the majority of white voters who believe their political beliefs to be anything but racially motivated.

But how did Trump’s dog whistle messaging resonate with so many white voters who vehemently denied an ideological investment in white supremacy? Widespread investment in white identity politics offers one answer. Identity politics emerged as both a term in political discourse and a mode of organizing in the late twentieth century, as large-scale political movements developed in an effort to combat harms done to particular social groups. Central to this organizing was the notion that some social groups are oppressed; that is, membership to a particular group or possession of a certain identity carries a particular vulnerability. Though identity politics has broadened to include any political position based on the interests of a particular social group, white identity politics nonetheless rests on the notion that one’s identity as a white person makes one susceptible to oppression, stigmatization, or other marginalization.

In the contemporary United States, the idea that white people are particularly subject to oppression may seem absurd to some. White Americans consistently outpace racial minorities, especially blacks and Hispanics, in nearly all statistical measures of success. A new study by researchers at Stanford, Harvard, and the Census Bureau highlighted the primacy of race in

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196 To further the idea that white people are a marginalized group, leaders of the alt-right have embraced the language of identity politics. According the Breitbart’s “Guide to the Alt-Right,” the alt-right is comprised of “mostly white, mostly male middle-American radicals, who are unapologetically embracing a new identity politics that prioritises [sic] the interests of their own demographic.” Allum Bokhari and Milo Yiannopoulos, "An Establishment Conservative’s Guide to the Alt-Right," (March 29 2016), accessed April 10, 2018, http://www.breitbart.com/tech/2016/03/29/an-establishment-conservatives-guide-to-the-alt-right/.
determining economic outcomes, finding that black boys earn less in adulthood than white boys who come from similar socioeconomic backgrounds.\textsuperscript{197} The racial wealth gap between whites and nonwhites has been consistently widening since 1963—white family wealth was seven times greater than black family wealth and five times greater than Hispanic family wealth in 2016.\textsuperscript{198} People of color face increased barriers in accessing healthcare, have lower utilization of care, and fare worse on the majority of health outcomes than whites.\textsuperscript{199} Yet there are those who still believe that white people face particular hardship. As journalist and academic Thomas Edsall explains, historical and cultural developments like mass immigration, the civil rights and women’s rights movements, the election and re-election of a black president, and the approaching end of white majority status have provoked a furious reaction among many white Americans, priming the political climate for the growth of white identity politics.\textsuperscript{200} Some of these developments are more misconception than reality—while the absolute number of immigrants has risen sharply since 1970, immigrants as a percentage of the U.S. population has increased only slightly. But even a perceived threat can fuel the rise of identity politics.

According to Ashley Jardina:

\begin{quote}
When the dominant status of whites relative to racial and ethnic minorities is secure and unchallenged, white identity likely remains dormant. When whites perceive their group’s
\end{quote}

\begin{flushright}
\end{flushright}
dominant status is threatened or their group is unfairly disadvantaged, however, their racial identity may become salient and politically relevant.\textsuperscript{201}

Changing demographics certainly contribute to a sense of imminent loss of white dominance. The U.S. Census Bureau has predicted that racial and ethnic minorities will make up fifty-six percent of the total population by 2060, compared to thirty-eight percent in 2014. Additionally, the foreign-born population is expected to reach nearly nineteen percent, up from thirteen percent in 2014.\textsuperscript{202} Research has also suggested that racial progress is psychologically threatening to whites—perceived changes to the racial status quo can damage white people’s self-worth. But by seeing themselves as victims of racial bias or discrimination, whites can buffer their self-worth, mitigating the psychological threat posed by racial progress.\textsuperscript{203} White identity politics is fueled by fear. Demographic shifts and racial progress, or the perception of such changes, contribute to a collective sense of white marginalization, the fear of a loss of dominant status, and the accompanying rise of white identity politics.

Another explanation for the rise of white identity politics lies in the glaring differences between how white Americans and their neighbors of color understand race. Blacks and whites hold widely discrepant views on race and ethnicity, according to new data from the non-partisan Pew Research Center. While nearly ninety percent of blacks believe that the country needs to continue making changes in order for blacks to have rights equal to those of whites, just half of

\textsuperscript{201} Ibid.
whites hold this view. Blacks are about twice as likely as whites to say that too little attention is paid to racial issues in the United States, while about four in ten whites say there is too much focus on race. Clearly, white Americans are far more likely to minimize the importance of race in the contemporary United States.

Divergent attitudes toward race are even more pronounced along partisan lines. White Republicans are three times as likely to believe that too much attention is paid to race these days as white Democrats. About eight in ten white Democrats believe that the country needs to continue making changes to achieve racial equity, yet only thirty-six percent of white Republicans agree; more than half of white Republicans believe that the country has already made the changes necessary for blacks to have equal rights with whites. Sixty-three percent of white Republicans believe that Barack Obama’s presidency made race relations worse, compared to a mere five percent of white Democrats. Perhaps most importantly, half of white Democrats recognize that their race has made it easier for them to succeed in life, while just seventeen percent of white Republicans agree. White Republicans decreasingly believe that black Americans and other people of color are the victims of race-based discrimination, and few recognize the power of their white privilege. Data from an early 2017 survey by the Public Religion Research Institute tell a similar story. Asked whether “there is a lot of discrimination” against various groups, forty-three percent of Republicans said that there is a lot of discrimination against whites, compared to just twenty-seven percent of Republicans who said

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204 Kim Parker, Juliana Horowitz, and Brian Mahl, *On Views of Race and Inequality, Blacks and Whites Are Worlds Apart* (Pew Research Center, 2016), 4-5.
205 Ibid., 6.
206 Ibid., 7.
207 Ibid.
208 Ibid., 12.
the same about blacks. Democrats and Independents, in contrast, are more likely to say that blacks experience a lot of discrimination than to say the same about whites.\textsuperscript{209} The tendency

\textbf{Republicans and Democrats Differ Markedly in Perceptions of Discrimination}

Percent who say there is a lot of discrimination against each of the following groups

- **Whites**
- **Christians**
- **Blacks**
- **Gay and lesbian people**
- **Transgender people**
- **Immigrants**
- **Muslims**

![Bar chart showing partisan perceptions of identity-based discrimination](image)

\textit{Figure 6. Partisan perceptions of identity-based discrimination (Daniel Cox et al., \textit{Majority of Americans Oppose Transgender Bathroom Restrictions} (PRRI, 2017), http://www.prri.org/research/lgbt-transgender-bathroom-discrimination-religious-liberty/.)}

for white Americans, particularly white Republicans, to view race as irrelevant and believe that racial discrimination is a thing of the past produces a climate conducive to the rise of white identity politics.

The fact that large proportions of white Americans feel a strong attachment to their racial identity further contributes to white identity politics. Over forty percent of respondents to political scientist Ashley Jardina’s survey said that being white was very or extremely important to their identity, forty-three percent felt that white Americans have a lot or a great deal in

\textsuperscript{209} Daniel Cox et al., \textit{Majority of Americans Oppose Transgender Bathroom Restrictions} (PRRI, 2017), http://www.prri.org/research/lgbt-transgender-bathroom-discrimination-religious-liberty/.)
common with one another, and more than half expressed pride in their racial group.\textsuperscript{210} Moreover, data from an American National Election Studies survey suggested that both white racial identity and beliefs that whites are treated unfairly were powerful predictors of support for Donald Trump in the Republican primaries. Figure 7 shows that white Independent and Republican voters who think their white identity is extremely important were over thirty points more likely to support Trump than those who think their racial identity is not important. Further, white Americans who perceived a great deal of discrimination against their race were nearly forty points more likely to support Trump than those who do not believe that white people face any discrimination. Powerfully, whites who think it is extremely likely that “many whites are unable to find a job because employers are hiring minorities instead” were more than fifty points more likely to support Trump than those who view this scenario as unlikely.\textsuperscript{211}

White people with a strong attachment to their racial identity not only were more likely to support Trump, but also shared some of the views associated with white nationalist groups. Even

\textsuperscript{210} Jardina, “White Identity Politics Isn’t Just About White Supremacy.”
after Jardina accounted for age, gender, educational attainment, and partisanship, she found that white identifiers were more likely to think that the growth of non-white racial and ethnic groups is negatively affecting the country than were whites without a strong attachment to their racial group. They were much more likely to identify illegal immigration as the most important issue
facing the U.S. today. White identifiers were also more likely to agree that American society owes white people a better chance in life.\textsuperscript{212} White identity politics are not only archetypal of white nationalist groups, but also reflected in more mainstream opinion.

The rising salience of white identity politics, particularly among Republicans, created a political environment that welcomed Trump’s scapegoating of minority groups. Though racial appeals are nothing new, the contemporary national climate was particularly hospitable this strategy with renewed enthusiasm. Characteristic of dog whistle politics, Trump’s narrative repeatedly referenced supposed threats to white identity and white dominance. These specters of white demise take various forms, from the undocumented Latino immigrant to the Islamic terrorist. But the moral of Trump’s tales was always the same: white Americans were losing their grip on the country, and only Trump would help them keep hold of their power.

Trump’s entreaties to white identity politics increased in flagrancy as the election approached. Throughout October, he repeatedly framed the election as a final chance to maintain white sovereignty. While discussing immigration, he uttered this sinister warning at least seven times: “Either we win the election, or we lose the country.” The “we” in this context could arguably refer to American citizens, which helped maintain the colorblind language and plausible deniability central to the dog whistle. But to white Americans concerned about mass immigration and the rising demographic strength of non-white groups, these words represented a call to action, encouraging them to support the campaign and vote for Trump. Trump manipulated widespread anxiety about diminishing white dominance, generating a sense of urgency among white voters: vote Trump now, or lose your racial advantage forever.

\textsuperscript{212} Jardina, “White Identity Politics Isn’t Just About White Supremacy.”
Voting patterns suggested that Trump’s appeals to white identity politics—and its accompanying perception of rising racial or ethnic minority populations as threatening—was an effective strategy for mobilizing particular segments of the white electorate. Trump mobilized white Americans to vote in high numbers—white voter turnout increased by 2.4 percent while black voter turnout decreased by almost five percent, compared to the 2012 election. White non-Hispanic voters preferred Trump to Clinton by twenty-one percentage points, with fifty-eight percent supporting Trump and just thirty-seven percent voting for Clinton. A striking two-thirds of whites without a college degree supported Trump, while a mere twenty-eight percent supported Clinton. This thirty-nine-point advantage dramatically beat Romney’s twenty-five-point lead in 2012 and McCain’s eighteen-point lead in 2008 in this same group. In addition to winning an overwhelming share of whites without a college degree, Trump outperformed Clinton among white college graduates by a four-point margin. Perhaps equally as telling were the low levels of Trump support among racial minorities. Less than a third of both Asian and Latino voters supported Trump, with two-thirds of each group voting for Clinton. Black voters were even more decisively pro-Clinton, with just eight percent supporting Trump, according to CNN exit poll data.

But aggregate data failed to tell the full racial story. In a compelling opinion piece titled “White-on-White Voting,” Thomas B. Edsall explored Trump’s crushing victory in the nation’s white enclaves. Overwhelmingly white localities were critical sources of support for Trump—he

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dramatically outperformed both Romney in 2012 and McCain in 2008. The graphic produced by researchers at the Institute on Metropolitan Opportunity shows this dramatic shift to the right by plotting the change in Republican vote share from 2012 to 2016 against the percentage of whites in every municipality within the country’s top fifty metropolitan areas (Figure 8). The red line illustrates Trump’s performance in 2016 relative to Romney in 2012. As Edsall explains, Trump trailed Romney in most municipalities and in the national vote. However, in municipalities that are between eighty-five and 100 percent white, Trump dramatically outperformed Romney, reaching peak performance in communities that are close to, but not entirely, 100 percent white.

Figure 8. Trump’s 2016 performance versus Romney’s 2012 performance by white percentage of the population in the nation’s top 50 metropolitan areas ()
Moreover, Trump was the most successful in communities experiencing rapidly rising rates of minority population growth despite small absolute numbers of racial minority residents. Edsall draws the connection between these trends and Trump’s strategic racism:

Trump’s anti-immigrant, racially-loaded messages resonated most powerfully among voters living in the least diverse, most racially isolated white communities. It is in these locales, which are experiencing the earliest signs of minority growth, that anxiety over approaching diversity is strongest…. [A]nger, fear and animosity toward immigrants and minorities was most politically potent in the communities most insulated from these supposed threats.  

Residents of the nation’s whitest communities feared the competition that rising minority populations might pose, having rarely interacted with nonwhites. Distress about the potential for demographic change in more homogeneous white communities prompted strong backlash in the form of high levels of Trump support. This response, aided by the increasing salience of white identity politics and catalyzed by Trump’s coded racial appeals, played a crucial role in pushing the demagogue candidate to victory.

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Trump’s election stunned much of the country. For months, polls, pundits, and politicians had suggested that a Trump victory seemed virtually impossible. Comedians like Cecily Strong and Jimmy Kimmel framed the race as laughably uncompetitive. Even the methodologically rigorous predictions of professional pollsters were wrong—the Princeton Election Consortium gave Clinton a ninety-nine percent chance of winning, while the Huffington Post forecast gave her ninety-eight percent and the New York Times’ The Upshot gave her eighty-five percent.  

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much of the nation’s astonishment, Trump earned 304 Electoral votes to Clinton’s 227. Trump himself reported finding his victory somewhat surprising.\(^{218}\) He became just the fifth U.S. president to have lost the popular vote while earning an Electoral College victory, joining the ranks of John Adams, Rutherford B. Hayes, Benjamin Harrison, and George W. Bush.

A coalescence of factors propelled Trump to his largely unanticipated victory. A significant number of voters who had supported Obama in 2012 “defected,” contributing to Clinton’s loss of seven swing states and 100 electoral votes that Obama had earned four years prior. Some analysts asserted that Clinton paid too little attention to the economy and ignored working class voters in several important swing states. Others argued that the timing of FBI Director James Comey’s announcement that he was re-opening his investigation into Clinton’s email scandal derailed her campaign and created an opening for Trump’s victory.\(^{219}\)

The proliferation of “fake news” stories and memes may also have played a decisive role in the outcome of the election. Though Trump first used the phrase a month after his election—and has tweeted about fake news nearly 200 times since then\(^{220}\)—false or misleading news stories abounded during the election cycle. Trump has often labeled any news that he disliked or disagreed with fake news, but the term actually describes deliberately false stories posing as news. In an era when two-thirds of American adults get some of their news from social media,\(^{221}\) the increase in misinformation, particularly online, is troubling. Following Trump’s election, many Americans expressed concern about fake news. Sixty-four percent of American adults reported that fabricated news stories cause a great deal of confusion about the basic facts of

\(^{219}\) Fraga et al, “Why Did Trump Win?”
current issues and events, according to a 2016 report by the non-partisan Pew Research Center. This belief was consistent across incomes, education levels, partisan affiliations, and other demographic characteristics.\(^{222}\) Fake news stories may have done more than just confuse voters. A new study from researchers at Ohio State University suggested that fake news might have influenced the outcome of the election. They found that fake news stories dissuaded about four percent of voters who supported Obama in 2012 from voting for Clinton in 2016. Though the study could not prove that belief in fake news \textit{caused} this defection, the data did indicate that exposure to fake news stories did significantly influence voting decisions.\(^{223}\)

Evidence increasingly suggests that fake news was a key component of the Russian information attack on the election. In addition to hacking and leaking Democratic emails, spreading a barrage of anti-Clinton stories on Russian media outlets, and, perhaps most disturbingly, penetrating the voter registration rolls of several U.S. states prior to the presidential election, Russian operatives promoted anti-Clinton messages on Facebook\(^{224}\) and Twitter,


\(^{224}\) Facebook is currently facing scrutiny after investigations exposed a partnership between the social media titan and Cambridge Analytica, a data analytics firm cofounded by Steve Bannon. In 2014, the firm collected data from about fifty million Facebook profiles without user consent, enabling them to make shockingly accurate predictions about the types of content that would appeal to millions of Facebook users. That same year, Cambridge Analytica began pilot testing concepts that became emblematic of the Trump campaign, including the phrase “drain the swamp” and imagery of the wall. The Trump campaign used Cambridge Analytica’s findings to strategically target voters in what CNN described as “electronic brainwashing.” For more, see Curt Devine, Donie O’Sullivan, and Drew Griffin, "How Steve Bannon Used Cambridge Analytica to Further His Alt-Right Vision for America," (March 31 2018), accessed April 11, 2018, https://www.cnn.com/2018/03/30/politics/bannon-cambridge-analytica/index.html.
turning them into “engines of deception and propaganda.” Politicians, researchers, and intelligence officers have yet to unravel the Russian operation and discern the extent to which Russian misinformation and meddling influenced the outcome of the election. But ongoing investigations and a growing body of evidence indicate not only that Russian forces interfered in the presidential election, but also that they may have colluded with the Trump campaign to help put Trump in office.

But while the widespread propagation of fake news and possible collusion between the Trump campaign and the Russian government may have contributed significantly to Trump’s victory, another aspect was key. Trump’s extensive race baiting and pandering to white identity politics played a decisive role in the 2016 election. Trump manipulated implicit racial biases—what some pundits have wrongly framed as “economic anxiety”—by grounding his campaign in the politics of white nationalist postracialism. Through his excoriation of political correctness, nostalgia for the past, pledges to “Make America Great Again,” and commitment to an “America First” agenda, Trump harnessed the voting power of both overt white nationalists and white Americans who would oppose racism, at least nominally. His white nationalist rhetoric was kept superficially post-racial when delivered through coded dog whistles, so that his race baiting messages came through loud and clear to white nationalists but still exerted a strong pull on his more moderate supporters. Trump’s largely unforeseen victory shocked the world. But given our country’s deep racial fissures, unwillingness to reckon with institutionalized white supremacy, and history of politicians exploiting racial animosities to win elections, perhaps we should not have been so surprised.

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Conclusion

Donald Trump’s ascent to the presidency offers a powerful lesson about the abiding significance of race and racism in American politics. He tapped into simmering racial anxieties and resentments that were operating under the surface in our supposedly post-racial society. But Trump was hardly the first politician to practice racial pandering for political gain. Instead, he represented the most recent iteration of a long tradition of strategic racism.

George Wallace’s shift from “segregation forever” to “states’ rights” illustrated the electoral power of coded racial appeals in a nation governed by the increasingly potent norm of racial equality, setting a precedent for dog whistle racism in campaign communication. Nixon decried “forced busing” and demanded “law and order.” Reagan couched his racial appeals in economic terms, broadcasting highly racialized representations of supposed welfare cheats like the “Chicago welfare queen.” George H. W. Bush reframed Nixon’s “law and order” rhetoric as a “get tough on crime” stance; his infamous Willie Horton ad exploited abiding stereotypes about black criminality without explicitly mentioning race. Though George W. Bush kept racial appeals to a minimum in his 2000 campaign, he nonetheless manipulated racial animosities during his presidency, using the racialized and purportedly threatening figures of the “Arab Muslim” and the “illegal alien” to build support for discriminatory policies. And while many hoped that Barack Obama’s election would usher in a post-racial utopia, dog whistle politics instead surged anew. The Tea Party, animated by anti-establishment fervor and racial resentment, highlighted the enduring power of coded racial appeals in garnering votes—while the Party’s opposition to welfare, undocumented immigrants, Muslims, and Obama was not explicitly motivated by race, it still agitated white racial anxiety.
Enter Trump, a businessman, television personality, and multibillionaire with a loosely outlined plan to “Make America Great Again.” Following a campaign announcement that broadly referred to Mexicans as drug dealers, criminals, and rapists, many public commentators questioned whether Trump had abandoned the Republican tradition of dog whistle racism in favor of a more overt expression of white supremacy. Yet like dog whistle politicians past, Trump strategically stirred racial animus while maintaining enough of a rhetorical shield to rebuff any accusations of racial prejudice. Trump drew on a variety of rhetorical strategies to construct his post-racial façade, including citing his relationships with people of color; scapegoating; othering; defiant political incorrectness; nostalgia for former American “greatness”; and coded appeals to white identity, emphasized by his performative flair and knack for repetition.

Racist dog whistles were a central, and immensely effective, aspect of Donald Trump’s campaign. And while his coded racial appeals targeted minority groups, the story of Trump’s success is primarily a story about white Americans. His politics of white nationalist postracialism enabled him to appeal to both avowed white nationalists and ostensibly post-racial white Americans, who denied an ideological investment in racism but were nonetheless roused by racist appeals. To these voters, Trump’s bluntness and brazenness brought a breath of fresh air and conferred credibility. His racist dog whistles resonated with them, even if they did not recognize—or admit—the white nationalist subtext of his rhetoric. Ultimately, Trump’s dog whistle campaign thrust the radical right to the forefront of American politics and demonstrated the widespread, enduring investment in white supremacy in the United States. Until we contend with the persistent racial divides and entrenched white supremacy in our nation, we leave room for a demagogue like Donald Trump to rise to power.
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