

## Insult Politics: Donald Trump, Right-Wing Populism, and Incendiary Language

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## 1. Introduction

- <sup>1</sup> In August 2016, Senator Susan Collins (R-Maine) announced she would not support the Republican Party's nominee for president, the former reality TV celebrity Donald Trump, because of his insulting rhetoric. Three months earlier, Rosario Marin, a longtime Republican who served as Treasurer of the United States in the George W. Bush administration, had said she could not support the nominee. Marin cited the nominee's insulting rhetoric as the straw that broke the camel's back. "He's insulted me, the people I love, the community I represent," Marin, the former Mayor of Huntington Park and Mexican immigrant, stated.<sup>i</sup> Collins and Marin were not the only Republicans to break ranks and refuse to support the controversial nominee. In fact, the list of prominent Republicans within the party openly refusing to endorse the nominee was considerable and included such party leaders as Mitt Romney, George W. Bush, George H.W. Bush, and John McCain. While the breaking point for them differed, many explicitly cited the insulting or mocking rhetoric and politics of Donald Trump. "Donald Trump is beginning to cross a lot of red lines of the unforgivable in politics," Representative Adam Kinzinger (R-Illinois) said in August 2016.<sup>ii</sup> The insult politics of Donald Trump, however, was inseparable from his candidacy for president from the beginning. Going into the first primary debate, approximately two months after he announced his candidacy with an inflammatory speech in which he labeled Mexicans criminals, the New York businessman had already insulted the party's 2008 presidential candidate, John McCain, going so far as to state that he "likes people who weren't captured."<sup>iii</sup>

- 2 With the former Governor of Florida, Jeb Bush, to his left and Governor Scott Walker of Wisconsin to his right, surrounded by a slew of former and current governors and senators, Donald Trump stood center stage at the Quicken Loans Arena in Cleveland on a Thursday in early August 2015. At the first Republican primary debate of the 2016 race, all eyes were on the unlikely and controversial political story of the summer. Brit Hume of Fox News, which hosted the debate, explained that the main focus of the night was “what Donald Trump is gonna do, or not do.”<sup>iv</sup> The first direct question to the unexpected poll leader came from the popular and conservative Fox News superstar Megyn Kelly. “Mr. Trump, one of the things people love about you is you speak your mind and you don’t use a politician’s filter. However, that is not without its downsides, in particular when it comes to women. You’ve called women you don’t like *fat pigs, dogs, slobs, and disgusting animals*. Your Twitter account...” Trump interrupted her, protesting, claiming such rhetoric was only in regards to Rosie O’Donnell, the comedian and former host of *The View*, with whom he has had well-publicized disputes. The audience burst out in wild applause, applause that Trump welcomed. Kelly, however, would not have it. She waited for the noise to calm down before stating it was a problem far beyond his feud with O’Donnell, pressing him on his mocking tone, sexist language, and insulting rhetoric. The political novice decided to double down in front of a record-breaking national television audience, suggesting it was a question of “political correctness,” describing his rhetoric as “it’s fun, it’s kidding, we have a good time,” and saying he doesn’t have time for “political correctness.” At the end of his answer, he turned his attention back to Kelly, saying: “and honestly, Megyn, if you don’t like it, I’m sorry. I’ve been very nice to you, although I could probably maybe not be, based on the way you have treated me, but I wouldn’t do that.” Again he was greeted by cheers, and some boos, from the crowd.
- 3 In the following days, facing bad press for his performance in the debate, Donald Trump claimed Kelly was unfair and hostile toward him and even suggested this was due to her menstruation. To the surprise of both politicians and pundits, in the aftermath of the first debate Donald Trump’s support in opinion polls climbed.<sup>v</sup> The puzzling phenomenon became a pattern of Trump’s campaign. After he called McCain a loser and denied he was a war hero, his support continued to climb in the polls, and following his call for a “total and complete shutdown of Muslims entering the United States” in December, his support again grew.<sup>vi</sup> In the right-wing populist tradition, Trump established his anti-elite bona fides by breaking norms and insulting what frequently was described as “the establishment.”
- 4 How could a political novice—with high unfavorable ratings, few conservative credentials, and a penchant for mocking and insulting opponents, real or imagined—capture the Republican Party’s presidential nomination and ultimately the White House? Despite the many unprecedented aspects of the ascendance of Donald Trump, he and his brand of insult politics fit into the long tradition of U.S. right-wing populism. This article will explore Trump’s uses of insult politics, as well as the reactions by other politicians and the media, and will position him within the history of right-wing populism and the Republican Party over the past decades.

## 2. Insult Politics versus Attack Politics

- 5 Criticism, attacks, and negative campaigning is nothing new in U.S. politics. Indeed, it is a fundamental part of U.S. political history. Notorious examples of ad hominem attacks

throughout U.S. history include John Adams calling Alexander Hamilton “the bastard brat of a Scotch peddler,” accusations that Andrew Jackson’s late mother was a prostitute, claims that Abraham Lincoln was a mulatto, charges that Franklin Delano Roosevelt was a Communist, and allegations that Barack Obama was a Muslim. Attack politics, however, is a broad category. Political science literature on attack politics often defines negative campaigning as any discussion of the opponent, his or her policies, or the opposing party in general.<sup>vii</sup> As political scientists Richard Lau and Gerald Pomper argue, “Negative campaigning is talking about the opponent – criticizing his or her programs, accomplishments, qualifications, and so on.”<sup>viii</sup> Such a definition does not differentiate between the “fairness, validity, accuracy, relevance, or appropriateness” of the attacks, which limits the use of such a definition in looking at the populist-fueled *ad hominem* attacks of Donald Trump.<sup>ix</sup>

- 6 I am using the term “insult politics” to capture a certain campaign rhetoric that is centered not on criticism *per se*, but on *ad hominem attacks of a disparaging nature aimed at an individual or group*. A characteristic of insult politics is its polemic and controversial nature; historically, presidential candidates have eschewed insult politics. Political attacks have a bad reputation, and the electorate tends to conflate what they dislike in politics with negative campaigning, which is why candidates traditionally cede the controversial ground of insult politics to surrogates such as the vice-presidential candidate, noteworthy supporters, and allies in the media.<sup>x</sup> Within the tradition of right-wing populism, however, insult politics has been a key ingredient of political rhetoric. As historian Robert Self noted regarding George Wallace’s populism, “it was a politics of the ‘little guy,’ who does his best [...] to live up to his manhood.”<sup>xi</sup> In this tradition, using norm-breaking language became a political strategy; to be perceived as fighting the alleged elite or establishment, right-wing populists needed to differentiate themselves from the customs and traditions of the political status quo.

### 3. The American Populist Tradition

- 7 One of the most commonly and most fiercely contested labels attached to Donald Trump in the 2016 presidential election was “populist.” While most outlets, including the *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, and Fox News, referred to Trump or his movement as populist or driven by populism, there was also strong pushback against the term being applied to the wealthy Manhattanite. While *Politico Magazine* asked in a headline if Trump was “the perfect populist,” others pushed back against the description.<sup>xii</sup> Commenting on the Republican candidate’s controversial remarks, President Barack Obama described them as exhibiting “nativism. Or xenophobia. Or worse. Or it’s just cynicism.”<sup>xiii</sup> Historians and journalists have also laid out the case for why Donald Trump should not be described as a populist or how his style of populism is inauthentic: despite his claims to be a blue-collar billionaire and reassurances to work for the Average Joe, there is scant evidence his policies would benefit them.<sup>xiv</sup>
- 8 The disputed attribution of “populism” to Donald Trump is evidence of how it remains one of the most contested terms in political history, as well as one of the most over-used and hardest to define. Following the historian Michael Kazin’s definition of populism not as ideology or identity but rather as a mode of persuasion, I primarily understand the term as a form of politics. “Populism, more an impulse than an ideology, is too elastic and promiscuous to be the basis” for ideological identity, Kazin contends.<sup>xv</sup> Accordingly, Kazin

identifies populism as “a language whose speakers conceive of ordinary people as a noble assemblage not bounded by class, view their elite opponents as self-serving and undemocratic, and seek to mobilize the former against the latter.”<sup>xvi</sup> Adopting this definition, the history of populism from the farmers of the Great Plains in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century to the modern Republican Party becomes clearer, making it easier to understand both the populist tradition of Donald Trump and the widespread critique of him as a populist. Despite the origins of the term in the left-wing politics of the People’s Party, populism is not defined by ideology but by rhetoric. Populism is thus political rhetoric which seeks to champion the common man against perceived sinister elites, or “the establishment.”

- 9 Right-wing populism emerged in force in the 1940s as a reaction toward the left-wing populism of labor unions, socialists, and Franklin D. Roosevelt. The two most renowned populists of the 1930s, Father Coughlin and Huey Long, were both initially devout followers of Roosevelt. Sharing in the populist tradition of hostility toward corporate power and wealthy elites, both men hoped the new president vowing to lift the country out of the Great Depression could also change the economic structure of the nation. Soon enough, however, they became convinced that FDR was no longer an ally of the cause and saw his political compromises as a sign of limited interest in the issues that had fueled his movement.<sup>xvii</sup>
- 10 There were strains of right-wing populism in Father Coughlin’s, and even Long’s, politics.<sup>xviii</sup> Yet, Kazin notes that until the 1940s “conservative populism was an oxymoron.”<sup>xix</sup> The historian Richard Hofstadter points out the crucial difference between the right-wing discontent of Father Coughlin and the new right-wing populism embodied by the junior senator from Wisconsin, “[Joseph] McCarthy was able to win considerable support from the middle and upper ranks of society, mobilizing Republicans who had never accepted the changes brought by the New Deal and whose rage [...] was reaching a peak.”<sup>xx</sup> It was, indeed, the great shifts in U.S. society and politics that had occurred in the 1930s that laid the groundwork for a growing right-wing populism in the post-war period. Roosevelt’s New Deal, the gains by labor unions, and the increasing fear of communism following the end of World War II upended the assumptions of elites. Instead of vilifying big businesses and concentrated wealth, the new right-wing populism was able to point at a rapidly growing government, infiltrated by fellow travelers and heralded by liberal intellectuals, wealthy celebrities and journalists, as the real enemies of the free people. Populism was now directed against social reform and fueled by considerable resentment toward intellectuals and fear of communism.<sup>xxi</sup>
- 11 With anti-communism and resentment of the New Deal as the backdrop, conservatives organized during the 1940s and 1950s with what historian Lisa McGirr has described as “a missionary zeal to stem the tide of ‘collectivism’ that they believed threatened the nation’s future.”<sup>xxii</sup> But conservative activists, whether adherents of the populist McCarthy or the conservative icon Robert Taft, were not in power. They were not even in power within the Republican Party. In large part due to the “missionary zeal” that characterized their political organizing, they were able to gain far more influence within, if not complete control of, the Republican Party during the tumultuous 1960s. From this pivotal decade emerged not only the most obvious example of right-wing populism, the segregationist Alabama Governor George Wallace, but also the lasting legacy of right-wing populism within the Republican Party. In Southern California, grassroots activists funded by wealthy opponents of the New Deal consensus developed a conservative

populism, one that “exuded overtones of religious revivalism as well as ultra-nationalism, antagonism toward minorities, and resistance to any form of social and cultural change.”

- <sup>xxiii</sup> In the politics of Wallace, the anti-communism merged with southern racism in ways such that “fear and hatred could be mobilized without mentioning race itself.”<sup>xxiv</sup> This new form of right-wing populism, which joined the conservative elements of both parties with traditional populist resentment against elites, was able to draw support from within both parties and all regions of the country.<sup>xxv</sup> In the hands of a better communicator, one without the stigma of overt segregation and racism that the Alabama governor carried, the new populism would become a staple within the Republican Party.
- 12 As Nixon adapted to the right-wing populism of his independent rival in the 1968 election, he reimagined the Republican Party as the home for the average American, in this case the white, middle-class, average American. “[N]ow ‘populism’ is of the middle class, which feels exploited by the Establishment,” Nixon-strategist Kevin Phillips remarked.<sup>xxvi</sup> The middle class would indeed become synonymous with “traditional” in terms of the values and policies espoused by the Republican Party of Richard Nixon.<sup>xxvii</sup> The new politics envisioned by Phillips was a “politics of hate,” and knowing who hated whom was the key to reach new segments of the electorate.<sup>xxviii</sup> Recognizing the role that racism played in the new Republican majority, Nixon’s advisors wanted to reach out to the white middle class in a way that played on white fears while allowing the voter to “avoid admitting to himself that he was attracted by a racist appeal.”<sup>xxix</sup> Despite the use of elements of right-wing populism, Nixon ceded the role of populist orator to his vice-president Spiro Agnew. With gusto, Agnew took on the “establishment,” deriding his political opponents as elitists, radicals, and snobs.<sup>xxx</sup>
- 13 By the 1990s, the Republican Party had adopted and refined right-wing populism. Reagan, the most effective communicator of the right, had been able to establish a pejorative understanding of the elite as “special interests” rather than the corporate rich. Where Nixon had sought to establish the “liberal culture elite” as threatening the people’s money, values, and safety, Reagan succeeded.<sup>xxxi</sup> In the populist appeals of the 1980s and 1990s, the sinister elites were liberal insiders who favored privileged minorities over “the people.”<sup>xxxii</sup> Using race to vilify liberalism, Republicans “updated and institutionalized a populist, Southern strategy for the GOP.”<sup>xxxiii</sup> Following the Republican takeover of Congress, organized by Newt Gingrich and cheered on by an emerging conservative media establishment, Kazin concluded that “the populist idiom still resonates more routinely on the Right.”<sup>xxxiv</sup> With the presidency of George W. Bush, coinciding with the ascendance of the conservative media establishment and ending with the mass protests of the Tea Party, the long tradition of right-wing populism was a firmly institutionalized part of the conservative movement and, by extension, the Republican Party. Trump’s rise should be understood as part of the long tradition of right-wing populism and the ultimate triumph of the Tea Party movement; a right-wing populist eruption within the Republican Party fueled by both a conservative media establishment and anti-intellectual and, at times, overtly racial appeals.

#### 4. Donald Trump as Provocateur

- 14 “Mitt Romney had his chance to beat a failed president but he choked like a dog,” the Republican nominee of 2016 wrote on Twitter about his predecessor.<sup>xxxv</sup> “Lightweight Marco Rubio was working hard last night. The problem is, he is a choker, and once a

choker, always a choker! Mr. Meltdown,” he wrote about his primary challenger Senator Marco Rubio (R-Florida).<sup>xxxvi</sup> “Truly weird Senator Rand Paul of Kentucky reminds me of a spoiled brat without a properly functioning brain,” he wrote after the first debate about another of his primary challengers.<sup>xxxvii</sup> “Did Crooked Hillary help disgusting (check out sex tape and past) Alicia M become a U.S. citizen so she could use her in the debate,” he asked in the middle of the night, alluding to a sex tape that does not exist.<sup>xxxviii</sup>

- 15 Despite the long tradition of both insult politics and right-wing populism in the United States, the mocking rhetoric used by Donald Trump in the presidential campaign was widely perceived and described as norm-breaking and extreme.<sup>xxxix</sup> The editorial board of the *New York Times* explicitly cited the Republican nominee’s personal insults in an editorial titled “Why Donald Trump Should Not Be President.” The editorial listed the qualities of the New York businessman as “bluster, savage mockery of those who challenge him, degrading comments about women, mendacity, crude generalizations about nations and religions.”<sup>xl</sup> These were not just the qualities of Trump’s campaign, they were the qualities that he had built his public persona around for years. On his reality television show *The Apprentice*, he played the role of a successful businessman who had no time for pleasantries, making “You’re fired!” his catch phrase. Eyeing a role in politics after the election of Barack Obama in 2008, Trump honed his conservative credentials within the broader Tea Party movement by continually questioning President Obama’s place of birth, claiming with stark undertones of racism that the first black president of the United States was born in Kenya.<sup>xli</sup>
- 16 The Tea Party movement was that rare phenomenon in U.S. politics: an outburst of grassroots activism funded by corporate wealth, supported by a media establishment, and welcomed in party politics.<sup>xlii</sup> It was a reaction to both the financial crash of 2008 and the election of a black president, as well as to how the George W. Bush presidency “fragmented [the conservatives’] once mighty coalition.”<sup>xliii</sup> At early Tea Party rallies, which regularly featured such Fox News personalities as Neil Cavuto, Greta Van Susteren, Sean Hannity, and Glenn Beck, people in the crowds carried signs calling President Obama a Communist or Muslim, or crudely depicting him as Hitler or an African witchdoctor. Tea Party demonstrators protesting the passage of the Affordable Care Act yelled the most insulting slurs at black, homosexual, and Jewish members of Congress.<sup>xliv</sup> Most supporters of the Tea Party movement certainly did not publicly engage in insulting and hurtful rhetoric, but norm-breaking populist language was a part of the movement.<sup>xlv</sup> “I want to replace the current political establishment, get all the incumbents out and replace them with fiscal conservatives who will abide by the Constitution,” a Tea Party activist declared, illustrating the right-wing populism at the core of the movement.<sup>xlvi</sup>
- 17 The method of using incendiary rhetoric to portray political opponents is neither limited to populism nor new, but in the 1990s, Congressional Republicans led by Newt Gingrich adopted language painting Democrats as evil. Gingrich recommended describing Democrats as “sick, traitors, [and] corrupt.”<sup>xlvii</sup> He admitted, privately to allies, that his strategy was to depict Democrats as “the enemy of normal Americans,” calling the Clintons “left-wing elitists.”<sup>xlviii</sup> In the 1990s, among conservative Republicans “any action or rhetoric was justified and any compromise was a betrayal,” historian Robert Self explains.<sup>xlix</sup> This new polarization was fueled by a new conservative media establishment, especially on talk radio and, by the late-1990s, also on Fox News and online news sites, which were willing and able to push right-wing populism.<sup>1</sup> In fact, as historian Nicole Hemmer posits, “[the] habit of conservative media consumption [is] part of what it now

means to be a conservative in America.”<sup>li</sup> The conservative media establishment has grown to be crucial in Republican politics, overshadowing the party in terms of influence and organizing power.<sup>lii</sup> The chairman of the Republican National Committee, Michael Steele, criticized Rush Limbaugh in 2009, calling his incendiary rhetoric “ugly.” Facing criticism from fellow conservatives, Steele was fast to apologize, making it clear that Limbaugh was above criticism on the right.<sup>liii</sup> “He does what he does best, which is provoke: He provokes thought, he provokes the left,” Steele explained about the popular radio-host.<sup>liv</sup> But provocation is not the limit of the actions of Limbaugh and his ilk. Since the 1990s, the conservative media establishment has changed the political culture of the Republican Party and the United States. Glenn Beck, one of the foremost figures of both the conservative media establishment and the Tea Party movement, openly acknowledges and regrets how his own overblown and incendiary rhetoric paved the way for Donald Trump.<sup>lv</sup> But Beck, Limbaugh, Sean Hannity, and Bill O’Reilly are neither politicians nor journalists. First and foremost, they are entertainers, who use “irony, humor, caricature, hyperbole, and occasional invective to advance their cause and sustain audience interest.”<sup>lvi</sup> Trump, who became a political figure on the air of Fox News and a variety of conservative talk radio shows, has erased the difference between the rhetoric of the echo chamber and national politics.

## 5. Reactions to Insults

- 18 The presidential campaign of George Wallace in 1968, like the Alabamian’s whole career, rested on the “media’s unflagging curiosity.”<sup>lvii</sup> For Wallace, who campaigned without the organizational support of a national party and the name recognition of his rivals, media attention was key. The Southern populist knew that “something a little fiery” would draw the necessary attention.<sup>lviii</sup> Almost five decades later, the same assumption seemed to hold true. Trump’s insulting rhetoric drew wide condemnation from politicians, journalists, celebrities, and institutions, but it also attracted considerable media attention. Les Moonves, the chairman of CBS, glibly remarked that “[Trump’s candidacy] may not be good for America, but it’s damn good for CBS,” alluding to the increased revenue that the higher ratings generated.<sup>lix</sup> His colleague Jeff Zucker, president of CNN, later acknowledged that the coverage of Trump’s insulting rhetoric was excessive, “[w]e probably did put on too many of the campaign rallies [...] unedited.”<sup>lx</sup>
- 19 The relationship between Donald Trump’s campaign and the media was a complicated one. The candidate was openly hostile to both the press and individual reporters, yet his populist insult politics thrived on the attention the press gave it.<sup>lxi</sup> Even the papers of record went along with the juvenile and insulting name-calling of the Republican. After a Trump rally ahead of the New York primary, the headline in the *New York Times* read “Donald Trump, in Upstate New York, Tries Another Label for Hillary Clinton.” The new label was nothing more than insulting name-calling: “Crooked Hillary! Mr. Trump intoned about Mrs. Clinton, whom he previously called ‘incompetent Hillary.’ But that adjective had four syllables, and Mr. Trump tends to pick names for his opponents that are shorter and likelier to stick with voters.”<sup>lxii</sup>
- 20 A search of articles in the *New York Times* shows that the insulting nicknames used by Trump about his opponents appear in a number of articles, with “Crooked Hillary” being the most common, followed by “Lyn’ Ted,” “Little Marco,” and “Low-Energy Jeb.” Articles highlighting his insults—with headlines like “Trump’s Most Notable Insults,”

“Donald Trump’s Meanest Twitter Insults,” “Top 5 Insults Donald Trump has Used on Twitter,” and “19 Republicans Donald Trump Has Insulted”—illustrated how the media tried to capitalize on insult politics.<sup>lxiii</sup> *Time* even went so far as to make a crude “Donald Trump Insult Generator.”<sup>lxiv</sup>

- 21 Despite his offensive comments, Trump continued to dominate the national conversation and, more crucially, the early Republican primaries. Accordingly, his rivals came to reevaluate insult politics. This shift was most conspicuous in the campaign of Senator Marco Rubio, the former Tea Party darling, who in 2016 was understood as an establishment favorite. In February 2016, Rubio adopted the personal, mocking tone of his opponent’s insult politics at rallies. “[Trump] doesn’t sweat because his pores are clogged from the spray tan that he uses,” Rubio said to laughter, continuing, “Donald is not gonna make America great, he’s gonna make America orange.”<sup>lxv</sup> The Floridian presidential hopeful also mocked the size of Donald Trump’s hands, which had been a sore spot for the real estate developer at least since journalist Graydon Carter called him a “short-fingered vulgarian” in the 1980s.<sup>lxvi</sup> At another rally, Rubio suggested that the Republican frontrunner had wet his pants at a recent debate, and he mocked his Twitter typos.<sup>lxvii</sup>
- 22 Calling the rhetoric “nasty,” Donald Trump replied to Rubio’s insults in an interview with Anderson Cooper: “I think he wanted to be Don Rickles. And he’s not Don Rickles.”<sup>lxviii</sup> The turn was surprising for many. “It is the kind of campaign he said he would never run,” the *New York Times* noted.<sup>lxix</sup> Senator Tim Scott (R-South Carolina), who had already endorsed Rubio, said he supported attacks on Trump’s policy positions, not personal insults.<sup>lxx</sup> Supporters explicitly stated that the turn to insult politics made them wary of standing behind the senator. “I liked him until he got down in the mud with Trump,” a supporter explained.<sup>lxxi</sup> The finance chairman for the Republican Governors Association, Fred Malek, called the insult politics an embarrassment, describing it as “disgusting and juvenile.” Trent Lott, the former Senate majority leader, agreed, saying he was “totally embarrassed” by the rhetoric.<sup>lxxii</sup> The Rubio team defended their strategy, saying “we came to the conclusion that if being a part of the circus is the price you have to pay in order for us to ultimately be able to talk about substantive policy, then that’s what we’re going to do.”<sup>lxxiii</sup> The turn to insult politics for Marco Rubio failed, his support was already in decline when he launched his personal attacks and it never recovered. The candidate himself admitted it was a mistake, “My kids were embarrassed by it. My wife didn’t like it. I don’t think it reflects good. That’s not who I am. [...] I’d do it differently – on the personal stuff.”<sup>lxxiv</sup>
- 23 Marco Rubio was not the only politician who decided to go after Trump with mocking and insulting personal attacks. Ted Cruz went after Trump before his last stand in Indiana, calling his opponent a “pathological liar,” “utterly amoral,” “a narcissist at a level I don’t think this country’s ever seen,” and “a serial philanderer.”<sup>lxxv</sup> Like Rubio, and in stark contrast with Trump himself, Cruz limited his insults to his political opponent. The same is true of the Democrats Elizabeth Warren, Joe Biden, and Tim Kaine when they went after the Republican nominee with personal insults. Warren, the superstar senator from Massachusetts, was the most prolific among the Democrats in mocking the Manhattanite, calling him a loser and engaging him directly on Twitter, for example.<sup>lxxvi</sup> Every effort to adapt to Trump’s rhetoric, however popular among the base, also raised criticisms and questions about insult politics.

24 Clinton herself eschewed prominent personal attacks for most of the campaign, recognizing insult politics as treacherous ground.<sup>lxxxvii</sup> Even during the vitriolic debates, when Trump called her a “nasty woman” among other things, her attacks on him were connected to his career, his statements, and his policies rather than his personality or appearance. The Democratic mantra of the 2016 campaign was outlined in Michelle Obama’s speech at the Democratic National Convention in July:

...how we urge [our daughters] to ignore those who question their father’s citizenship or faith. How we insist that the hateful language that they hear from public figures on TV does not represent the true spirit of this country. How we explain that when someone is cruel or acts like a bully, you don’t stoop to their level. No, our motto is, when they go low, we go high.<sup>lxxxviii</sup>

25 Without mentioning Donald Trump by name, Obama made it clear she was referring to the tradition of right-wing populism he was representing.

26 An unlikely figure emerged in early 2016 in an attempt to take down the Republican frontrunner, Mitt Romney. The party’s previous presidential candidate voiced his vehement opposition of Trump’s politics and policies, highlighting his insult politics: “this is an individual who mocked a disabled reporter, who attributed a reporter’s questions to her menstrual cycle, who mocked a brilliant rival who happened to be a woman due to her appearance.”<sup>lxxxix</sup> Romney represented a wide variety of politicians who believed the candidacy of Donald Trump called for unprecedented steps, before Election Day a staggering 160 Republican leaders had acknowledged they would not vote for their own party’s nominee.<sup>lxxx</sup> Journalists took similar steps, the *New York Times* actually printed a list of all the 289 people, places, and things the Republican candidate had insulted on Twitter during his campaign. In an unprecedented move, the list appeared not just online but in the printed paper, taking up two whole pages.<sup>lxxxxi</sup> A record number of newspapers endorsed Hillary Clinton, or at least recommended not voting for Trump, including several staunchly Republican papers who had not favored a Democrat for decades.<sup>lxxxii</sup> The *Cincinnati Enquirer*, which had not endorsed a Democrat for almost a century, criticized Trump and his “childish insults.”<sup>lxxxiii</sup> For the first time in its 126-year history, the *Arizona Republic* endorsed the Democratic candidate, calling Trump’s insulting comments a “pattern” and evidence of a “stunning lack of decency, empathy and respect.”<sup>lxxxiv</sup> Endorsing a Democrat for the first time in over 75 years, the *Dallas Morning News* described his insults as “a dangerous lack of judgement.”<sup>lxxxv</sup> Keeping to their tradition of never endorsing a candidate, the editorial board of *USA Today* called Trump unfit for office and claimed he “coarsened the national dialogue.”<sup>lxxxvi</sup> Faced with the question of whether his rhetoric during the campaign had gone too far, only days after the election, Trump simply said, “No. I won.”<sup>lxxxvii</sup> Apparently, any rhetoric was indeed justified in the populist insult politics of Donald Trump.

## 6. Conclusion

27 The presidential campaign of Donald Trump was in many ways unprecedented, yet in many more ways it was the culmination of decades of developments within the conservative movement, the Republican Party, and the political culture of the United States. Putting the campaign in historical context

his use of insulting and mocking rhetoric. According to opinion polls, an overwhelming majority of likely voters were bothered by Donald Trump's mocking of a reporter's physical disability and his insulting rhetoric toward the parents of a fallen U.S. soldier.<sup>lxxxviii</sup> Research by political scientists Lynn Vavreck and John Geer has also shown how Trump's derogatory rhetoric on women drove down his support.<sup>lxxxix</sup> The votes cast in the election make it clear, however, that even though many people were worried or bothered by his insults, they gave their vote to the Republican candidate. Indeed, strong partisan polarization was one of the main aspects of the election results. Yet, despite winning the White House, Trump actually received a lower percentage of the popular vote than any candidate—winning or losing—in the last two decades, with the exception of John McCain in his landslide loss against Barack Obama in 2008 and Bob Dole in the three-way race against the incumbent Bill Clinton and Texas billionaire Ross Perot in 1996. Furthermore, Trump took office with a lower approval rating than any president in modern history.<sup>xc</sup>

- 28 In early January 2017, Donald Trump held a press conference, the first one in six months. Asked about his former rival Senator Lindsey Graham's (R-South Carolina) hard stance toward Russia, the president-elect apparently could not help but insult his fellow Republican. "Lindsey Graham, I've been competing with him for a long time. He's going to crack that 1 percent barrier one day. I didn't realize Lindsey Graham was still at it," he said mockingly alluding to the South Carolinian's unfruitful run for the Republican presidential nomination.<sup>xc</sup> Indeed, there are no signs that Donald Trump will change his incendiary language and insulting rhetoric as president. Yet he is unique not in his use of populist insult politics, but in the fact that he reached the presidency in spite of it.
- 29 In the long tradition of right-wing populism, Donald Trump set out to break political norms utilizing conservative media to cultivate a politics of the little guy, anger, and insults. Mockingly lashing out not only at his political rivals but at institutions, celebrities, and individual citizens, the Republican nominee found a political environment eager to condemn his insults and a media industry keen to report on the norm-breaking behavior. The other candidates who adopted Trump's rhetoric encountered the same condemnations, but did not benefit in the same way from flouting political customs and basic decency. The reality TV celebrity was uniquely positioned within the traditions of right-wing populism and conservative media to benefit from an unabashed variety of insult politics. Yet even in victory, the candidate was unable to abandon insult politics and consequently was incapable of shedding the lasting stigma of his rhetoric, assuming the office as the most divisive president in modern history.

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## NOTES

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## ABSTRACTS

While often hailed—or denounced—as unprecedented, the 2016 presidential campaign of Donald Trump was not ahistoric. This article positions the Trump campaign in historical traditions of right-wing populism, incendiary political language, and insulting rhetoric. Trump's mocking and insulting rhetoric in the campaign was widely described as both norm-breaking and, surprisingly, not politically harmful. This article challenges both assumptions, illustrating how Trump fits into a long tradition of insult politics, and how it remains controversial and politically dangerous. The insult politics Trump utilized throughout his campaign served a political purpose. However, there are strong indications that Trump won the White House in spite of his mocking rhetoric, not because of it. Rather, the particular political position of Trump, and his media image, explains how he could utilize insult politics to his advantage. The initial unwillingness of the other candidates to engage in insult politics, as well as the backlash against those who eventually did, further illustrates the problems inherent in the use of insulting and mocking language.

## INDEX

**Keywords:** 2016 U.S. Presidential Election, right-wing populism, mocking rhetoric, political discourse, attack politics, insult politics