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**Populism Versus Racism in Trump's
Campaigns: A Thematic Analysis of 'Make
America Great Again' Rhetoric**

**A Dissertation Submitted to the Department of English in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for Master's Degree in Civilization and Literature**

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Dedication

I thank Allah for all his gifts.

*To my beloved parents, whose unwavering support and limitless love have sown strength and kindness within my soul.

*To my dearest husband, who helped me and supported me.

*To my precious children: Mohamed, Aymen, and Selma; your laughter, innocence, and dreams are the sweetest treasures I hold dear.

This is dedicated to all of you, with all my love.

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Abstract

Trump's 2016 presidential campaign incorporated populism, racism, and the "Make America Great Again" (MAGA) rhetoric. These elements mobilized white voters sharing cultural and economic anxieties by arousing feelings of nostalgia to an idealized past of America. Their sense of grievance and discontent is expressed through racial resentment. Considering the above statement, it is necessary to investigate the reason behind adopting this racialized political strategy by Trump. The present work aims at examining how polarisation and exclusion are entrenched by populist messages through the 'MAGA' rhetoric. To achieve this objective, a qualitative approach is adopted for a thematic analysis of the "MAGA" rhetoric to capture how it constructs racialized and populist narratives. The findings revealed that the "MAGA" rhetoric promotes exclusion and discrimination. It shapes the nation ethnically by defining 'white' citizens as dominants while minorities and immigrants are portrayed as threats which creates hostility, and legitimizes racism. The "MAGA" rhetoric is a driver of populist belief.

Keywords: "MAGA" rhetoric; Populism; Racism; Trump.

List of Abbreviations

BLM: Black Lives Matters

GATT: General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade

ICE: Immigration and Customs Enforcement

MAGA: Make America Great Again

WTO: World Trade Organization

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General Introduction

The complex interplay where populist appeals often intertwine with racialized narratives in president Donald Trump's rhetoric has sparked extensive debates. His campaign slogan "Make America Great Again" promised a return to a bygone era of American prosperity and dominance. Besides, the promise implicitly carries exclusionary and racialized intentions.

The vigorous combination of populism, racism, and the "Make America Great Again" (MAGA) rhetoric was potently figured out in Trump's presidential campaigns. Trump's populist rhetoric targeted white working-class to utilize their anger and fear about immigration, globalization, and economic insecurity. He portrayed himself as the candidate who could restore their rights and reassure their anxiety. In addition, Trump's campaign rhetoric explicitly demonized minorities especially immigrants and Muslims. This reflected a highly racial resentment. Furthermore, the "MAGA" rhetoric has been analysed as fearmongering and dehumanizing, and not just a political brand. It became a unifying platform for Trump's base. Through the analysis of the "MAGA" rhetoric, a set of themes has been identified. The most prominent of which were anti-elitism, and economic nationalism. Trump has constantly fought the elite, and promised to protect American jobs and industry. Defending whiteness and using the social media are among themes as well.

This research aims to examine how Trump's populist messages and "MAGA" slogan fuelled polarisation, and exclusion to maintain white cultural and political dominance under the guise of nationalism and patriotism. The motivation for studying this topic is to understand contemporary political dynamics, and more precisely how political messaging can reshape societies and influence their choices. In this regard, I set some objectives for my study. First, to understand the roots of racial divisions. Then, to reveal how these divisions are exploited for political gain. Finally, to help guard against the normalization of exclusionary, xenophobic, or supremacist ideologies.

Populism has often been defined as a slippery term with no fixed meaning or ideology, and its broad usage creates confusion and frustration. Robert C Rowland, in his book, “The Rhetoric of Donald Trump: Nationalist Populism and American Democracy” (2021), focuses on how Trump’s rhetoric reflects nationalist populism in the context of American democracy. It explores themes such as Trump’s communication style, and the way it challenges traditional political norms. It also illustrates that Trump’s rhetoric is fundamentally negative.

Miah Ward (Politico Newspapers US. 2024) concluded in an article that the analysis of more than 20 of Trump’s rallies showed that his rhetoric was racist. He accuses all sorts of immigrants of invading and destroying the United States. He describes them as “blood thirsty animals”, “the worst people”, and genetically predisposed to commit crimes.

Vernette Whiteside (August 7, 2023) argued in her research paper entitled: “A Rhetorical Analysis of Quot Make America Great Again” that Trump used the slogan MAGA for the sake of pathos. It targets a specific audience. Whiteside evaluates the effectiveness of the message in political discourse; she shows how powerful the ‘MAGA’ is as a rhetorical device, and how it plays on people’s emotional strings.

Giuseppina Scotto Di Carlo in her book “A Discourse Analysis of the Trumpusconi Phenomenon: Is Trump the Contemporary Berlusconi”, said that Trump uses the MAGA to give the impression that he is the saviour who is going to regain America’s lost greatness and lead it back to its old glory. She highlighted the similarities in Trump and Berlusconi’s rhetorical strategies, populist discourse, and media manipulation to argue whether Trump can be considered a contemporary Berlusconi.

Furthermore, the dissertation is a modest contribution to the ongoing discussion about populism in contrast to racism and the way these two themes contribute to Trump’s

messaging strategy. The main concern of the dissertation is to investigate the following research questions:

- How can the MAGA rhetoric reflect populist themes, and what were trump's real objectives behind such a rhetoric?
- How can populist discourses align with racist believes, and to what extend has the "MAGA" rhetoric succeeded in reshaping the American national identity?

To answer these questions, the study will adopt a qualitative approach by collecting and analysing data from several resources to have an in-depth insight into such a complex topic, and to reach a comprehensive understanding of the subject. This research method will be elaborated by proposing the following hypothesis: The "MAGA" rhetoric in Trump's campaigns is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it seeks support from disenfranchised voters by using populist themes, and on the other hand, it simultaneously invokes racist undertones targeting minority groups. Moreover, such rhetoric often legitimizes systemic racism.

Hence, this dissertation is divided into two chapters. Chapter one is entitled: Populism and the "Make America Great Again" Rhetoric, it contains definitions of key notions, themes exploring, and an analysis of the 'MAGA'. Chapter two: Racism and Exclusion in "Make America Great Again" Rhetoric, analyses to what extent Trump's rhetoric perpetuates racial discrimination, and shapes political identities and social divisions.

**Chapter One: Populism and the
“Make America Great Again” Rhetoric**

Introduction:

Populism is a political approach that divides society into “common people” and “corrupt elite”. Populist movements all over the world focus on anti-establishment sentiments, claim to maximize the power of marginalized people, and defend their interests (Murno). It is unreasonable to delve into the discussion of populism without referring to the “Make America Great Again” rhetoric, which well represents contemporary populism; it embodies nationalist and anti-elite themes. Donald Trump popularized the “MAGA” and made it his official slogan (Jupskas).

Throughout this chapter, the concept of populism is going to be examined, starting from its inception around the world, especially in America. The chapter includes an investigation into the nature and objectives of Trump’s rhetoric, in addition to a thematic analysis of the slogan “Make America Great Again.”

1.1 Historical Context of Populism:

Before tackling the history of populism, it is important to give a concise overview of Populism. What has been agreed on is that populism is a form of political practice through which the politician or the leader takes the floor to talk about or defend the people against the elite (Slez 06).

At this stage, it is worth mentioning that the emergence of populist movements alongside nationalist doctrines shaped American political development but with different emphasis. The former’s focus was on economic justice and opposition to the elite while the latter stressed more on political unity, individual liberty, and stands on the belief that America is the most important country in the world. American nationalism has evolved over the decades to become a form of patriotism. Indeed, American people are known for their pride in their country. After that, American patriotism took shape of what is called jingoism

i.e. A country is jingoistic when it intervenes military in another country. Another form of American nationalism is exceptionalism. For, the USA was always considered as a country famous for its liberal and democratic values, openness, and diversity. Yet, Trump’s ‘America first’ brand of exceptionalism has always given America the right to do what is needed to be great again.

Back to Populist movements, they rose from the late nineteenth to the twentieth century and became part of the political landscape. Social and economic transformations paved the way for populism to emerge. For the same factors, namely globalization and economic inequalities, populism resurrected in the 21st century. Yet, digital media helped new populists to communicate with masses and gain their support (Ivanovic et al.04).

Populism came out in countries like Russia where The Navodnichestro Movement championed the cause of the empire’s peasantry against the governing establishment (Mudde and Kaltwasser 32). It emerged In Europe, namely in France, which 1970’s populist movement extends to Jean Marie Le Pen’s National Front in modern era (Hawthorne 2), and Italy with the neofascist Movimento Sociale Italiano’s leader Gianfranco Fini who declared fascism out of date. Latin America and its famous populist leaders such as Hugo Chavez the populist president of Venezuela (1993-2013) and General Juan Peron the leader of the first modern populist regime in history (Finchelstein 22). The United States, into the bargain, witnessed the emergence of populism with the People’s Party, whose main goal was advocating agrarian rights and economic reforms, which is going to be detailed later (Slez 7).

1.1.1 Definition of Populism:

Populism, as defined by Cambridge, Oxford Learner’s Dictionaries, and Merriam Webster, refers to the idea that some politicians claim to represent the opinions and interests of ordinary people and give them what they want to get their support. In other words, the

common people in opposition to the elite. According to Muller, populists are anti-pluralists, anti-elitists, and angry people feeling resentment. He also argued that populists’ goal is to exclude their adversaries whom they treat as “enemies of the people” (1-4). A leader can be described as being populist if he makes use of the struggle of the people against the elite in his political campaign as well (Funke et al.26).

1.1.2 Populism in American History and its Impact on Politics:

Populist movements in the United States have deep roots. It emerged in the 1890s as a result of technological changes and globalization. First, it referred to a leftist-oriented farmers Movement in the Midwest [Northern and Central U.S. lying midway between the Appalachians and Rocky mountains and North of the Ohio River and 37th parallel], and South [Southern U.S. South of the Mason and Dixon line, the Ohio River a, and the 36°30’ parallel] (Britannica) suffering from grievances of a system that privileged the rich over their expense. Then, it developed to become The People’s Party, also known as The Populist Party. It was founded in 1891 aiming at improving the economic conditions for farmers and labourers. Their main demands were an increase in the circulating currency, a graduated income tax, government ownership of the railroads, and a direct election of US senators (Han et al. 10).

The prominence of the Populist Party started to decline after several electoral victories, namely when they joined the Democratic Party in the elections of 1896, and most of the party’s ideas were absorbed into the Democratic Party. By 1908, The Populist Party officially disbanded. However, populist ideas did not vanish. Theodore Roosevelt, the 26th U.S. president, embodied the populist ideas by the expansion of the regulation of business and industry. The seventeenth amendment, calling for the direct election of senators, was ratified in 1913. In addition, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt adopted most of the populist platform as a framework. By the 1950s, the anti-elitist populism turned rightward

and continued its journey steadily, passing by the Tea Party Movement and the presidential campaign of Donald Trump in 2016 (Ruckno). Populist policies affected American politics in different ways. Populist governments are likely to stay to power and cause political damage. Actually, when unfettered and uncompromised populists control state institutions, they undermine democracy. In fact, trump’s rise to power made American democracy look vulnerable.

1.2 The “Make America Great Again” Rhetoric:

The slogan “MAGA” has always been linked to Donald Trump’s political philosophy though the 40th U.S President Ronald Reagan (1981-1989) (Britannica) first coined the phrase. Trump adopted it in 2016 presidential campaign to appeal to American people who were nostalgic to America’s past strength, the era during which the country was prosperous and who believe social, economic, and cultural changes led to America’s decline. The slogan reflects Trump’s themes of economic revival, immigration, and national identity. Nevertheless, some criticized the slogan of being a form of coded language with racist and exclusionary undertones (Bajagai).

1.2.1 An Overview of Donald Trump’s Rise to Prominence:

Donald Trump, the 45th president of the U.S., was born on June 14, 1946, in New York. He is a politician, a businessman, and an author. His intention to become president of the US dates back to the 1980s when he publicly mused about running for presidency. He joined the Republican Party in 1987. Since then, he has had his party affiliation five times. In 1999, he changed to the Independent Party of New York. He registered as a democrat in 2001 to return to the Republican Party in 2009. Two years later, in 2011, he became independent. Finally, he re-joined the Republicans in 2012. His first announcement of candidacy for the presidential election was in June 2015. In July 2016, he was declared the nominee of the

Republican Party (Gillin). During his electoral campaign, he pledged an end to the American carnage in which America was drowning, according to him (Staff).

On January 20th, 2017, he took the oath of office to become the 45th U.S. president after he defeated democratic Hillary Clinton (306 votes for Trump against 232 for Clinton) (“Elections Result”). In a stunning remontada from his loss to Joe Biden in 2020, Trump returned to the white house in 2024 by defeating democrat kamala Harris and became the 47th US president (Livesay).

1.2.2 The Past and the Present of the “Make America Great Again” Slogan:

Sable and Torres said, “The slogan praises a past era, rejects the present state of affairs, and promises a better future” (195). In fact, the slogan was used for the first time by President Ronald Reagan during his 1980’s presidential campaign (Day 48). During that period, the country was suffering from economic downturn. Here is an excerpt from Reagan’s speech using the ‘MAGA’ slogan: “I’m asking you as I ask all Americans in this month of decision, please join me as we take this new path ... and together we’ll make America great again. Thank you very much”. The slogan was founded on popular belief that the US was a great nation and had no longer been so because of immigration, multiculturalism, and globalization (Puri 153-154).

Once again in November 19, 2012, after Barack Obama (44th US president, 2009-2017) was re-elected, Trump applied to have the “MAGA” trademarked. Later, he told the Washington Post that it has become his official campaign slogan. Since then, the slogan has become synonymous with the Trump campaign.

Four years later, in 2016, during the Republican Primaries, Trump accused his two rivals, Governor Scott Walker and Senator Ted Cruz, of copying the phrase to use it in their speeches (Wilson). In his 2020 presidential campaign, Trump announced that his new slogan would be “Keep America Great,” but he soon returned to his old one. Although Trump lost

the presidency in 2020, he made sure to keep the spark of the “MAGA” burning. He won the 2024 presidential elections relying on nearly the same principles (Brown).

Trump’s use of “MAGA” marked a departure from traditional Republican leadership. The slogan is not just a campaign phrase but a core element of Trump’s identity as a Republican. It is both a continuation of certain Republican themes such as the restoration of economy and global strength, nationalism and ‘America first’ policy, a return to traditional and moral values, and a distinct populist shift centered around Trump’s personal brand (Rhodes et al).

1.2.3 Rhetorical Analysis:

After Trump had declared his candidacy for the republican nomination for president (June 16, 2015), he immediately started promoting and popularizing his slogan “Make America Great Again”. Logo hats swept the arena. In his speeches he directly promised to make America great again, “The line of ‘MAGA’, the phrase, that was mine, I came up with it about a year ago, and I kept using it, and every body’s now using it, they are all loving it (...) I guess I should copyright it, maybe I copyrighted it” (Scotto 40). By using the ‘MAGA’, Trump appealed to emotions, and the message conveyed through his body language was empathy for the suffering of others. The “guy from the neighbourhood” was sending waves of hope (Feldman 116). He was seen as a saviour by the voices charged with anger and resentment towards the elite. He targeted marginalized, white people who saw in him the Superman who would take them back to America’s former greatness (Penko 418-419).

Among those people were the less educated ones who mostly voted in his favour in 2016 and the Blue-Collar Workers (persons who perform manual labour or skilled trade) for these later felt threatened by globalization and immigration. Fortunately for them, one of the most important points of Trump’s campaign themes was to bring jobs back and ban immigration namely illegal one (Heed and Kubyskin 107). To do that, Trump planned to

take a series of measures. First of all, he promised to remove obstacles that are hindering job creation such as environmental and labour regulations. Second, the stimulation of investments within the U.S. via taxes cutting so that job opportunities won't leak out of the country. Concerning immigration issue, his proposals to confront it were as follows: to stop immigration from countries known for terrorism (Muslim ban), deporting undocumented immigrants, and building a wall across the 1954 miles of the Mexican border. Trump's harsh stance towards immigration made him portray it as a threat to national security and economy. He argued that illegal immigrants took jobs that are intended for the Americans. He also accused them of spreading crime in the American society (Vincent).

At first glance, Trump's use of 'MAGA' seems casual and spontaneous but his language is strategically thought out. He managed to build a relationship of empathy and intimacy with his audience through his simple, impulsive and uncivil words. To strongly impact, persuade, and build positive ethos with his voters; trump restored to using grammatical and rhetorical strategies of emphasis. Grammatically speaking, he used adverbs of degree both down toners like “hardly, barely, scarcely” and amplifiers like “absolutely, really, fully”. He also used intensifying adjectives to reinforce statements as “utter, genius”. Rhetorical devices helped him conveying his emotions too. To arouse his audience's anger and frustration, he used hyperbole: “U.S. has become a dumping ground for everybody's else problem”. He used it to make his public feel the necessity to vote for him as well: “Sadly, the American dream is dead”. Throughout his speeches, Trump constantly used repetition to put down and demonize his opponents and here is an example: “How stupid are our leaders? How stupid are they these politicians to allow this to happen, how stupid are they”. Side by side with hyperbole, to delineate other countries as enemies, anaphora was the suitable choice. He stated: “they're laughing at us, at our stupidity. They 're killing us economically” (Ligbet 83-96).

Trump usually blew things out of proportion, he portrayed himself and his voters as saint and victims and his adversaries as guilty. He convinced his audience by the existence of irrational fears of dangerous others like immigrant, refugees, Islamic terrorists, black protesters, and women lurking for them. Emotions of fear and solidarity were emanating from Trump’s narratives. This led to the creation of group solidarity and shared identity among his supporters (Rowland 3-5).

The following excerpt from Trump’s speech illustrates his core concern:

“Under the current administration, we are indeed a nation in decline. [...] we have an inflation crisis that is making life unaffordable, [...] crushing our people like never before. They ‘ve never seen anything like it. We also have an illegal immigration crisis, and it’s taking place right now [...] It’s massive invasion at our border that has spread misery, crime, poverty, and destruction to communities all across our land nobody’s ever seen anything like it. [...] It’s time for change. This administration can’t come close to solving the problems” (Trump 2024).

Overall, Trump’s rhetoric is stuffed with emotions of anger, disgust, fear, and hope. In fact, his behaviour, policies, and tone all show a political resentment towards foreigners and incompetent administrations. Meanwhile, he illustrated hope through confidence in the hero saviour, Trump himself, who would take the nation back to the idyllic, filled with opportunities past.

1.2.4 Populist Themes in Trump’s Campaign:

Before dealing with themes, it is necessary to note that most populist candidates make promises with a short-term effect to attract minds with little awareness. They are demagogues, and Trump is a typical populist politician who seeks support from middle-class whites, lower-educated people, and the working class with anti-government attitudes. In fact,

one of the most important elements of Trump’s appeal is the anti-establishment sentiment, or what is known as anti-elitism, which he used to incite oppressed nations who see themselves as righteous and legitimate as opposed to the others; the elite that are corrupt and illegitimate. According to Trump, left-wing government officials, media executives, and reporters, people of colour (namely Mexican, Muslims, and people in inner cities), seculars, and people of multicultural backgrounds are all immoral and corrupt (Rackaway and Rutledge 41-43). Moreover, Trump succeeded to portray himself as a victim and convinced his audience that their economic status, gender, and way of life is threatened by people who defend women, people of colour, and LGBTQ population [lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer]. He used victimization politics to seek evangelic and catholic support by claiming that democrats are threatening their religious freedom (Rackaway and Rutledge 45-46).

In short, negative sentiments are an attribute of Trump’s populist discourse. His mobilization of people against the establishment and the call to remove and disrupt it aims at making of himself the ‘The superman’ who will resist oppression and injustice.

1.2.4.1 Economic Nationalism:

Trump’s ‘America First’ doctrine prioritized economic nationalism. In addition to appeals to racism and xenophobia, economic nationalism is one of trump’s most effective ideological tools. Trump bet on economic nationalism as a strategy to restore America’s hegemony after its decline as a world power, and to oppose emerging economics like China (Bhatti). Trump embraced protectionist policy especially towards China. He increased tariffs on imports (namely steel and aluminium) to protect and revive American industries. Moreover, the adoption of economic nationalism was like a reassurance for ordinary people to restore jobs and prosperity. However, this populist and traditional approach towards China was counterproductive. In fact, while some industry’s benefited from increasing tariffs;

others didn't and it led to job losses and increased costs for consumers. The revival of economic nationalism, for Trump, was inevitable to reclaim American economic independence. However, it urged withdrawal from global economic integration (Cheek 94-95).

Economic nationalism is not compatible with the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT)/World Trade Organisation (WTO) multilateral trading system. This latter's logic is a “positive sum game” which means all participant countries benefit from the trade concessions. However, the economic nationalism represents a menace to the multilateral trading system. Its logic is a “zero sum game i.e. one nation must suffer a loss so that the other one obtains a gain in trade” (Sheldon and McGuire). By adopting the policy of economic nationalism Trump's goal, apparently, was to make middle-class and ordinary Americans benefit from aggregate national welfare (Apeldoorn, et al. 115).

Accordingly, the stated goals of the Trump's administration foreign policy include the focus on security by combating terrorists, strengthening border defences, immigration control, and adopting the ‘America first’ principle in trade and diplomacy.

1.2.4.2 Anti-Establishment Sentiment:

According to the Cambridge dictionary, anti-establishment means “opposed to or directed against the establishment (the important and powerful people who control a country or an organization, especially those who support the existing situation)”. Merriam Webster defines anti-establishment as “opposed to or hostile to the social, economic, and political principles of a ruling class”.

Enders and Uscinski stated that anti-establishment sentiment is: “the innate struggle between the good people and a nefarious, self-serving establishment” (50). Indeed, anti-establishment sentiment or what is known as anti-elitism was one of the factors that led to

Trump’s victory. He used it to incite oppressed nations who see themselves as righteous and legitimate against the ‘others’; the elite that are corrupt and illegitimate.

Trump took advantage of the anti-establishment sentiment to strengthen his populist platform. He attacked the political establishment and disaffiliated from it after he had asserted its incorrectness (Schrock, et al). In addition to his hostile attitude towards the political establishment, trump’s anti-media stance has been a defining feature of his political identity. He has always antagonized the press and accused them of being ‘enemy of the people’(Jacobsen). He even banned some media outlets from his campaign events and treated them as “very dishonest and totally biased media” (Beckwith and Sorscher). According to trump, left-wing government officials, media executives, reporters, people of colour (namely Mexicans, Muslims, and people in inner cities), seculars, and people of multicultural background are all immoral and corrupt (Rackway and Rutledge 41-43). Trump’s populist security narratives were embodied in anti-Chinese resentment too. He accused China of being an existential threat to the U.S. national security after the spread of the coronavirus pandemic (Ioffmann 2014). Trump’s wild desire to challenge the political elite framed his alleged protection of the “real people”, and his appeal to sentiments of existential anxieties made disillusioned voters sympathize with him.

1.3 Comparison of Trump’s Rhetoric in 2016 and 2020 Electoral Campaigns:

Before starting the comparison, it is necessary to point out that Trump’s rhetorics are characterized by a nationalistic and populist style. Through his terms and metaphors, he emphasizes populist themes. First, in his 2016’s campaign, trump made a series of promises to the public, the most important of which were: the border wall, cutting of taxes, reducing prices, Muslim ban, creating jobs, and ending wars (Zurcher and Geoghegan). In 2016’s rhetoric, through his slogan ‘Make America Great Again’, he appointed himself as the representative of the left-behind people by the elite. He promised to recover the economy,

and restore past national greatness (Rowland 62). He used to attack the media and his opponents, highlighting the anti-establishment sentiment, and at the same time, his simple language and repetitive phrases enabled him to affect his supporters.

Another important feature of Trump’s rhetoric that he had adopted in 2016 is his reliance on social media, namely Twitter. This way, he communicated freely and without mediation with his audience. Trump showed his willingness to change the status quo of the nation as well. He referred, as it has been mentioned before, to immigration issues, economic inequality, and the perceived failure of the political establishment (Ashcroft 2006-2007). He focused on nationalistic themes, too, such as American exceptionalism in all domains (Paetow 2).

In 2020’s rhetoric, Trump kept nearly the same doctrine and promises. He stated, “My first and highest duty as president is to defend our country and the American people” (Krieg, Merica, and Nobles). His new slogan had become ‘Keep America Great’ (Choi). However, the new challenge for Trump was the COVID-19 pandemic caused by the SARS-COV-2 virus that spread and rushed the world after it appeared in Wuhan, China (Pasteur Institute). He said on the 10th of August 2020, “My administration will stop at nothing to save lives and shield the vulnerable”. This time, Trump called the nation to unity to achieve victory over the virus.

To better understand the difference between Trump’s rhetorics in both electoral campaigns, it is indispensable to mention why Trump won the election in 2016 and lost in 2020. In his 2016 rhetoric, he mobilized community groups that felt socio-economic and cultural insecurity. These were the traditional Republican voters: working, middle-class, no degree whites; rural voters, and protestants (Fougier). Using his pragmatic mentality, he convinced them that the prosperity of people, the availability of jobs, and safety are priorities and success criteria for him. He played on the strings of people’s anxiety about the present

and their fear of the future (Schweibart and Pollak). Add to this the astonishing fact that the vulgarity of his rhetoric, especially clips directed to Muslims, Latinos, African-Americans, and women, increased his chances to win and enlarge his audience (Raston and Collinson).

In 2020, Trump did not bring anything new. Some of his promises were partially fulfilled, others not. During his first four-year term, he proved he had limited skills as a politician, and what made matters worse was his disastrous failure to handle the pandemic of covid 19 as deaths and new cases were constantly increasing. This could have been avoided if he had responded to the initial outbreak by a competent and well-coordinated strategy. At that time, even the dropping of unemployment below 7 percent and the inclusion of the Pfizer vaccine against the coronavirus were not a trump card (Greenblatt).

Conclusion:

The rhetoric of “Make America Great Again” is an encapsulation of a modern form of populism that capitalizes on the division of society into ‘us’ (the people) versus ‘them’ (the elite) and a longing for a bygone era of national glory. Trump reunited the so-called left behind people under the umbrella of the “MAGA” through shared senses of grievances and anti-establishment sentiment. Through the thematic analysis of the “MAGA” rhetoric, it had been concluded that it is not just a campaign slogan but rather a mirror that throws back a strategic agenda that employs exclusionary nationalism and confrontational politics.

**Chapter Two: Racism and Exclusion in “Make
America Great Again” Rhetoric**

Introduction:

Trump’s “Make America Great Again” rhetoric is related to themes of racism and exclusion that are pervasive in American society. Their existence in the U.S. back to the era when minority groups were excluded, and whiteness was at its best. Through his campaign’s rhetoric, Trump promised to call back that era by restoring national security and cultural identity, legitimizing his policies that perpetuate racial exclusion and inequality.

This chapter aims at analysing how the “MAGA” rhetoric was used to shape political identity and social divisions in America. The study also aims to prove how the slogan portrays white supremacy as sacred as opposed to the other ethnic groups, under the guise of patriotism and economic revival. Finally, it examines the effect of Trump’s immigration policies on minority groups in particular, and American politics and society in general.

2.1 Critique of MAGA:

The slogan “MAGA” that was popularized by President Donald Trump during his 2016 electoral campaign has always been criticized as loaded with racism. Before going into detail on the subject, we must define racism. Racism, as defined by Oxford Learner’s Dictionary, is the unfair treatment of people who belong to different races. For Mohn, it is the “belief that some humans are superior to others based on the colour of their skin, language, or place of birth”.

Historically speaking, the slogan calls the spirit of the 1950s during which the white American happy family was being depicted as living in an ideal country. In fact, according to Trump, America was the land of security and safety; no thefts or crimes, and no Islamic mosques or radical jihadist sleeper cells. Trump said: “The slogan inspired me, because to me, it meant jobs. It meant Industry. It meant so much”. The slogan served a specific class of people, namely white men those affected most by women and minorities who gained

power and rights over the past few years (Melton). Rhetorically, the phrase carries multiple interpretations. It appeals to emotions of fear of losing white supremacy. It incites to keep the ethnic majority (white nation) as an important component of the nation alongside other groups.

The slogan's racial implication lies first in the fact that not all American people believe that America's great days were in the past. African Americans, for instance, who suffered from racial segregation before the eruption of the Civil Rights Movement, do not share the same opinion. For them, the slogan denies the eternal struggle of black Americans to get basic rights. Making America great again does not include people of colour. Hence, the “MAGA” was pointed out as a racist slogan because Trump used it to appeal to racially conscious whites and evoke their allegiance. It increased racial animus as well by making an era marked by racial inequality great and glamorous.

2.2 Racism in Trump's Rhetoric:

2.2.1 Historical Context of Racial Tensions:

Racism in the United States has its roots in the British colonial period. It was marked by brutal treatment of the indigenous population (first Americans already living in the North of America, speaking over a thousand languages, and forming 140 to 160 distinct tribes), and African enslavement (Biscotini).

The European explorers had settled in the American territories by the 16th century. They initially formed the famous 13 colonies. Once they had confronted the indigenous population, they described them as being savage and uncivilized and harshly treated them. As a result of the expansion of the American population, natives faced more woes. They stole their lands, stacked them in reservations, and sent their children to boarding schools under the pretext of civilizing them. Consequently, millions of them died because of war and disease. After Native Americans, enslaved Africans brought to the Southern U.S. to work as

labourers in tobacco crops and cotton did not escape mistreatment and discrimination (Hellie, Britanica).

Abolitionist movements in the late 18th and 19th centuries spoke publicly, wrote, and used insurrections to support their cause and raise awareness among slaves, but this did not stop enslavement. The fight over slavery between Northern states and Southern states that relied primarily on slaves to work in the fields led to the declaration of the U.S. Civil War (1861-1865). The war resulted in the signing of the 13th Amendment (1865) which abolished slavery, the 14th Amendment (1868) which granted citizenship to slaves, and the 15th Amendment (1870) which gave them the right to vote. However, Southern lawmakers made the African slaves' dream of racial equality fade away by passing the Jim Crow Laws that allowed segregation and discrimination. It was not until the 1960s that the country witnessed a Civil Rights Movement in which black Americans protested against discrimination and inequality. The movement succeeded in achieving the Civil Rights Act (1964) and the Voting Right Act of 1965.

African Americans weren't the only ones to suffer from racism. In fact, after the economic downturn of the 1870s, Chinese immigrants faced a wave of violent racist attacks as they were accused of stealing jobs from Americans. Hence, this led the American Congress to pass the Chinese Exclusion Act (1882), which stated that Chinese immigrants were banned from entering the U.S. for 10 years. In the 1960s, Immigration Laws in the U.S. designed for specific nations were ended.

Back to the African-Americans issue, after crossing into the twenty-first century, racist practices still existed. As a continuation of the Civil Right Movement, arose the Black Lives Matters movement (BLM) in 2013. The BLM advocated criminal justice, equality in education, and employment. Even politics have not been spared from racism in the U.S. since some white communities did not tolerate Barack Obama (44th U.S. president, 2009-

2017) as a black president. Again, anti-Asian sentiment jumped up on the roof following Covid-19 pandemic (Mohn).

Nevertheless, all the above-mentioned laws that were enacted seeking equality and living with dignity remained ink on paper because racism in American society has been entrenched and deep-rooted for decades. What made things worse was the rise of Donald Trump to power, who has long intensified racial tensions through his racialized rhetoric and controversial policies. By attacking immigrants and obstructing of civil rights laws, he dismantled efforts aimed at combating racism.

2.2.2 Othering and Exclusion:

Donald Trump has always portrayed immigrants as a threat to American security. Immigrants, refugees, and other ethnic minorities represented ‘them’ as opposed to the exclusive ‘us’. Historically, though immigrants contributed to the foundation of the USA both economically and culturally, they were always viewed as dangerous to national unity and the cultural integrity of the nation. They have been linked with rampant unemployment. They have always been represented as the negative ‘others’.

Trump’s hostility towards immigrants, especially Latinos and Muslims, exceeded all expectations. He didn’t waste his time as from the first week in power he began to malign immigrants as potential terrorists, violent, and rapists. Trump’s rhetoric spread a sort of xenophobic fever to the point that immigrants and their families were reduced to destructive, criminal, and parasitic individuals (Quinonez 1-8). In his speeches, Trump used strong pejorative terms like ‘aliens’, ‘illegals’, ‘anchor babies’ to convey the message that foreigners have ‘no-place’ in the U.S., they are ‘less-than’ humans (Quinonez 37).

As mentioned before, Latinos and Muslims were the core concern of Trump. Many Latinos experienced heightened fear, anger, and a sense of vulnerability as a result of the overt legitimization of white nationalism. Latinos, as Trump argued, were a part of the

invading force from South of the border. Trump concerning Latinos immigrants stated: “When Mexico sends its people, they’re not sending their best. [...]. They bringing drugs. They’re bringing crime. They’re rapists”. (Trump 2015)

As an Islamophobia, Trump sought to raise anti-Muslim sentiments. Unfortunately, he succeeded in distorting the image of Muslims. Add to this the fact that the 09/11 attacks paved the way for him. Indeed, since then, Muslims have been stereotyped as extremists and terrorists (Quinonez 5-6). During Trump’s electoral campaign, Islamophobic terms were constantly repeated. The strongest were: racial Islamic terrorism (is a global threat), radical Islam (is the main cause of terrorism), and immigrants and refugees from Muslim countries are dangerous to American security. Then, when he was elected president of the U.S, even his administration was carefully chosen to show off his Islamophobia. His President’s Senior Advisor, Steve Banon, commented: “Islam is not a religion of peace and the West is at war with Islam”. According to Sebastian Gorka, Deputy Assistant to the President, accepting Muslim refugees would be a “national suicide” because “Islam and Koran serve as the basis of terrorism worldwide”. Michael Flynn, President Trump’s National Security Advisor in the White House, criticized Muslims as being a source of national fear.

Trump even used Twitter to spread anti-Muslim sentiment. Through it, he transmitted the idea that Muslims are the cause of every bad thing that might happen in the USA. He created the famous hashtag #DrainTheSwamp. On October 8, 2016, he tweeted: “If elected POTUS- I will stop radical Islamic terrorists in this country! To do this, we need to #DrainTheSwamp! Hence, confirming that all Muslims are “Radical Islamic Terrorists” (Hassan Khan 3-6).

Racism is a complex issue, and it is not new to America. Its existence dates back to the earliest era of the country. In fact, today’s U.S. is not but the result of the struggles of trailblazing immigrants who sought freedom from oppression and persecution. Nevertheless,

to everybody’s astonishment, this same U.S. perceives foreigners as criminals, uneducated, terrorists, invaders, and points at them with the ugliest terms.

Trump, of course, excelled in inciting feelings of hatred and racism. He promoted the rhetoric of “us” (America and its allies as peacemakers) versus “them” (all non -whites and minority groups as the ones who snatched America’s great past). Among the “them”, Muslims, Trump’s biggest nightmare. Trump’s xenophobic narrative about Muslims and Islam as the epicentre of terrorism is embedded in the American psyche. Trump held all Muslims accountable for the sins of a specific group, regardless of their identity.

Besides, Trump and his supporters reject accusations of racism. He frames his populism as a defense of ‘real Americans’ against corrupt elites. His supporters see his focus on immigration restrictions, protectionist economy, and nationalism as a protection for American jobs and culture. Trump’s rhetoric is considered by pro-Trump as a necessary pushback against political correctness and liberal policies rather than a racial animus. They argue that it is more about economic nationalism and anti-elitism than race. In essence, they emphasize patriotism and economic protectionism without racial intent (Baali et al).

2.2.3 Immigration Policies:

Trump’s immigration policies were part of his broader vision of restoring American sovereignty. His major focus was on enhancing border security, restricting asylum access, expanding deportations, and interior enforcement measures. Regarding mass deportation and border security, The U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) declared the deportation of 142,818 non-citizens both from the interior of the country and the border during the period between the beginning of Trump administration (January 20, 2017) and the end of fiscal year (September 2017) (Pierce and Selee 3). To enhance the US-Mexico border security, the Pentagon has sent 1500 additional active-duty troops, as well, to patrol and monitor the surrounding area (Gowayed).

Then, on January 25, 2017, for complete control over the border, Trump signed Executive Order 13767, which stipulated building a wall of approximately 1000 mile and 40 to 50 feet high to prevent illegal crossing. Add to it a “zero tolerance” policy, which meant everyone that is caught crossing the border would immediately be arrested. Trump’s cruel policy shredded families and caused trauma and psychological distress (Clapton 102).

The next point was the restriction of asylum and refugee admission. In fact, during Trump administration, refugees’ admission decreased from 85,000 (during the Obama administration) to 45,000. Moreover, vetting for refugee applicants highly increased especially from countries considered as risky to protect the United States from foreign terrorists. Refugees who already resided in the US territory weren’t allowed to bring their families. Even procedures for legal immigration were toughened; to assess applicants’ admissibility, a huge amount of information was required, which caused the extension and the slowdown of legal admission (Pierce and Selee 4-5).

Finally, Trump’s executive order to ban Muslims, known as the Travel Ban, that was signed on January 20, 2017, was a knockout for immigrants. Trump banned entry from Iraq, Syria, Iran, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Yemen for 90 days, claiming that this was to defend the country from terrorism. Muslim students who applied for education were blocked by the Muslim Ban. (Almasy and Simon).

Throughout his humble political career, Trump has always supplied stories about how specific minority groups posed a threat to the nation and exploited it. On this basis, he framed his immigration policies. As he has always considered that danger comes from immigrants, both legal and illegal, he mobilized all the state resources to suppress and prevent them from entering the American territory. He claimed that illegal immigration is a disastrous invasion at the Southern border, and by deploying military troops and building the wall, it would repulse it. His administration declared a state of emergency from the very beginning of

taking power. Indeed, to prevent the country from presumed terrorists and criminals, and to preserve national security, Trump limited asylum, expedited deportation, and banned Muslims. For him, His policies were set to protect American jobs and ensure public safety. However, they poorly served the working and immigration system.

2.2.4 Racially Charged Language:

Populist leaders generally exploit racial and religious resentment to gain support. Trump didn't go out of line. As a populist demagogue, his racial nationalism and xenophobia are a landmark in his rhetoric. Because of his frequent use of racist and offensive language, it was difficult to list everything. In what follows, the strongest and fiercest expressions are selected.

During his 2016 presidential campaign, Trump's stereotyped Latinos as “blood-thirsty criminal”, “gang members”, rapists, and Latinas mothers with their children as a threat to continued white supremacy and resource drainers (Clapton103-105). Again, a proof of his xenophobic and racist rhetoric against immigrants and minority groups, his saying: “they are genetically predisposed to commit crimes”. In a radio interview, he told the host that all immigrants have “bad genes” (Ward).

On June 3, 2016, at a campaign rally, Trump pointed to a black man and said, «Look at my African American over here. Look at him” to stress how a black man looks among whites. The New York Times in June 2017 reported that, at an Oval Office meeting, Trump declared Haitian Immigrants “all have Aids” and Nigerian immigrants will never “go back to their huts” in Africa (Finnegan and Barabak).

His unrelenting derogatory comments about Muslims and Islam reinforced his racist rhetoric. For Trump, Muslims are to be blamed for most of the disorder in America, and they are all accountable for terrorist activities. He described Muslims as “grave issue”,

“terrorists”, “religious extremists”, and “anti-democratic bodies”. His racism extended even to sacred places; he said mosques are “intolerant” (H. Khan).

The FBI released a statistical report stating that hate crimes reached their peak as a result of the high spread of racial animus during Trump’s 2016 electoral campaign and after he was elected as U.S. president. Hateful harassment, intimidation, and racist slogans towards minority groups frighteningly rose (Petulla, Kupperman, and Schneider).

Throughout his language, Trump revealed his racist nature, and his intention to stress racial division and bullying minorities is illustrated. He founded his campaign by focusing on the anxieties of the white middle class. Trump fanned the flames of racism and sowed the seeds of division to reap a dramatic uptick in hate crimes. Under his biases, poisonous racism spread everywhere and jumped from the margins to the mainstream.

2.3 Impact and perception:

Donald Trump’s rhetoric has had a significant impact, repercussions, and has been perceived differently. The majority of supporters were white-working class people who viewed his rhetoric as a liberating shift from politically correct norms, and those who had the same ideological thought about American sovereignty and immigrants. Their expression of negative emotions of fear, anger, and hatred against the elite and dangerous others illustrated the emotional connection that Trump had built with them (Rowland 1-3). Besides, his opponents blamed him because of his divisive and dehumanizing rhetoric. He has been criticized of using authoritarian tactics through which he undermined democratic institutions, and encouraged racism and xenophobia (Nacos, Shapino, and Elkon).

Joe Biden (46th U.S president, 2021-2025) said about Trump regarding his rhetoric: “a nasty and vicious racist” (Quartzy 17). In addition, large and small newspapers in the country were fed up with Trump’s offensive rhetoric against the media. They launched an editorial campaign under the logo “The dirty war on the free press must stop”. Some of these

newspapers were: The Boston Globe, MSNBC, The Dallas Morning News, and The Tennessean (Herman).

Regardless of his rhetoric, Trump was also criticized by many scholars and commentators for his lack of political experience, multiple sins, and his bad performance in presidential debates (Rowland 11).

In addition to various reactions, Trump’s rhetoric has had contrasting impacts on his campaign and presidency. Voters who favoured nativist policies and strict immigration policies were energized by his anti-immigrant rhetoric, which highly deepened racial divides in public opinion. Hence, this had increased his chances of winning the elections. Nonetheless, his blunt, inflammatory rhetoric alienated many of the American citizens, namely Latinos, who felt unsafe and fearful (Vidal).

After studying Trump’s electoral career and comparing his rhetoric during his first and second campaigns, I concluded that Trump is just a new incarnation of racism that has ever existed in the U.S., and it was a pillar of its foundations. Trump’s lack of sense of governance management, haste in making decisions, and quickly implementing them, and his clear contempt for the constraints of the Constitution constituted a threat to democracy. The factors that brought him to power in his first term also made him lose in 2020. In fact, tapping into white middle-class anger and anxieties, and voters’ dissatisfaction with the establishment (the elite) no longer helped him. In 2020, the electorate’s priorities had shifted in a different direction. Moreover, the knockout blow that destroyed him was his mismanagement of the Covid-19 pandemic. His administration was criticized for a failure to adopt a clear policy to combat the virus.

Conclusion:

To conclude, the slogan “Make America Great Again” is a nostalgic vision of a mythical past dominated by whites. It appeals to anxious voters about demographic changes, multiculturalism, and minority groups empowerment. The “MAGA” narrative implicitly calls for racial segregation on the basis of ethnic, religious, and cultural differences. In fact, Trump’s othering of people is linked with their race, gender, or alleged link to a certain religion namely Islam. His immigration policies, for instance, are based on his racist ideology which makes it impossible for immigrants especially illegals to reach the kind of better life they dreamt of.

General Conclusion

On the whole, Trump's "Make America Great Again" rhetoric is a depiction of the way populism intersects with racism. What resulted from this combination is the reinforcement of systemic inequality and exclusionary nationalism. Significantly, Trump is a "Populist par excellence"; his style embodies populist traits. He, by all means, has appointed himself as the voice of "the common people" against the corrupt establishment. According to him, the American identity is only built on white race and his exclusionary nationalist ideas. Trump's outsider persona changed the trajectory of political campaigns; he skilfully used the social media to communicate directly with his supporters which strengthened his populist connection with 'the people'. The "MAG" rhetoric is a catalyst for social division and exclusion of marginalized communities. Then again, the research confirmed that the use of sarcastic and inflammatory terms to address media outlets, opponents, and stereotyping specific groups boosted exclusion and racial discrimination. Over and above, the "Make America Great Again" rhetoric undermines inclusivity and enhances xenophobia as it shows resentment for diversity.

The main concern of this dissertation was to investigate the themes behind Trump's messaging strategies, and to understand how the "MAGA" rhetoric utilised populist discourse and racial beliefs. Our objective is to highlight how racial divisions are still exploited for specific purposes despite the claim of democracy and openness; which perpetuates inequality. By talking this topic, we contribute to the already existing body of language by shedding light on how populism and racism -woven together -manifest in Trump's rhetoric and to evaluate the impact of the "MAGA" slogan on voters.

To delve deeper into the specifics of the research results, we display each chapter separately. Chapter one includes definitions that are essential since they pave the way for the subject in addition to giving an overview of the background of populism, the "MAGA" slogan, and how trump stormed the political arena. Moreover, it sheds light on Trump's campaign themes and a comparative study of Trump's rhetoric in 2016 and 2020 electoral

campaigns. Through this chapter and with the progress of research, it is concluded that populist themes in the “MAGA” rhetoric are evident as the “people” (white Americans) are defined as victims that are left behind by the political elite, and the “others” (minority groups) are scapegoated. The “MAGA” reflects populist appeals to voters who are frightened by demographic and cultural changes by invoking a nostalgic past when America was white and socially hierarchical. Trump’s objectives behind such a rhetoric are to reshape political discourse around themes of exclusionary nationalism, economic protectionism, and to cultivate doubt about the elite and incitement towards globalization and immigration.

Chapter two provides a comprehensive critic of “MAGA” rhetoric. It leads us to the fact that the populist discourse is racially underpinned. It rises hostility towards immigrants, minorities, and progressive social movements creating a boundary that subordinates and excludes them. It mobilizes white voters by conflating national identity with whiteness and normalizing racism making it socially acceptable. Hence, legitimizing discriminatory policies such as voter suppression, restricted access to services, and immigration bans.

All things considered, the issue still needs further investigation. Therefore, we recommend future students and scholars to continue the research in this topic to help policymakers, educators, and populations all over the world respond better to the challenges of divisive rhetoric. In essence, such studies are vital to explore ways to foster inclusion, social cohesion, uproot racism, and to build a more informed and equitable societies.

As for the limitations, the issue is a contemporary one and still ongoing which requires continuous follow-up and research. Add to this, the shortcoming of the qualitative approach as data-collection method and analysis require effort, multiplicity of resources, and is time-intensive.

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Appendices



President Trump points to the slogan on a “Make America Great Again” hat at a 2017 rally in Melbourne, Fla. Associated Press File Photo



Trump's border wall

Donald Trump's proposed wall on the US-Mexico border will be over 1,600 km long, which will replace the current porous fencing of about 1,000km. The rest of the border is protected by natural obstacles.

Source: Al Jazeera, P2016, US Customs and Border Protection

* Assumed locations: United States, Mexico border

Résumé :

La campagne présidentielle de Trump en 2016 a été marquée par le populisme, le racisme et la rhétorique "Rendre à l'Amérique sa grandeur ". Ces éléments ont œuvré pour mobiliser les électeurs de race blanche qui partageaient les mêmes inquiétudes culturelles et économiques en suscitant chez eux des sentiments de nostalgie pour un passé où l'Amérique était idéale. Leur sentiment d'injustice et d'indignation s'exprime par un ressentiment racial. Compte tenu de la déclaration ci-dessus, il est nécessaire d'enquêter sur la raison pour laquelle Trump a adopté cette stratégie politique raciste. Le travail actuel vise à examiner comment la polarisation et l'exclusion sont ancrées dans les messages populistes à travers la rhétorique "Rendre à l'Amérique sa grandeur". Pour atteindre cet objectif, une approche qualitative est adoptée pour une analyse thématique de la rhétorique "Rendre à l'Amérique sa grandeur " afin de saisir comment elle construit des récits racialisés et populistes. Les résultats révèlent que ce discours renforce l'exclusion et la discrimination. Il racialise la nation en définissant les citoyens blancs comme dominants, tout en présentant les minorités et les immigrants comme des menaces, créant ainsi de l'hostilité et légitimant le racisme. La rhétorique "Rendre l'Amérique sa grandeur" est un moteur de populisme.

ملخص:

تميزت حملة ترامب الرئاسية لعام 2016 بالشعبوية والعنصرية وخطاب "جعل أمريكا عظيمة من جديد" بشكل ملحوظ، وقد عملت هذه العناصر على حشد الناخبين البيض الذين لديهم قلق من الوضع الثقافي والإقتصادي وذلك من خلال إثارة مشاعر الحنين لديهم الى الماضي المثالي لأمريكا فعبّرت هذه الفئة عن شعورها بالظلم والسخط من خلال إظهار إستياء عنصري. بالنظر الى البيان أعلاه فمن الضروري التحقيق في السبب وراء اعتماد ترامب هذه السياسة العنصرية. يهدف هذا العمل الى دراسة كيفية ترسيخ الاستقطاب والاستبعاد العنصري من خلال الرسائل الشعبوية في خطاب "جعل أمريكا عظيمة من جديد"، ولتحقيق هذا الهدف تم اعتماد نهج نوعي للتحليل الموضوعي لخطاب "جعل أمريكا عظيمة من جديد" من أجل فهم كيفية بناء السرديات العنصرية والشعبوية. تكشف النتائج أن هذا الخطاب يعزز الإقصاء والتمييز. فهو يصنف الأمة عرقيا من خلال تعريف المواطنين البيض على أنهم مهيمنين بينما يتم تصوير الأقليات والمهاجرين على أنهم تهديدات مما يخلق العداء ويشرع العنصرية. إن خطاب "جعل أمريكا عظيمة من جديد" هو محرك للشعبوية.