

# Digital Demagogue: The Critical Candidacy of Donald J. Trump

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*Over the last several months, businessperson Donald Trump has taken the lead in the Republican primary race. His flamboyant personality and unusually aggressive speech has drawn much attention and criticism. Journalists and academics have posited that Trump's rhetoric is that of a demagogue. This essay catalogues the existing definitions of demagoguery, examines how Trump's rhetoric may qualify, and outlines some ways in which demagogues may function differently in a digital world.*

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The long road to businessperson Donald Trump's nomination as the presidential candidate for the Republican party has drawn much attention from rhetorical scholars. His flamboyant personality and unusually aggressive speech have prompted both journalists and academics to label him a demagogue. If this assessment is accurate, Trump may be positioned to become the latest in a category of leaders who have historically left devastating legacies. However, accusations of demagoguery should not be made lightly, as they may be used to silence or discredit marginalized voices.<sup>1</sup> Since having a demagogue in the office of President would be disastrous, the question of determining whether his rhetoric fits the description is an important one. Even if Trump's bid is unsuccessful, his campaign is raising issues and lines of argument that have not previously been associated with presidential campaign rhetoric, or even with polite society. Roberts-Miller has described how argument and ideology can both shape policy and influence individual behavior.<sup>2</sup> In the digital age, a demagogue has the capacity to reach more people than ever before, as the internet serves as both the catalyst and the cauldron in the creation of a movement. This candidate, at this time, may be in a uniquely powerful position to influence political rhetoric in the United States for decades to come.

This essay examines existing definitions of demagoguery, analyzes Trump's rhetoric, including some of the circumstances that may have contributed to his rise, and outlines how socio-economic context may be less significant in understanding demagoguery in the digital age than it has been in previous eras.

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<sup>1</sup> J. Michael Hogan and David Tell, "Demagoguery and Democratic Deliberation: The Search for Rules of Discursive Engagement," *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 9, no. 3 (2006): 479-87.

<sup>2</sup> Patricia Roberts-Miller, *Fanatical Schemes: Proslavery Rhetoric and the Tragedy of Consensus* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2009).

## What is a Demagogue?

While the term is fairly commonly used, defining “demagogue” can be difficult. Some descriptions focus on the personality and characteristics of the speaker, while others focus on the particular rhetorical techniques employed. Hogan and Tell caution that “demagogue” is often used as little more than an epithet, rather than a specific descriptor.<sup>3</sup> Roberts-Miller points out that frequently “demagogue” is used merely to mean someone whose politics one does not like.<sup>4</sup> Gilbert describes demagoguery as inherently immoral, a form of political unscrupulousness.<sup>5</sup> Ceaser asserts the importance of a rhetor’s intent in classifying one as a demagogue.<sup>6</sup> Although the avowed goals of a demagogue may be neutral or even positive, their real motivation is an increase in influence, power or gain.<sup>7</sup> A demagogue works to increase influence, rather than being focused on governing or shaping policy, whereas a statesman is understood to be working for the good of society, or at least their constituents.<sup>8</sup> But intent can be extremely difficult to parse, as Ceaser notes: “one man’s statesman, after all, is another man’s demagogue.”<sup>9</sup>

While determining exactly what a demagogue is may be difficult, descriptions of what they do abound. Logue and Dorgan argue that the word demagogue implies insincerity and opportunism.<sup>10</sup> Demagogues make assertions or arguments without regard for truth.<sup>11</sup> Ceaser adds that the demagogue relies on appeals to three main emotions: envy, fear and hope. Religion is a powerful tool of the demagogue, since the speaker’s invocation of the divine can inspire all three of those passions.<sup>12</sup> They pander to passion, prejudice, bigotry and ignorance rather than appealing to reason.<sup>13</sup> Roberts-Miller offers the following definition of demagoguery: “Demagoguery is polarizing propaganda that motivates members of an in-group to hate and scapegoat some outgroup(s), largely by promising certainty, stability, and ‘an escape from freedom.’”<sup>14</sup> She goes on to explain that instances of demagogic rhetoric may occur without any one individual emerging as a demagogic leader, simply because this rhetoric is an expression of prejudices and fears that are already latent within the culture.<sup>15</sup>

Many scholars have catalogued the rhetorical strategies of individual demagogues, or movements that employed demagogic arguments.<sup>16</sup> While demagogues may employ a wide variety of

<sup>3</sup> Hogan and Tell, “Demagoguery and Democratic Deliberation.”

<sup>4</sup> Patricia Roberts-Miller, “Democracy, Demagoguery, and Critical Rhetoric,” *Rhetoric and Public Affairs*, 8, no. 3 (2005): 459-76.

<sup>5</sup> Gustave M. Gilbert, “Dictators and Demagogues,” *Journal of Social Issues* 11 (1955): 51-53.

<sup>6</sup> James W. Ceaser, “Demagoguery, Statesmanship, and the American Presidency,” *Critical Review* 19, no. 2 (2007): 257-98.

<sup>7</sup> Charles W. Lomas, “The Rhetoric of Demagoguery,” *Western Speech* 25, no. 3 (1961): 160-68.

<sup>8</sup> Ceaser, “Demagoguery, Statesmanship, and the American Presidency.”

<sup>9</sup> Ceaser, “Demagoguery, Statesmanship, and the American Presidency,” 259.

<sup>10</sup> Cal Logue and Howard Dorgan, “The Demagogue,” in *The Oratory of Southern Demagogues*, ed. Cal Logue and Howard Dorgan, 1-11 (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1981).

<sup>11</sup> J. Justin Gustainis, “Demagoguery and Political Rhetoric: A Review of the Literature,” *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 20 (1990): 155, 158-60.

<sup>12</sup> Ceaser, “Demagoguery, Statesmanship, and the American Presidency.”

<sup>13</sup> Gilbert, “Dictators and Demagogues.”

<sup>14</sup> Roberts-Miller, “Democracy, Demagoguery, and Critical Rhetoric,” 462.

<sup>15</sup> Roberts-Miller, “Democracy, Demagoguery, and Critical Rhetoric”; Patricia Roberts-Miller, “Conspiracy Bullshit,” *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 45, no. 5 (2015): 464-67.

<sup>16</sup> Ceaser, “Demagoguery, Statesmanship, and the American Presidency”; Gilbert, “Dictators and Demagogues”; Allan L. Larson, “Southern Demagogues: A Study in Charismatic Leadership,” (Ph.D. diss., Northwestern University, 1964); Logue & Dorgan, “The Demagogue”; Lomas, *The Rhetoric of Demagoguery*; Reinhard H. Luthin, *American*

specific appeals, these appeals can be classified into three rhetorical categories: scapegoating, rhetoric of paranoia, and rhetoric of subverted authority.

*Scapegoating:* Demagogues pander to audiences by identifying a root cause for all their problems in the form of a scapegoat, or possibly scapegoats. By engaging in stereotyping of out groups, the demagogue attempts to justify prejudice against them.<sup>17</sup> The victims of oppression and prejudice are framed as the oppressors, presenting an easy explanation to the demagogue's audience for their present perceived misfortunes and offering a simple solution in the form of removing or subjugating that group, all the while relieving them of guilt for their treatment of the outgroup.<sup>18</sup>

*Rhetoric of Paranoia:* Demagogues arouse and then capitalize on their audience's resentment and paranoia.<sup>19</sup> By stoking a sense of outrage, humiliation at a loss of influence, or an obsession with the perceived decline of society, the demagogue is able to compel their followers to renounce due process and rule of law in their rush to marginalize, expel or punish the scapegoated outgroup.<sup>20</sup> This paranoia leads to a distrust of authority,<sup>21</sup> regardless of whether or not evidence exists to support their suspicion.<sup>22</sup>

*Rhetoric of Authority:* Demagogues cast themselves as truth-tellers, as the ultimate authority on matters of importance.<sup>23</sup> Audiences are discouraged from seeking other viewpoints, and questions or criticism are treated as a great betrayal.<sup>24</sup> The demagogue presents himself as someone uniquely qualified to handle the present circumstances,<sup>25</sup> such that disagreement constitutes treachery.<sup>26</sup> The paranoia and resentment fomented by the demagogue leads to distrust of traditional institutions of authority and information.<sup>27</sup> Demagogues will tend to discredit other leaders, suppress the media, and subvert educational institutions in order to control the narrative and silence opposition making it difficult to promote an alternative point of view.<sup>28</sup>

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*Demagogues: Twentieth Century* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1959); Amy E. Mendes, "A Grounded Theory of the Justification of Exclusion" *Proceedings* 85, Spring (2016); Kerry Owens, "Contemporary Southern Demagogue: A Rhetorical Analysis of the Message of David Duke," *Studies in Popular Culture* 19, no. 2 (1996): 319-33; Roberts-Miller, "Democracy, Demagoguery, and Critical Rhetoric"; Roberts-Miller, *Fanatical Schemes*; Ruth Wodak, "Old and New Demagoguery: The Rhetoric of Exclusion," *openDemocracy.com*, May 10, 2011, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/ruth-wodak/old-and-new-demagoguery-rhetoric-of-exclusion>.

<sup>17</sup> Stephen E. Bronner, *The Bigot: Why Prejudice Persists* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), 59; Dan Carter, *The Politics of Rage: George Wallace, the Origins of the New Conservatism, and the Transformation of American Politics* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995), 468.

<sup>18</sup> Bronner, *The Bigot*, 60.

<sup>19</sup> Richard Hofstadter, "The Paranoid Style in American Politics," *Harper's* (November, 1964): 77-86.

<sup>20</sup> Thomas W. Benson, "The Rhetoric of Civility: Power, Authenticity, and Democracy." *Journal of Contemporary Rhetoric* 1, no. 1. (2011): 25; Bronner, *The Bigot*, 13, 29; Mendes, "A Grounded Theory of the Justification of Exclusion"; Robert O. Paxton, *The Anatomy of Fascism* (New York: Random House, 2004), 218; Roberts-Miller, *Fanatical Schemes*, 46.

<sup>21</sup> Benson, "The Rhetoric of Civility"; Richard Hofstadter, *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life* (New York: Random House, 1962); Paxton, *The Anatomy of Fascism*.

<sup>22</sup> Roberts-Miller, *Fanatical Schemes*.

<sup>23</sup> Patrick Healy and Maggie Haberman, "95,000 Words, Many of Them Ominous, from Donald Trump's Tongue," *New York Times*, December 5, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/12/06/us/politics/95000-words-many-of-them-ominous-from-donald-trumps-tongue.html>

<sup>24</sup> Roberts-Miller, *Fanatical Schemes*.

<sup>25</sup> Healy and Haberman, "95,000 Words"; Logue and Dorgan, "The Demagogue."

<sup>26</sup> Roberts-Miller, *Fanatical Schemes*.

<sup>27</sup> Hofstadter, "The Paranoid Style in American Politics," 81-82; Luthin, *American Demagogues*.

<sup>28</sup> Benson, "The Rhetoric of Civility"; Hofstadter, *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life*; Luthin, *American Demagogues*.

These categories encompass a myriad of different types of arguments and assertions, and are born out of six decades of scholarship on demagogic rhetoric. They may prove useful in analyzing the rhetoric of Donald Trump, to determine if his speech features the characteristics of the three categories.

### Is Trump a Demagogue?

Many have already called Trump's rhetoric demagogic.<sup>29</sup> His campaign rhetoric has been characterized as crude, cruel, angry, and bigoted.<sup>30</sup> Others have noted his use of ad hominem attacks and personal insults,<sup>31</sup> "calling political opponents 'stupid' (at least 30 times), 'horrible' (14 times), 'weak' (13 times)."<sup>32</sup> And these epithets were all uttered before the end of 2015. In the time since, the count has undoubtedly gone up. Trump's rhetoric is frequently criticized as being incoherent, lacking ideology, and narcissistic.<sup>33</sup> While these elements are shocking, they alone do not constitute demagoguery. To determine if Trump's rhetoric sinks to the level of demagoguery, the three categories of demagogic rhetoric should be present.

### Trump's Scapegoating

Trump's rhetoric is strongly eliminationist – he has called for the deportation of all undocumented immigrants, the construction of a wall to keep them out, and a complete moratorium on any Muslims entering the United States.<sup>34</sup> He has characterized undocumented immigrants as criminals, killers and rapists, and accused them of bringing disease and committing crimes. He also promised to deport or remove any Syrian refugees who have recently arrived if he wins the presidency.<sup>35</sup>

Anti-Muslim sentiment is common, and frequently is built upon a mischaracterization of the tenets of the faith, most notably the idea that all Muslims are terrorists, or that Islam is an inherently violent religion.<sup>36</sup> Trump capitalizes on this latent fear and distrust, holding out his promise to rid the nation of this threat to win the trust and loyalty of his audience. His manner of describing

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<sup>29</sup> Healy and Haberman, "95,000 Words"; Joe Klein, "Trump – The Incoherent Demagogue," *Time*, January 10, 2016, <http://time.com/4174328/donald-trump-thoughts-politician/>; Simon Malloy, "Donald Trump is the GOP Now: Sorry, Bob Dole, and even Dick Cheney. This is Your Party," *Salon*, [http://www.salon.com/2015/12/10/donald\\_trump\\_is\\_the\\_gop\\_now\\_sorry\\_bob\\_dole\\_and\\_even\\_dick\\_cheney\\_this\\_is\\_your\\_party/](http://www.salon.com/2015/12/10/donald_trump_is_the_gop_now_sorry_bob_dole_and_even_dick_cheney_this_is_your_party/); Greg Sargent, "Donald Trump is a Highly Skilled Demagogue. This One Chart Shows it's Working," *The Washington Post*, January 26, 2016, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/plum-line/wp/2016/01/26/donald-trump-is-a-highly-skilled-demagogue-this-one-chart-proves-it/>; Ben Schreckinger, "White Supremacist Group Sees Trump Bump," *Politico*, December 20, 2015, <http://www.politico.com/story/2015/12/donald-trump-white-supremacists-216620>; Richard A. Wilson, "Why Trump Emphasizes Emotions over Facts," *New Republic*, January 28, 2016, <https://newrepublic.com/article/128550/trump-emphasizes-emotion-facts>.

<sup>30</sup> Peter Wehner, "Why I Will Never Vote for Donald Trump," *New York Times*, January 14, 2016, [http://www.nytimes.com/2016/01/14/opinion/campaign-stops/why-i-will-never-vote-for-donald-trump.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/01/14/opinion/campaign-stops/why-i-will-never-vote-for-donald-trump.html?_r=0).

<sup>31</sup> Jasmine Lee and Kevin Quealy, "Introducing the Upshot's Encyclopedia of Donald Trump's Twitter Insults," *The Upshot*. *The New York Times*, January 28, 2016, <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/01/29/upshot/introducing-the-upshots-encyclopedia-of-donald-trumps-twitter-insults.html>.

<sup>32</sup> Healy and Haberman, "95,000 Words."

<sup>33</sup> Healy and Haberman, "95,000 Words."

<sup>34</sup> Malloy, "Donald Trump is the GOP Now"; Mendes, "A Grounded Theory of the Justification of Exclusion."

<sup>35</sup> Healy and Haberman, "95,000 Words."

<sup>36</sup> Jonathan Githens-Mazer, "The Rhetoric and Reality: Radicalisation and Political Discourse," *International Political Science Review* 33, no. 5 (2012): 556-67; Mendes, "A Grounded Theory of the Justification of Exclusion."

outgroups such as immigrants, Muslims, and refugees relies heavily on “us/them” dichotomous language and “harsh words and violent imagery.”<sup>37</sup>

### Trump’s Rhetoric of Paranoia

One prominent feature of Trump’s rhetoric is outrage. He expresses angry disbelief, frequently speaking of what a laughingstock the nation has become.<sup>38</sup> He bemoans our lack of “winning,” promising that when he is president we will win. He describes the terrible state of affairs, “We are a country that doesn’t win any more. We don’t win anymore, when was the last time we won? We don’t win on trade, we don’t win in the military, we don’t beat ISIS, we don’t do anything, we’re not good, we are not in the same place.”<sup>39</sup> Trump references over and over circumstances which he says cause a sense of shame or discontent, and promises to bring an end to them.<sup>40</sup>

Trump’s paranoid rhetoric is used by him to justify extreme reactions. Trump employs violent imagery, graphically describing the beheadings perpetrated by ISIL, and has advocated for the use of waterboarding and other forms of torture. He seems perfectly willing to countenance illegal acts and abandon due process to combat the threats he invokes. He voiced approval when his supporters physically assaulted a Black Lives Matter protestor at one of his rallies.<sup>41</sup>

Trump plays on the anxieties and fears of his audiences over social change, economic instability, enemies real and imagined, and the influx of minorities.<sup>42</sup> These fears and anxieties are already extant, though their validity is questionable. Even though the probability of a terrorist attack affecting any one individual is tiny, the perception of that risk is much greater, and this fear is what Trump plays upon.<sup>43</sup> “The anger of the Trump constituency simply cannot be rationally justified.”<sup>44</sup>

### Trump’s Rhetoric of Authority

Trump employs the rhetoric of authority by holding himself up as a model of leadership, a great man of destiny. He repeatedly trumpets his own success, intelligence, wealth, and bizarrely, robust health.<sup>45</sup> He equates his own wealth with the idea of American exceptionalism, holding himself up as an exemplar, a self-made man, whose virtue is evident in his success.

His repeated assertions that he’s going to build a great wall charm his supporters, despite the fact that there is no supporting evidence that it is possible or even likely.<sup>46</sup> He simply refuses to acknowledge factual evidence against his claims, such as when he insisted that Muslims cheered when the World Trade Center fell, despite the utter lack of journalistic or video evidence of such

<sup>37</sup> Healy and Haberman, “95,000 Words”; Mendes, “A Grounded Theory of the Justification of Exclusion.”

<sup>38</sup> Paxton, *The Anatomy of Fascism*.

<sup>39</sup> Audie Cornish, (Host), “Leading Republicans Deliver Closing Arguments to Iowa Voters” [Radio broadcast episode]. *All Things Considered*, Washington, DC: National Public Radio, January 29, 2016, <http://www.npr.org/2016/01/29/464893260/leading-republicans-deliver-closing-arguments-to-iowa-voters>.

<sup>40</sup> Healy and Haberman, “95,000 Words.”

<sup>41</sup> Healy and Haberman, “95,000 Words.”

<sup>42</sup> Healy and Haberman, “95,000 Words.”

<sup>43</sup> Githens-Mazer, “The Rhetoric and Reality,” 560.

<sup>44</sup> Klein, “Trump – The Incoherent Demagogue.”

<sup>45</sup> Harold Bornstein, “Statement on Donald J. Trump Record of Health,” *Donald J. Trump for President*, December 4, 2015, [https://www.donaldjtrump.com/images/uploads/trump\\_health\\_record.pdf](https://www.donaldjtrump.com/images/uploads/trump_health_record.pdf); Mendes, “A Grounded Theory of the Justification of Exclusion.”

<sup>46</sup> Sargent, “Donald Trump is a Highly Skilled Demagogue.”

an occurrence.<sup>47</sup> By telling them what they want to hear, and discounting the credibility of anyone who questions him, Trump slowly degrades his supporters' trust in traditional sources of authority and information, as well as in objective facts, numbers, or government or news agencies.<sup>48</sup> When anyone dares to disagree with him, he becomes angry and has them removed from his presence, or stands back and lets his enthusiastic crowds do it for him.<sup>49</sup> He is so confident in his supporters that he stated that he believed he could 'shoot someone on 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue' and his supporters would remain loyal.<sup>50</sup>

Trump clearly has many of the characteristic behaviors and rhetorical strategies of a demagogue. Like most demagogues, he is entertaining to listen to, and many credit his outrageous behavior for increasing interest in the primary.<sup>51</sup> However, the negative ramifications of this demagogic behavior for both the party and the public are very real. Because the nominee becomes the face of the party, Trump's excesses have begun to reflect on all Republicans and by extension, all Americans. While he has undoubtedly mobilized a base of support, he has also used bigoted and xenophobic language,<sup>52</sup> given renewed credibility to previously discredited claims, intentionally undermined trust in credible sources, and made patently false statements.<sup>53</sup> His Twitter feed is a laundry list of personal insults against other candidates, journalists, news outlets, and anyone who criticizes him.<sup>54</sup> The ramifications of his rhetoric may echo long past this election season, whether he wins or not.

### How did Trump Rise to Prominence?

Previous studies of demagogic rhetoric has largely been focused on the characteristics of the rhetor,<sup>55</sup> and the particular rhetorical techniques employed to sway audiences.<sup>56</sup> But as authors disagree about the nature of demagoguery, and especially over the question of whether the key factor is the rhetor or the rhetoric, it may be valuable to examine the significance of the context.

Certain contextual factors are common across many historical examples of demagoguery. Larson described how the socio-economic unrest of a particular time sets the stage for a demagogue to emerge.<sup>57</sup> Specifically, there is generally widespread economic or social unrest; the general population feels demoralized or hopeless, with an accompanying sense of anger or outrage; distrust of institutions and rejection of experts; racist or xenophobic rhetoric becomes more prominent as

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<sup>47</sup> Eugene Kiely, "Trump, Carson on 9/11 'Celebrations.'" *FactCheck.org*, November 24, 2015, <http://www.factcheck.org/2015/11/trump-carson-on-911-celebrations/>

<sup>48</sup> Healy and Haberman, "95,000 Words."

<sup>49</sup> Wilson, "Why Trump Emphasizes Emotions over Facts."

<sup>50</sup> Colin Campbell, "Donald Trump Jokes That He Could 'Shoot Somebody' and Not Lose Any Voters," *Business Insider*, January 23, 2016, <http://www.businessinsider.com/donald-trump-least-racist-person-don-lemon-2015-12>.

<sup>51</sup> Sargent, "Donald Trump is a Highly Skilled Demagogue."

<sup>52</sup> Wehner, "Why I Will Never Vote for Donald Trump."

<sup>53</sup> Jack Shafer, "Donald Trump, American Demagogue," *Politico*, August 10, 2015, <http://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2015/08/dont-write-trumps-obit-yet-121232>.

<sup>54</sup> Lee and Quealy, "Introducing the Upshot's Encyclopedia of Donald Trump's Twitter Insults."

<sup>55</sup> Carter, *The Politics of Rage*; Ceaser, "Demagoguery, Statesmanship, and the American Presidency"; Roberts-Miller, "Democracy, Demagoguery, and Critical Rhetoric"; Roberts-Miller, *Fanatical Schemes*.

<sup>56</sup> Gustainis, "Demagoguery and Political Rhetoric"; Hogan and Tell, "Demagoguery and Democratic Deliberation."

<sup>57</sup> Larson, *Southern Demagogues*; Shafer, "Donald Trump, American Demagogue."

people cast about for a scapegoat; and, previously apolitical people begin to look for a candidate to rally around.<sup>58</sup>

### *Economic Instability*

Unlike past demagogues, Trump's rise did not come at the nadir of an economic crisis. Although the current economic recovery is not complete, many of the economic metrics are near pre-2008 levels.<sup>59</sup> Unfortunately, increasing income inequality may prohibit many from experiencing the improving economy. It could be argued that, just as Germany's defeat in World War I and ensuing economic plight made way for the rise of Hitler,<sup>60</sup> and the poverty and discontent of a post-Reconstruction South served as a cradle for the Southern Demagogues,<sup>61</sup> Donald Trump may owe some of his success to the lingering sense of economic hopelessness. Anger against those in the financial industry who are seen as responsible for the economic downturn lingers as well. The question remains, however, whether these circumstances are sufficient to explain the incredible success of Trump's demagogic rhetoric.

### *Conservative Resentment*

If the economic climate alone is not sufficient to explain the rise of Trump, other causes must be considered. Hofstadter points out that "American politics has often been an arena for angry minds."<sup>62</sup> The simmering discontent and increasing fractiousness of the conservative movement may provide an explanation.

"Trump is not an aberration; he's the end product of years-long Republican political strategy that exploited white resentment and nurtured xenophobia."<sup>63</sup> Malloy argues that the rise of someone like Trump is the natural consequence of the trajectory of Republican ideology. Just as southern demagogues of the past were able to rise to prominence in response to the concerns of poor whites,<sup>64</sup> Trump's rise may be partially attributable to years of right wing pundits and partisan media outlets who created the perfect audience for a demagogue: an audience that is terrified and angry. His rhetoric is not unlike previous Republican candidates such as Pat Buchanan, or commentators such as Ann Coulter.<sup>65</sup> Trump's pandering to evangelical Christians and hawkish tone with regard to Syrian refugees brings to mind Bronner's description of the ideology of the George W. Bush administration as being "free markets, militarism, and parochialism."<sup>66</sup>

Though Trump has positioned himself in opposition to the Republican party elites, relishing his status as a "political outsider," his rhetoric may reflect "what Republican politicians and their

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<sup>58</sup> Carter, *The Politics of Rage*; Ceaser, "Demagoguery, Statesmanship, and the American Presidency"; Gustainis, "Demagoguery and Political Rhetoric"; Hogan and Tell, "Demagoguery and Democratic Deliberation"; Roberts-Miller, "Democracy, Demagoguery, and Critical Rhetoric"; Roberts-Miller, *Fanatical Schemes*; Roberts-Miller, "Conspiracy Bullshit."

<sup>59</sup> Joshua Brown, "American Economy Blues: Everything You Need to Worry About," *Fortune*, August 20, 2015, <http://fortune.com/2015/08/20/american-economy-worries/>; Klein, "Trump – The Incoherent Demagogue."

<sup>60</sup> Paxton, *The Anatomy of Fascism*.

<sup>61</sup> Carter, *The Politics of Rage*; Logue and Dorgan, "The Demagogue."

<sup>62</sup> Hofstadter, "The Paranoid Style in American Politics."

<sup>63</sup> Malloy, "Donald Trump is the GOP Now."

<sup>64</sup> Owens, "Contemporary Southern Demagogue."

<sup>65</sup> Wehner, "Why I Will Never Vote For Donald Trump."

<sup>66</sup> Bronner, *The Bigot*, 163.

conservative backers believe and say.”<sup>67</sup> Trump is perhaps most like the Tea Party wing of the Republican party, who are similarly rebellious against party leadership. Their rise to prominence during the presidency of Barack Obama “energized the prejudices of a reactionary mass base,”<sup>68</sup> creating a perfect opportunity for a demagogue to emerge.

### *Anti-Intellectualism*

During times of instability people start to lose faith in existing institutions and reject rational leaders who base their arguments on dry data.<sup>69</sup> Hofstadter wrote of anti-intellectualism that it is “a resentment of the life of the mind, and those who are considered to represent it; and a disposition to constantly minimize the value of that life.”<sup>70</sup> Some have pointed to anti-intellectualism in the rhetoric of the Tea Party wing of the Republican Party, who reject scientific evidence on subjects such as climate change. Bronner characterizes the Tea Party as “reinforced by an anti-intellectual, anti-scientific, and paranoid cultural outlook that dismissed global warming and climate change as hoaxes.”<sup>71</sup>

Trump’s insistence that he saw Muslims celebrating after 9/11, his insistence that he can somehow deport all undocumented immigrants, his boast that he can make Mexico pay for his big beautiful wall – all of these concepts crumble under rational scrutiny. Trump, however, has learned to capitalize on the latent anti-intellectualism in his supporters, and has found that simply repeating himself, loudly and insistently, and refusing to acknowledge contradictory evidence, is enough to convince a segment of the population already eager to reject evidence with which they do not agree. Trump himself admits that he exaggerates intentionally to please or persuade an audience, describing it as “truthful hyperbole.”<sup>72</sup> Coupled with this is what Bronner calls “repressive tolerance”: “‘repressive tolerance’ whose proponents believe that the content of speech is always secondary to the right to speak. Their logic permits intolerance, places stupidity on the same level as intelligence, and attempts to bind future generations to the ignorant prejudices of those that preceded them.”<sup>73</sup> The false equivalency of fact and fantasy, of logic and logorrhea, leaves audiences without a frame of reference for understanding what they hear.

### *Xenophobia and Paranoia*

Trump’s rhetoric regarding Mexican immigrants, Syrian refugees, and Muslims in general is based on an understanding of these peoples as inherently “less than” the average United States citizen. The threats they pose are exaggerated or simply made up. Trump’s assertion that Mexican immigrants were criminals and rapists was enormously popular among his supporters, but also among openly racist groups. Indeed, Don Black, the founder of the racist forum Stormfront, reported that Trump’s campaign has led to an increase in traffic to his site, and more listeners and calls to his radio show.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Malloy, “Donald Trump is the GOP Now.”

<sup>68</sup> Bronner, *The Bigot*, 163-164.

<sup>69</sup> Hofstadter, *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life*; Schreckinger, “White Supremacist Group Sees Trump Bump.”

<sup>70</sup> Hofstadter, *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life*.

<sup>71</sup> Hofstadter, *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life*.

<sup>72</sup> Gary Belis, “Donald Trump Explained (January 1988),” *Fortune*, February 3, 2016, <http://fortune.com/2016/02/03/donald-trump-explained-january-1988/>.

<sup>73</sup> Bronner, *The Bigot*, 36.

<sup>74</sup> Schreckinger, “White Supremacist Group Sees Trump Bump.”



Some ascribe Trump's success to his entertaining and ingratiating speaking style, even when his speech includes xenophobic statements.<sup>75</sup> Demagogues frequently use appeals to underlying sexist, racist or xenophobic ideas.<sup>76</sup> Though these statements are shocking, and may garner criticism, they have served to reinforce both Trump's ideology, as well as the notion that his willingness to make outrageous statements is equivalent to trustworthiness. Some attempt to justify Trump's most extreme statements, such as his exhortations to his followers to engage in racist or violent behavior, as merely humorous. However, his status as a major party candidate imbues his words with more, not less significance. Though it may be difficult to accept that a Presidential candidate is engaging in such behavior, "it is a mistake to think that explicit calls for violence come only from the margins."<sup>77</sup> These ideas have been growing more blatant than latent in recent years. Bronner links this to the rise of the Tea Party, which "legitimized forms of intolerance that many believed had lost their appeal. Its members applauded as a few lunatic pastors threatened to burn the Koran and condemned Islam as a religion of the 'gutter.' Old stereotypes about African Americans, gays, Latinos, and women resurfaced with a vengeance."<sup>78</sup>

While the use of racial slurs and openly sexist or xenophobic language may still be frowned upon, Trump and others are transgressing that rule. He is giving voice to the forbidden thoughts and feelings of many Americans, and they respond to him as a great teller of truths rather than seeing him, and perhaps themselves, as xenophobic.

### *Traditional and Digital Media*

Modern communication and digital journalism have increased the points of access to information, diluting the power and credibility of traditional news outlets, and making it easier for a demagogue to control information, and thereby, the narrative.<sup>79</sup> The decades of priming the American public has received from conservative media sources have carefully nurtured and reinforced the free-floating discontent of xenophobia and prejudice that existed in American culture, creating a perfect setting for the demagogic rise of Donald Trump, who brazenly voices what has only been alluded to before.

In 1964, Hofstadter posited that the "paranoid style" he wrote of was spreading more rapidly because of mass media.<sup>80</sup> Postman argued that our obsession with media entertainment "change[d] the structure of discourse ... by encouraging certain uses of the intellect ... by creating new forms of truth-telling."<sup>81</sup> As reality television became more popular, the lines between entertainment and real life became blurrier, affecting our epistemological approach to many things, most notably politics.<sup>82</sup> When we equate political theatre with show business, then the will to achieve solutions is replaced with the desire to project the image of a problem-solver.<sup>83</sup>

Media frames the public understanding of the significance of events<sup>84</sup>, shaping the message while purporting to merely relay the message. This makes discourse around these events more

<sup>75</sup> Healy and Haberman, "95,000 Words."

<sup>76</sup> Roberts-Miller, *Fanatical Schemes*.

<sup>77</sup> Bronner, *The Bigot*, 174.

<sup>78</sup> Bronner, *The Bigot*, 163-164.

<sup>79</sup> Ceaser, "Demagoguery, Statesmanship, and the American Presidency," 279-280.

<sup>80</sup> Hofstadter, "The Paranoid Style in American Politics," 81.

<sup>81</sup> Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death* (New York: Penguin Books, 1985).

<sup>82</sup> Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*.

<sup>83</sup> Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*.

<sup>84</sup> Erving Goffman, *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974).

difficult, since serious discussion requires the acknowledgement of the premises upon which an argument is based.<sup>85</sup> Postman says “a person who has seen one million television commercials might well believe that all political problems have fast solutions through simple measures.”<sup>86</sup> Add Tumblr posts, tweet-storms, and Facebook memes to the commercial tally, and one can understand why many would prefer a sound-bite solution to a complicated policy position.

Social media intensifies the effect of media framing.<sup>87</sup> Stories that are “trending” become important by popular acclaim, regardless of the relative significance of the content of the story itself. Cute baby animals achieve equivalence with international news events. Astute political actors can capitalize on this effect by communicating their agenda in a manner that shapes the way in which the media cover them in the future.<sup>88</sup> As traditional media cover social media trends, politicians can respond by posting to social media about their news coverage, which may elicit enough of a response to “trend,” thereby creating more news. Thus, to quote McLuhan, “the medium is the message.”<sup>89</sup> Ultimately, this means that Trump’s tweets become news, regardless of the accuracy, appropriateness, or validity of the content of those tweets.

Trump uses all of this to his advantage, keeping all the attention on himself by making shocking and outlandish statements. Perhaps no other politician in recent history has so skillfully manipulated media coverage during a campaign as has Donald Trump. The value of his earned media, or news coverage and commentary on his campaign, as opposed to purchased advertising, was more than \$400 million during the month of February, 2016 alone.<sup>90</sup> According to Confessore and Yourish, his total earned media value during the campaign as of March 2016 is around \$2 billion.<sup>91</sup>

And it hardly matters that much of this coverage may have been negative. The public reaction to his performance then becomes newsworthy as well. While some have criticized the media for their overwhelming coverage of Trump, to the detriment of more circumspect candidates,<sup>92</sup> they are in a difficult position. Failure to cover him seems discriminatory, and when he says something shocking, refusing to mention it may be seen as collusion.<sup>93</sup> However, when media outlets do report on Trump’s shocking statements, they are giving the remark, and the man, more attention.

Trump’s manipulation of media is masterful. While his political persona and his campaign have been criticized roundly for being disorganized, unprofessional, or misguided<sup>94</sup>, some have suggested that Trump is following a completely different rubric for success. “Donald Trump is a

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<sup>85</sup> Roberts-Miller, *Fanatical Schemes*, 102

<sup>86</sup> Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*.

<sup>87</sup> Bethany Conway, Kate Kenski, and Di Wang, “The Rise of Twitter in the Political Campaign: Searching for Inter-media Agenda-Setting Effects in the Presidential Primary,” *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 20 (2015): 363-380.

<sup>88</sup> Conway, Kenski, and Wang, “The Rise of Twitter in the Political Campaign.”

<sup>89</sup> Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1964).

<sup>90</sup> Nicholas Confessore and Karen Yourish, “\$2 Billion Worth of Free Media for Donald Trump,” *The New York Times*, March 15, 2016, <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/16/upshot/measuring-donald-trumps-mammoth-advantage-in-free-media.html>.

<sup>91</sup> Confessore and Yourish, “\$2 Billion Worth of Free Media for Donald Trump.”

<sup>92</sup> John Nichols, “The Discourse Suffers When Trump Gets 23 Times as Much Coverage as Bernie Sanders,” *The Nation*, December 14, 2015, <http://www.thenation.com/article/the-discourse-suffers-when-trump-gets-23-times-as-much-coverage-as-sanders/>.

<sup>93</sup> Wodak, “Old and New Demagoguery.”

<sup>94</sup> Benjy Sarlin, Katy Tur, and Ali Vitali, “Donald Trump Does Not Have a Campaign,” *NBC News*, June 6, 2016, <http://www.nbcnews.com/politics/2016-election/donald-trump-does-not-have-campaign-n586356>.

political performance artist whose repertoire is inspired by professional wrestling.”<sup>95</sup> Specifically, many believe that Trump is a “heel.”<sup>96</sup>

DeVega describes the “heel” in professional wrestling as the villain everyone loves to hate, who will do anything to win, and who is valued for the energy, drama, and unpredictability they bring to a match. Ross continues the comparison, describing the interplay between Trump and his supporters at rallies as “vintage WWE” (World Wrestling Entertainment).<sup>97</sup> His recent entrance at the Republican National Convention, amid smoke and lighting effects, seemed more reality TV than political theater. And this similarity is no accident, given Trump’s decades-long affiliation with professional wrestling, culminating in the “Battle of the Billionaires,” which was decided in Trump’s favor when he shaved the head of his rival, WWE commissioner Vince McMahon.<sup>98</sup>

His demeanor at rallies and even on debate stages echoes the familiar tropes of professional wrestling, as he insults his opponents, makes hyperbolic statements, and generally works the crowd. His current supporters exhibit some of the same enthusiasm as his former fans from WWE, and he has given them a fight to remember during the primary season. The violence of his rallies, his outrageous insults of his opponents, and his crass references to the size of his genitals have been disturbing and puzzling to all those expecting Trump to act like a politician, but make perfect sense in the context of Trump the WWE entertainer. Donald Trump is both. He has employed the rhetorical devices of the political demagogue with the skill and style of a reality television star, and managed to command an enormous audience to witness his antics. His manipulation of both traditional and social media, his appropriation of familiar television tropes, and his unerring sense for garnering publicity have helped him turn a niche entertainment character into a mass-market political star, and flood the internet with that star’s image. He is a digital demagogue.

## Conclusions

Trump’s rise to prominence can be attributed in large part to his masterful manipulation of media. His success as a reality television star seems to presage his success as a candidate. His supporters tout his “sincerity” and “honesty,”<sup>99</sup> even as fact-checkers such as Politifact find that his statements are overwhelmingly false.<sup>100</sup> They point to his blunt, “politically incorrect” style as a feature they like, stating that he says what they have been thinking. This is likely true; while average citizens may feel constrained by the boundaries of polite society from voicing their most xenophobic and bigoted ideas, Trump’s role as a demagogue means that he acts as their proxy, broadcasting their previously unvoiced prejudices.

<sup>95</sup> Chauncey DeVega, “Playing the Heel: When a Presidential Candidate Channels His Pro-Wrestling Persona,” *The Washington Spectator*, April 14, 2016, <http://washingtonspectator.org/trump-wrestlemania/>.

<sup>96</sup> DeVega, “Playing the Heel”; Steven Miller, “How Pro Wrestling Taught Donald Trump to be the Perfect Showman,” *The National Review*, April 4, 2016, <http://www.nationalreview.com/article/433609/donald-trumps-pro-wrestling-campaign-wwe-and-trumps-showman-persona>; Vann Newkirk, “Donald Trump, Wrestling Heel,” *The Atlantic*, March 15, 2016, <http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2016/03/trump-politics-and-professional-wrestling/473652/>; Jim Ross, “How Donald Trump’s WWE Character Shaped His Political Persona,” *FoxSports.com*, March 16, 2016, <http://www.foxsports.com/wwe/story/donald-trump-vince-mcmahon-wrestlemania-republican-presidential-candidacy-031616>.

<sup>97</sup> Ross, “How Donald Trump’s WWE Character Shaped His Political Persona.”

<sup>98</sup> Miller, “How Pro Wrestling Taught Donald Trump to be the Perfect Showman”; Newkirk, “Donald Trump, Wrestling Heel.”

<sup>99</sup> Schreckinger, “White Supremacist Group Sees Trump Bump”; Wilson, “Why Trump Emphasizes Emotions Over Facts.”

<sup>100</sup> “Donald Trump’s File,” *Politifact*, 2016, <http://www.politifact.com/personalities/donald-trump/>.

Trump also employs derisive, contemptuous language when describing those he sees as foes. He declared that Senator John McCain was not a hero, but instead was a loser because he was captured; he mocked a reporter with a visible disability; he made a veiled reference to menstruation in an attempt to cause embarrassment to a female journalist; and he likened opponent Ben Carson to a child molester.<sup>101</sup> Each of these instances are examples of Trump combining outrageous language with the calculated framing of a conversation in terms of in-groups and out-groups. His recurring tendency to engage in rhetoric that demeans, maligns, or disadvantages a particular group stand in contrast to his description of himself as a man of intelligence, and certainly never a bigot.<sup>102</sup>

The truth might be easier to parse if one could look back over a political career, to determine if his actions match his rhetoric or his self-description. “Prejudice is not simply a matter of what people say that they feel but how they act and what political positions they take.”<sup>103</sup> It is difficult to judge how Trump would act, and what policies he would enact, if he were to be elected, since he has no record of public office. His policy positions change from week to week. But the behaviors of others in reaction to him may be just as significant as his own actions. When Trump made his remarks about halting immigration and deporting Mexicans, the effect was a rise in racist outbursts against Hispanic children in schools, with reports of white children threatening Hispanic children with deportation after Trump is elected.<sup>104</sup> The rhetoric that has been normalized by Trump will continue to echo after this election, regardless of its outcome. Even if many disbelieve his claims and recognize him as a manipulator, the fact remains that Trump’s campaign has introduced a type of rhetoric and a style of showmanship into mainstream political discourse that had previously been taboo. White supremacist Don Black said “He’s certainly creating a movement that will continue independently of him even if he does fold at some point.”<sup>105</sup> The effects of Trump’s digital demagoguery will not disappear, even if the man himself does.

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<sup>101</sup> Wehner, “Why I Will Never Vote For Donald Trump.”

<sup>102</sup> Campbell, “Donald Trump Jokes that He Could ‘Shoot Somebody’ and Not Lose Any Voters.”

<sup>103</sup> Bronner, *The Bigot*, 179.

<sup>104</sup> Maureen Costello, “The Trump Effect: The Impact of the Presidential Campaign on Our Nation’s Schools,” *Southern Poverty Law Center*, April 13, 2016, <https://www.splcenter.org/20160413/trump-effect-impact-presidential-campaign-our-nations-schools>.

<sup>105</sup> Schreckinger, “White Supremacist Group Sees Trump Bump.”