Journal of American Studies (2025), **59**, 1–20
doi:10.1017/S002187582510114X

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Second Coming: Donald Trump's Reelection and Its Consequences

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(Accepted 27 June 2025)

The United States has elected as its President a vain, outlandish, anti-immigrant, fearmongering demagogue. His victorious campaign promised to rescue America from its spiral of declining power and prosperity and to make it great again. Once in office, he trampled over democratic norms and carried out a coup against constitutional government through centralizing power in his authoritarian presidency. The foregoing is actually the premise of a 1935 dystopian novel, *It Can't Happen Here*, written by Sinclair Lewis to warn against complacency that a populist tyrant could never come to power in freedom-loving America and discussed in Ian Afflerbach's contribution to one of the roundtables in this issue's Readers' Room.[1] The fictional President, Berzelius "Buzz" Windrip, is clearly modelled on Senator Huey P. Long, the Louisiana Democrat expected to run on a third-party ticket against Franklin D. Roosevelt in the 1936 presidential election (a possibility ended by his assassination six weeks before the book's publication). Nevertheless, there are some eerie parallels between the scenario portrayed by Lewis and the second coming of Republican Donald Trump as President nearly a century later.

This essay opens *JAS*'s special issue on American studies and the 2024 election in which contributors explore issues that rose to prominence during the election campaign and the first months of the second Trump administration using a variety of disciplinary lenses and methodologies. It analyses why Trump became only the second President in history (after Grover Cleveland) to win nonconsecutive terms in office and assesses the transformative significance of his early second-term initiatives. At the same time, it advances the guiding premise of the special issue: that the broad objects of study, interdisciplinary approaches, and asynchronous

[1]Sinclair Lewis, *It Can't Happen Here* (New York: Doubleday, Doran, 1935) (reissued as a Penguin Modern Classic in 2017). Afflerbach argues that Windrip's politics and the landscape in which he operates have little in common with Trump in 2024, but that the novel can still illuminate the risks of political complacency.

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https://doi.org/10.1017/S002187582510114X Published online by Cambridge University Press

perspectives of American studies can combine with history and political science to help us better understand Trump's victory, its causes, and its possible consequences. As demonstrated by *It Can't Happen Here*, literature and other cultural outputs can enrich understanding of American history and politics at any given time. As an area studies discipline, with a geographical organizing principle that compliments the traditional chronological frameworks of English and history, American studies foregrounds relations between states and regions, and at national and transnational scales that shape US politics and require consideration to better appreciate the complexity of the country that national aggregates may fail to reveal. Where appropriate, therefore, this introduction to the special *Journal of American Studies* issue on the 2024 presidential election references films, television programmes and literature that cast light on Trump's second coming and its significance.

The meaning of the 2024 vote

Whatever their discipline, scholars generally agree that Trump won a solid victory but not the landslide that he claimed to have given him "an unprecedented and powerful" mandate to govern.[2] There is no standard definition of a presidential landslide beyond the rather imprecise requirement that the margin of victory be overwhelming. Trump clearly failed to meet this in besting his Democratic rival, Kamala Harris, in the popular vote by just 1.5 percent (49.9 to 48.4 percent), the lowest winning margin in all but four of the twenty White House races since 1945. He gained a more substantial victory in the Electoral College by 312 votes to 226, but his tally was only the twelfth highest in post-World War II elections.

The basic arithmetic of popular-vote and Electoral College winning margins signifies that presidential elections have become much tighter in the twenty-first-century era of polarization. In comparison with their twentieth-century predecessors, the contemporary Republican and Democratic parties are more ideologically cohesive and dependent on strongly partisan voter bases that are more or less equal in size.[3] Overwhelming victories on the scale won by Dwight D. Eisenhower in 1952 (55.2 percent of the popular vote and 442 Electoral College votes) and 1956 (57.4 percent and 457), Lyndon B. Johnson in 1964 (61.1 percent and 486), Richard Nixon in 1972 (60.7 percent and 520), and Ronald Reagan in 1984 (58.8 percent and 525) have disappeared from the political landscape. The half-dozen or so competitive swing states where neither main party can count on a safe majority have determined the outcome of recent presidential elections.[4]

One indication of this new political environment is that in two of the seven twenty-first-century presidential elections, those of 2000 and 2016, the victor (respectively Republicans George W. Bush and Trump) gained a smaller share of the popular vote than the loser (respectively Democrats Al Gore and Hillary Clinton),

[2]James Fitzgerald, "Just How Big Was Donald Trump's Election Victory?", *BBC News*, 23 Nov. 2024, at www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cn5w9w160xdo.

[3]Nolan McCarty, *Polarization: What Everyone Needs to Know* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019); Pew Research Center, "Political Polarization in the American Public," 14 June 2014, at www.pewresearch.org/politics/2014/06/12/political-polarization-in-the-american-public.

[4]David A. Shultz and Rafael Jacob, *Presidential Swing States*, 3rd edn (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2022).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S002187582510114X Published online by Cambridge University Press

something that last happened in 1888. In 2024, Trump became the first Republican since George W. Bush in 2004 to win the largest share of the popular vote and his Electoral College vote was the highest GOP tally since George H. W. Bush in 1988. Nevertheless, he fell short of the highest winning margins of the twenty-first century set by Barack Obama in 2008 when defeating his Republican opponent, Senator John McCain of Arizona, by 52.9 to 45.7 percent in the popular vote and by 365 to 173 Electoral College votes. Trump's short coattails provided further evidence that his victory was no landslide. The Republicans made a net gain of four to attain a 53–49 majority in the Senate, where the hitherto ascendant Democrats were defending several vulnerable seats, but a net loss of two in the House of Representatives left them with a majority of 219 sitting members to 215, the smallest for any party since 1931.

Trump evidently lacked a transformational mandate in the manner of Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1932 or Ronald Reagan in 1980. The significant achievement of his campaign was winning all seven of the swing states that determined the outcome in 2024 – Arizona, Georgia, Michigan, Nevada, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin. He carried the four Sunbelt states comfortably but the switch of just 114,844 popular votes into Harris's column in the three Great Lakes states would have put her in the White House. The clearest conclusion to be drawn from the close vote is that America remains deeply divided in political terms. Significantly, 59 percent of respondents, including 88 percent of Democrats and Democratic-leaning independents, in a Pew post-election survey expressed doubt that Trump could bring the country together in his second term.[5]

Three interrelated disadvantages weighed down Kamala Harris in her quest for victory. First, as the serving vice president, she was to all intents and purposes the incumbent candidate and inherited the broad popular dissatisfaction with the sitting President. Joe Biden's Gallup approval rating had only exceeded 50 percent in the first six months of his tenure and festered thereafter in the low forties and high thirties. His thirteenth-quarter (January–March 2024) average approval rating of 39 percent was the lowest for any elected President at this point in his first term in Gallup history. Confirming his unpopularity, a post-election Gallup survey would rate him the worst President since Richard Nixon. Already worried that Biden was too far behind in the polls to beat Trump, senior Democrats pressured him into withdrawing his candidacy after an incoherent performance in a televised presidential debate with his GOP opponent on 27 June 2024 intensified concerns that he was too old at eighty-two to serve a second term. It is highly likely that loyal aides had hitherto concealed the full extent of the President's physical and mental decline, as later revealed in *Original Sin*, a best-selling book published by journalists Jake Tapper and Alex Thompson a few months after his term ended.[6]

[5]John Nichols, "If Less than 115,000 Votes Had Switched in Three Battleground States, Harris Would Have Beaten Trump," *The Nation*, 20 Dec. 2024, at www.thenation.com/article/politics/three-battleground-states-defeated-trump; "Public Narrowly Approves of Trump's Plans; Most Are Skeptical He Will Unify the Country," *Pew Research Center*, 22 Nov. 2024, at www.pewresearch.org/politics/2024/11/22/public-narrowly-approves-of-trumps-plans-most-are-skeptical-he-will-unify-the-country.

[6]Gallup, "Biden's 13th-Quarter Approval Average Lowest Historically," 28 April 2024, at https://news.gallup.com/poll/644252/biden-13th-quarter-approval-average-lowest-historically.aspx; Joe Edwards,

https://doi.org/10.1017/S002187582510114X Published online by Cambridge University Press

Second, the popular sense that the country was on the wrong track, evident since the financial crash of 2007–9, grew stronger under Biden. The monthly Gallup poll asking respondents whether they were satisfied with the way things were going in the United States consistently recorded 75 to 80 percent rates of dissatisfaction in 2023–24.[7] Finally, Trump's "Make America great again" message, familiar to voters from his 2016 and 2020 campaigns, was in tune with the national mood of discontent. Harris could never encapsulate her vision of change with comparable sharpness. The closest she came to producing an election slogan was "We're not going back," which enthused her campaign audiences with its promise to defend women's bodily autonomy, racial and gender equity, and LGBTQIA+ inclusion. However, too many voters in the lower half of the income distribution, caught up in economic anxieties about the present and future, wanted a return to what they perceived as the more secure times of Trump's first term as president from 2017 to 2021.[8]

The anti-incumbency outcome of the US presidential race conformed with the general pattern in the more than one hundred national elections held worldwide in 2024, but occurred almost uniquely amid economic conditions of high employment, low inflation, and strong economic growth. Two weeks before the election, *The Economist* magazine's cover showed a turbocharged rocket of $100 notes heading for the stratosphere to illustrate that the American economy was "THE ENVY OF THE WORLD." When Biden took office, many economists forecast that it would take several years for the country to recover fully from the effects of the coronavirus shutdown. Nevertheless, the US economy grew by 10 percent from 2021 through 2024, three times the average rate for other G7 advanced nations. America also had a lower average rate of unemployment during the Biden years than under any President since Lyndon B. Johnson. The creation of 225,000 new jobs in December 2024 brought the total generated during his tenure to 16.6 million, making his administration the first in history to record employment growth during every month in office.[9]

Bill Clinton's victory in the 1992 election made the mantra "It's the economy, stupid" part of American political lore. The 2024 race rewrote the script to make "It's the perception of the economy, stupid" the new reality. A year out from the vote, a poll commissioned by *The Guardian* newspaper found that 68 percent of respondents felt financially squeezed, 59 percent thought the economy was

"Biden Will Be Seen as Worst President since Nixon: Poll," *Newsweek*, 7 Jan. 2025, at www.newsweek.com/joe-biden-poll-worst-president-since-richard-nixon-2011155; Jake Tapper and Alex Thompson, *Original Sin: Biden's Decline, Its Cover-Up, and His Disastrous Choice to Run Again* (New York: Penguin/Random House, 2025).

[7]Gallup, "Satisfaction With the United States," at https://news.gallup.com/poll/1669/general-mood-country.aspx.

[8]Ashley Brown, "'Make America Great Again' vs. 'We're Not Going Back': The Power behind the Slogans," *Bruin Political Review*, 5 Nov. 2024, at https://bruinpoliticalreview.org/articles?post-slug=-make-america-great-again-vs-we-re-not-going-back-the-power-behind-the-slogans.

[9]"America's Economy: A Special Report," *The Economist*, 19–25 Oct. 2024, at www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2025/01/10/statement-from-president-joe-biden-on-the-december-2024-jobs-report.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S002187582510114X Published online by Cambridge University Press

shrinking, 51 percent thought unemployment was at a fifty-year high, and 65 percent disbelieved government and media reports that the economy was doing well. Though Republican identifiers were far more pessimistic than Democratic ones, the survey found that unhappiness with the economy was widespread across partisan lines.[10]

In substantive terms, "Bidenomics" delivered better aggregates than "Trumponomics," but the full benefits would not be directly felt by many ordinary Americans for years. The industrial policy it pursued sought to create well-paid jobs through development of green energy, advanced technology, and domestic production of semiconductors and computer chips to reduce dependence on Chinese imports. The Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act of 2021, the Chips and Science Act of 2022, and the Inflation Reduction Act of 2022 formed the core of this strategy. These measures were primarily intended to grow the economy through business subsidies in the form of investment incentives, tax credits, and public–private partnerships. In essence, historian Brent Cabul argues, "Bidenomics" constituted a supply-side liberalism that anticipated trickle-down improvements for workers via its corporate beneficiaries. A four-year presidential term allowed insufficient time for its full development. When Biden bowed out of the 2024 race, 75 percent of respondents in one poll reported deriving no benefit from his economic initiatives.[11]

Unsurprisingly, a majority of voters – 53 to 46 percent according to the CNN exit poll – trusted Trump more than Harris to manage the economy. The overriding issue for many was inflation in the here-and-now rather than the still-distant prospect of decent jobs. Price instability was nowhere near as bad under Biden as it had been in Jimmy Carter's presidency when an inflation rate of 13 percent in 1980 had put Ronald Reagan into the White House. The Federal Reserve, possessing more effective monetary powers to combat inflation than any tools in the President's policy kit, brought the annualized rate of increase in consumer prices down to 2.5 percent in late 2024. Nevertheless, prices were still 20 percent higher overall than at the end of 2020 owing to supply problems resulting from the COVID shutdown, the Russia–Ukraine war's effect on global commodity prices, and labor shortages pushing up wage costs. Aggregate federal spending of $1.9 trillion on the administration's industrial-policy programmes also stoked inflationary pressures as the post-COVID economy grew.[12]

Wages rose much faster overall than prices in the Biden years but the scale of inflation was still a psychological shock to many Americans who had not experienced serious price instability in their adult lifetimes. More pertinent to the election outcome, the growing cost of basic foodstuffs, gasolene, and energy enhanced the

[10]Dominic Rushe, "US Economy Going Strong under Biden – Americans Don't Believe It," *The Guardian*, 15 Sept. 2023, at www.theguardian.com/us-news/2023/sep/15/biden-economy-bidenomics-poll-republicans-democrats-independents.

[11]Brent Cebul, "Bidenomics: Farewell to an Idea?",*New York Review of Books*, 16 Jan. 2025, at www.nybooks.com/online/2025/01/15/bidenomics-farewell-to-an-idea/?srsltid=AfmBOor9QpksMWh49UKB2IafVrKABQT6sA9cmIRTHmjnkjI5q54dDjEu.

[12]Ben S. Bernanke and Olivier Blanchard, "What Caused the U.S. Pandemic-Era Inflation?", *Brookings Research and Commentary*, 13 June 2023, at www.brookings.edu/articles/what-caused-the-u-s-pandemic-era-inflation.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S002187582510114X Published online by Cambridge University Press

substantive economic insecurities of families who lacked the cushion of savings and rising wages to protect their standard of living. Some 45 percent of voters in Edison Research's exit poll said their financial situation was worse than four years ago and did not feel that the Democrats had adequately responded to those concerns. CNN's exit poll similarly found that respondents whose families had suffered serious hardship from inflation in the previous year voted for Trump over Harris by 76 to 23 percent, those who had experienced moderate hardship broke for Trump by 52 to 46 percent, and those who had experienced no hardship went for Harris by 78 to 21 percent.[13]

Cost-of-living issues affected nonaffluent voters far more than better-off ones. This reinforced the income inversion of partisan support that was a feature of recent presidential elections. For much of the twentieth century, the Democratic Party's core support was its working-class base, but this shrank in conjunction with blue-collar employment decline. When Trump first ran for office in 2016, the US had 7.5 million fewer manufacturing jobs than in 1980, more than two-thirds of which had been lost since the turn of the century. Foreign competition was partly to blame for this, with China responsible for about a quarter of the decline. Even more important was the shift in the manufacturing sector from low-skilled jobs to high-skilled occupations, such as engineers, computer programmers, and software developers, which are not labour-intensive and require high levels of education to undertake. In these circumstances, Trump's "Make America great again" message, with its promise to bring back traditional manufacturing jobs, had particular appeal to low-skilled, blue-collar voters in his nonincumbent campaigns of 2016 and 2024.[14]

Trump perfected a populist critique charging that the Democrats had become an out-of-touch, elitist, bi-coastal party unconcerned with the needs of ordinary Americans trying to get by in difficult times. In 2024, it helped him win majorities of 50 to 48 percent among voters with an annual household income of less than $50,000 and 52 to 46 percent among those in the $50,000–$100,000 bracket. Harris, meanwhile, carried voters with a household income above $100,000, a GOP constituency in pre-Trump times, by 51 to 47 percent. The educational status of Democratic and Republican voters confirmed the class-based change in partisan support. Harris won a 56 to 42 percent majority among college graduates, generally a higher-earning group with liberal inclinations on sociocultural issues, while Trump carried non-graduates, a cohort that felt increasingly shut out of the new economy, by 56 to 43 percent. In parallel with this class inversion of partisan support, Trump ran better than any of his post-1960 Republican predecessors with nonwhite groups to gain 13 percent of African American voters, 46 percent of Latinos, and 40 percent

[13]Linda Robinson, "Kamala Harris and the Glass Cliff," *Council on Foreign Relations*, 8 Nov. 2024, at www.cfr.org/blog/kamala-harris-and-glass-cliff; CNN, "Election 2024: Exit Polls," at https://edition.cnn.com/election/2024/exit-polls/national-results/general/president/0.

[14]Richard Hernandez, "The Fall of Employment in the Manufacturing Sector," *Monthly Labor Review* (US Bureau of Labor Statistics), Aug. 2018, at www.bls.gov/opub/mlr/2018/beyond-bls/the-fall-of-employment-in-the-manufacturing-sector.htm; Alan I. Abramowitz, *The Great Alignment: Race, Party Transformation, and the Rise of Donald Trump* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2018).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S002187582510114X Published online by Cambridge University Press

of Asian Americans. (This significant development is analysed and explained by Richard Johnson in this issue).[15]

Class and educational status proved more important than identity and culture-war issues in determining the outcome of the 2024 vote. The Democrats had been confident of winning a large majority of women voters after the Supreme Court's judgment in *Dobbs* v. *Jackson Women's Health Organization* (2022) rescinded abortion rights promulgated a half-century earlier in *Roe* v. *Wade* (1973). The three appointees Trump made to this body in his first term constituted the margin of difference in the judicial majority that issued this decision by a six-to-three vote. The abortion issue had strongly benefited Democratic candidates in the 2022 midterm elections, but Kamala Harris's hopes that it would do the same for her in 2024 went unrealized. Although she had a lead of 8 percent among women voters, this was significantly smaller than Biden's 15 percent margin in 2020 and Hillary Clinton's of 13 percent in 2016.[16]

The Upper Midwest battleground

Investigation of national voting aggregates, though essential, cannot provide a complete understanding of the 2024 presidential election outcome – or, indeed, any other (the shortcomings of generative AI tools of political analysis for exploring subnational diversity are pertinently demonstrated by Lauren Bell in this issue.) The Electoral College nature of the national ballot and the significant role of the states in the US system of federalism requires consideration of the importance of place in the outcome of the presidential vote. The tensions between the national and the regional are frequently on display, as exemplified in recent times by the Republican Party's hold over the South even when the Democrats triumph nationally and the latter's similar preponderance in the Northeast and the Pacific West in contests won by the GOP. Accordingly, it is important to explore subnational diversity to understand broader political developments.

The Upper Midwest was the critical battleground in all three of Trump's presidential races. His success in this region was instrumental in his winning the presidency in 2016 and 2024, while his loss of its swing states was similarly significant in his defeat in 2020. Approaches in American studies that explore the formation of regional cultures and identities and their relationship to the national body via readings across politics, history, and cultural productions can make a significant contribution to understanding why the states of the Upper Midwest went for Trump in 2024. The region has received relatively less attention from historians and social scientists in recent years in comparison to the metropolitan Northeast, the South and the Sunbelt. In a clear indication of its significance in 2024, however, both Trump and Harris looked to broaden their regional appeal through selecting Midwesterners as their vice-presidential running mates, respectively Senator J.D. Vance of Ohio and Governor Tim Walz of Minnesota.

[15]CNN, "Election 2024: Exit Polls"; "Poorer Voters Flocked to Trump – and Other Data Points from the Election," *Financial Times*, 9 Nov. 2024, at www.ft.com/content/6de668c7-64e9-4196-b2c5-9ceca966fe3f.

[16]Zachary B. Wolf, Curt Merrill, and Way Muller, "Anatomy of Three Trump Elections: How Americans Shifted in 2024 vs. 2020 and 2016," *CNN Politics*, 6 Nov. 2024, at https://edition.cnn.com/interactive/2024/politics/2020-2016-exit-polls-2024-dg/index.html.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S002187582510114X Published online by Cambridge University Press

Whether the twelve states that are conventionally labelled Midwestern have a common regional identity is a matter of debate. The United States Census Bureau identifies the Midwest as one of the nation's four regions but subdivides it into East North Central (Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Ohio, and Wisconsin) and West North Central (Iowa, Kansas, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, North Dakota, and South Dakota).[17] It is the East North Central states that interest electoral analysts. Aside from strongly Democratic Illinois and safely Republican Indiana, Wisconsin, Michigan, and Ohio (which Barack Obama carried in 2008 and 2012) have a recent history as swing states. While the large cities are safely Democratic and the rural areas are overwhelmingly Republican in all five states, the more competitive small and medium-sized cities tend to determine which party carries the three swing states.[18]

The smaller cities of the upper Midwest have an ambiguous place in the national mind. The publication in 1920 of Sinclair Lewis's *Main Street*, set in a fictionalized version of his hometown of Sauk Center, Minnesota, saddled them with the image of being moralistic, narrow, and resistant to change. For historian John Lauck, this contributed to the Great Lakes heartland, once the most dynamic part of the country in terms of economic growth, population expansion and cultural life, becoming seen as backward in relation to the Northeast and Pacific West.[19] After World War II, the region regained some esteem as the exemplar of simpler times and communal values. In his 1947 report on the nation, journalist John Gunther called it "America uncontaminated" in a chapter entitled "Mind of the Middle West" (which he defined as the five East North Central states, plus Minnesota, Iowa, and Missouri). Fifty years later, regional geographer James Shortridge remarked that the small-town Midwest was the touchstone for "the positive values that grow out of a rootedness in place." For some critics, this was an image fostered by cultural outputs that celebrated its past without paying heed to its present.[20]

In 2024 urban researcher Michael Bloomberg produced a list of 179 so-called "forgotten cities" with the common characteristics of being old (a minimum population of 5,000 in 1880), small (a current population between 15,000 and 150,000), and relatively poor (a median household income 17 percent or more below the national average). Seventy of these were in the East North Central section of the Midwest. Ohio had twenty-three such cities, Illinois had sixteen, Indiana had fourteen, Michigan had ten, and Wisconsin had seven. These places were hard-hit in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries by manufacturing job loss,

[17]"Census Regions and Divisions of the United States," at www2.census.gov/geo/pdfs/maps-data/maps/reference/us_regdiv.pdf.

[18]For an overview of regional politics see John K. Lauck and Catherine McNicol Stock, eds., *The Conservative Heartland: A Political History of the Postwar American Midwest* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2020).

[19]John K. Lauck, *From Warm Center to Ragged Edge: The Erosion of Midwestern Literary and Historical Regionalism, 1920–1965* (Iowa City: Iowa University Press, 2017).

[20]John Gunther, *Inside U.S.A.* (New York: Harper, 1947), 270–92, esp. 274; James R. Shortridge, "The Heartland's Role in US Culture: It's 'Main Street'," *Public Perspective*, June–July 1998, at https://ropercenter.cornell.edu/sites/default/files/2018-07/94040.pdf; Amanda Arnold, "Why Literature and Pop Culture Still Can't Get the Midwest Right," *Lit Hub*, 27 March 2017, at https://lithub.com/why-literature-and-pop-culture-still-cant-get-the-midwest-right.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S002187582510114X Published online by Cambridge University Press

the departure of younger residents to bigger regional cities with greater employment opportunities, and the opioid public-health crisis. They leaned Democratic for decades but have become redder of late. The twenty cities in the neighbouring swing state of Pennsylvania that feature in Bloomberg's list manifest the same political trend.[21]

The plight of "forgotten cities" was highlighted in J.D. Vance's memoir, *Hillbilly Elegy* (2016), which detailed the tribulations of life in his birthplace of Middletown, Ohio (population 50,000). Fiction is also catching up with fact, perhaps best exemplified by Phillipp Daniel's novel *American Rust* (adapted for a television series in 2021), which is set in a dilapidated steel town in southwestern Pennsylvania. In the same mould, Steven Markley's 2018 crime mystery *Ohio*, described by one reviewer as the novel to read "to understand the Midwest today" (and hailed by some as the fictional equivalent of *Hillbilly Elegy*), explores the underside of a town in the northeast of the state that prosperity has left behind.[22] A flourishing of what some have called "hillbilly Gothic" or "hillbilly noir" in the last fifteen years suggests that, as for southern writers in the 1940s and 1950s, "forgottenness" has becomes a locus for cultural place-making. Paradoxically, this "forgottenness" is putting the Midwest on the cultural map of the nation in the same moment as that region is exerting outsized influence on national politics.[23]

The Biden administration's huge investments in renewable energy and computer chip production brought new manufacturing plants to some "forgotten cities," but the benefits were not widespread. People who live in these places generally feel neglected by a national Democratic leadership seemingly more focussed on gaining support from affluent areas. Republicans, by contrast, put their plight in the national spotlight in 2024, even if they had to lie to do so. Trump and Vance gave credence to a conspiracy theorist's groundless allegation that Haitian immigrants settled in Springfield, Ohio, a town on the list of "forgotten cities," were stealing neighbours' pets to kill and eat. (Kodai Abe's essay in this issue puts that story in the broader context of the historical demonization of this group to serve the racialization of refugee politics.)[24]

Nationally focussed Democratic leaders failed to foresee the consequences of small-city voters in the Great Lakes states switching to Donald Trump in 2016. Senator Charles Schumer of New York (soon to become Senate minority

[21]Philip Bloomberg, "America's 179 Forgotten Cities Are Old, Small, and Poor," *Groundwork Data*, Oct. 2024, at www.groundworkdata.org/forgottencities. This was an updating of an earlier research survey, "Voices from the Forgotten Cities," published in 2007 by Lorene Hoyt and Andre Leroux.

[22]J.D. Vance, *Hillbilly Elegy: A Memoir of a Family and Culture in Crisis* (New York: Harper, 2016); Philipp Meyer, *American Rust* (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2009); Stephen Markley, *Ohio* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2018); Zac Davies, "Stephen Markley's 'Ohio' Is the Novel You Need to Read to Understand the Midwest Today," *America: The Jesuit Review*, 30 Nov. 2018, at www.americamagazine.org/arts-culture/2018/11/30/stephen-markleys-ohio-novel-you-need-read-understand-midwest-today.

[23]For further fictional and nonfictional examples of this genre that have gained literary awards, high sales, or both see Emma Copley Eisenberg, *The Third Rainbow Girl: The True Story of a Double Murder* (New York: Grand Central Publishing, 2020); David Joy, *Where All the Light Tends to Go* (New York: Putnam, 2015); Tiffany McDaniel, *The Summer That Melted Everything* (London: Scribe, 2016); and Donald Ray Pollock, *The Devil All the Time* (New York: Doubleday, 2011).

[24]Robert Tait, "Republicans Point Finger at Laura Loomer for Trump's Pet-Eating Rant," *The Guardian*, 12 Sept. 2024, at www.theguardian.com/us-news/2024/sep/12/laura-loomer-trump-pet-eating-claim.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S002187582510114X Published online by Cambridge University Press

leader) reportedly commented, "For every blue-collar Democrat we lose in western Pennsylvania, we will pick up two moderate Republicans in the suburbs of Philadelphia. And you can repeat that in Ohio and Michigan and Wisconsin." In reality, the retention of habitually Democratic blue-collar voters in the smaller cities of these states would have put Hillary Clinton into the White House in 2016 and Kamala Harris likewise in 2024. Their realignment also harmed down-ticket Democrats. Sherrod Brown, a native of Mansfield, Ohio (population 48,000) and long a champion of "forgotten cities," lost to millionaire Republican Bernie Moreno in his 2024 bid for a third term as Buckeye-state Senator because of dwindling blue-collar support.[25]

Democratic postmortems to explain Kamala Harris's defeat would do well to consult Representative Marcy Kaptur of Ohio, whose victory in one of the most hotly contested House seats against a Trump-endorsed Republican extended her record as the longest-serving woman in Congressional history. When first elected in 1982, her Toledo-adjoining district – home now to two "forgotten cities" (Fremont and Sandusky) – was reliably blue, but has become deeply purple in recent elections. To hold it, the devoutly Catholic Kaptur focussed on getting job-creating projects for her district, while opposing free-trade deals, supporting stronger immigration controls, and keeping a low profile on culture-war issues. The *Washington Post* aptly characterized her as "an economic populist from America's heartland with progressive values and a conservative disposition." If the Democrats are to regain lost ground with smaller-city voters in the Great Lakes states of the upper Midwest and Pennsylvania, which are so crucial to their prospects of national victory, they may need to develop a comparable identity.[26]

The affirmation of Trumpian Republicanism

By contrast, the Republicans are apparently set on their identity for the foreseeable future. If the 2024 race was the last hurrah for Trump himself as a presidential candidate because of the 22nd Amendment's constitutional ban on anyone being elected to the nation's highest office more than twice, it likely did not mark the swan song of Trumpism. What had seemingly started as a personal insurgency in 2016 quickly became a more organized, mainstream MAGA movement that almost completely took over the Republican Party. Shortly before the 2022 midterms, GOP strategist Sarah Longwell concluded from overseeing a slew of Republican focus groups, "People are happy – overwhelmingly – with the direction of the party. And that means America First ... the party has now changed forever." (Lane Crothers offers a detailed explanation of this development in his contribution to this issue.)[27]

[25]Alec MacGillis, "The Small Midwestern Cities That Could Play a Pivotal Role in This Year"s Elections,' *ProPublica*, 26 Oct. 2024, at www.propublica.org/article/election-ohio-wisconsin-michigan-pennsylvania-sherrod-brown-marcy-kaptur.

[26]Erin Glynn, "Longest-Serving Congresswoman Marcy Kaptur Wins 22nd House Term in Ohio," *USA Today*, 20 Nov. 2024, at https://eu.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/elections/2024/11/20/marcy-kaptur-wins-ohio-22-terms/76457447007; Elisa Gray, "The Quiet Endurance of Marcy Kaptur," *Washington Post*, 26 Aug. 2019, at www.washingtonpost.com/news/magazine/wp/2019/08/26/feature/the-quiet-endurance-of-marcy-kaptur.

[27]"Briefing: Donald Trump's Hold on the Republican Party Is Unquestionable," *The Economist*, 18 Aug. 2022, at www.economist.com/briefing/2022/08/18/donald-trumps-hold-on-the-republican-party-is-unquestionable.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S002187582510114X Published online by Cambridge University Press

The Reaganite GOP that endured for some three and a half decades after the fortieth President left office has metamorphosed into the Trumpian GOP. Trump's grip on the 2024 Republican National Convention in Milwaukee was near total in contrast to his haphazard hold on its 2016 predecessor in Cleveland, where a goodly number of senior party figures refused to endorse him. Historian Julian Zelizer has observed of Trump, "For all the talk about his being a renegade and a one-man wrecking ball, he displays a clear appreciation of the centrality of party to American government." In his first term, he pursued a recognizably Republican agenda of low taxes, deregulation, immigration control, and cultural conservatism, which fostered the partisan loyalty that saved him from impeachment in his 2019 and 2021 Senate trials. Trump furthermore recognized that party backing was essential if Trumpism was to survive as GOP gospel after he left office.[28]

The selection of Senator J.D. Vance of Ohio as his 2024 running mate was a crucial indicator of Trump's determination to safeguard his legacy. The need to broaden his appeal among evangelicals determined the choice of former Indiana governor Mike Pence for second spot on the 2016 and 2020 tickets. Never a true believer in MAGA, Pence committed the ultimate sin in Trump's eyes of refusing to stop Congressional certification of Biden's Electoral College victory when overseeing the process as vice president on 6 January 2021. Vance's vice-presidential nomination was partly down to Trump's need to boost his support in the Great Lakes states lost to Biden four years earlier, but it was equally intended to ensure MAGA's future as the Republican Party's dominant ideology.

A Yale Law School graduate, marine veteran, and former venture capitalist, the forty-year-old Vance became the third-youngest vice president in history (after John C. Breckinridge in 1857 and Richard Nixon in 1953). He had shot to fame with the publication of his *Hillbilly Elegy* memoir, later made into a Netflix movie starring Gabriel Basso and Glenn Close. When promoting his best seller in 2016, Vance voiced strong criticism of Trump, even texting a friend that his future boss might become an "American Hitler." In 2020, however, he displayed a convert's zeal in disputing the legitimacy of Biden's election. The politically inexperienced Vance secured Trump's endorsement for his candidacy in Ohio's Republican Senatorial primary in 2022 through the good offices of his major financial backer, conservative tech billionaire Peter Thiel. In the general election, he campaigned as a Trump-style right-wing populist to defeat his highly experienced opponent, Congressman Tim Ryan, who ran as a "Roosevelt-style Catholic Democrat."

This victory in a crucial swing state elevated Vance to generational leadership of younger conservatives. Gaining an entrée as Senator into the network of Washington's right-wing think tanks, he grew particularly close to Heritage Foundation director Kevin Roberts. In 2024, Vance wrote the foreword for Roberts's book, *Dawn's Early Light*, ending it with the exhortation for conservatives to "circle the wagons and load the muskets" in support of a right-wing takeover of

[28]Julian E. Zelizer, "Trump Didn't Break the Republican Party. He Harnessed It," *New York Times*, 27 Jan. 2025, at www.nytimes.com/2025/01/27/opinion/trump-republican-party-partisanship.html; Geoffrey Skelly, "Republicans Start 2025 with the Smallest House Majority since 1931," *ABC News*, 9 Jan. 2025, at https://abcnews.go.com/538/republicans-start-2025-smallest-house-majority-1931/story?id=117464711.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S002187582510114X Published online by Cambridge University Press

government. By then, he was on the radar of Trump's two sons, Donald Jr. and Eric, avowed MAGA enthusiasts who had replaced their more moderate sister, Ivanka, as his closest family advisers. It was their advocacy of Vance as the future guardian of Trumpism that ultimately got him the nod for the number-two slot on the GOP ticket over the likes of Senator Marco Rubio of Florida and Governor Doug Burgum of North Dakota.[29]

Vance's emergence as the darling of right-wing think tanks signified that institutions parallel to the GOP were engaged in programme and personnel planning for a second Trump administration, a role they had played in earlier incarnations to lay the foundations for Reaganism. The most significant initiative was Project 2025, overseen and bankrolled to the tune of $22 million by the Heritage Foundation. Over a hundred conservative groups, and some 140 officials in Trump's first-term administration contributed to the nine-hundred-page report that was unveiled in April 2023. Project 2025 set out a Christian white nationalist agenda based on policy recommendations in four broad areas: restoration of the family as the centrepiece of American life, dismantlement of the administrative state, defence of the nation's sovereignty and borders, and reestablishment of God-given individual rights to live freely from DEI (diversity, equity, and inclusion) and "woke" strictures. Its acolytes envisaged a rapid rollout of their agenda in a second Trump administration through presidential issuance of executive orders in unprecedented numbers, replacement of obstructionist civil servants with loyalists, and enactment of a multipurpose "big bill" to deliver the legislative elements of the conservative agenda in one fell swoop.[30]

Project 2025 embodied right-wing conviction that the federal government is a behemoth weaponized by the wolf of cultural Marxism disguised in the sheep's clothing of liberalism to suppress the inherent conservatism of the American people. Its authors drew inspiration from Viktor Orbán's takeover of the administrative state in his second spell as Hungary's prime minister and his transformation of that country into an electoral autocracy controlled by his Fidesz party.[31] When Kamala Harris focussed attention on the transformative goals of the conservative blueprint in the 2024 campaign, Trump disassociated himself from it. "I know nothing about Project 2025," he posted on his social-media platform, Truth Social. "I have no idea who is behind it." To take the heat off, Heritage's Kevin Roberts delayed publication of his book promoting Project 2025, with its Vance-penned foreword, until after the

[29]Stephanie Saul, "How Yale Propelled J.D. Vance's Career," *New York Times*, 18 July 2024, at www.nytimes.com/2024/07/17/us/jd-vance-yale-law-school.html; Alice Herman and Sam Levine, "Trump Names J.D. Vance, Once One of His Fiercest Critics, as 2024 Running Mate," *The Guardian*, 15 July 2024, at www.theguardian.com/us-news/article/2024/jul/15/trump-vp-jd-vance-election; Henry J. Gomez and Matt Dixon, "The Inside Story of How Trump Chose J.D. Vance as His Running Mate," *NBC News*, 16 July 2024, at www.nbcnews.com/politics/donald-trump/trump-chose-jd-vance-running-mate-vp-pick-rcna161982; Alex Shephard, "Read J.D. Vance's Violent Foreword to Project 2025 Leader's New Book," *New Republic*, 30 July 2024, at https://newrepublic.com/article/184393/jd-vance-violent-foreword-kevin-roberts-project-2025-leader-book.

[30]*Project 2025: Mandate for Leadership. The Conservative Promise* (Washington, DC: Heritage Foundation, 2023), at https://static.project2025.org/2025_MandateForLeadership_FULL.pdf.

[31]Jeremy Shapiro and Zsuzsanna Vegh, "The Orbanisation of America: Hungary's Lessons for Donald Trump," *European Council on Foreign Relations*, 9 Oct. 2024, at https://ecfr.eu/publication/the-orbanisation-of-america-hungarys-lessons-for-donald-trump.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S002187582510114X Published online by Cambridge University Press

election. Nevertheless, key contributors to the report received top Trump II jobs that enabled them to begin implementing its radical agenda as soon as they took office. These luminaries included Office of Management and Budget director Russ Vought, Federal Communication Commission chief Brendan Carr, and immigration czar Tom Homan. (Alex McPhee-Browne's essay suggests the historical parallels between contemporary right-wing thought and the antidemocratic ideas of elements of the American right in the 1930s and 1940s.)[32]

Delivering Trump's second-term agenda

In filling second-term senior positions, Trump's transition team made absolute fealty to the returning President the primary criterion for selection. Owing to his surprise victory in 2016, his hastily assembled first administration had featured numerous personnel with long-standing experience in government or military service. Trump predictably fell out with a goodly number of appointees whom he suspected of disloyalty to his MAGA agenda. High-profile resignations/firings from his team included Defense Secretary General James Mattis, chief of staff General John Kelly, national security adviser John Bolton, Attorney General Jeff Sessions, and Navy Secretary Richard Spicer. Attesting to intra-executive discord, an op-ed essay published in the *New York Times* by an anonymous administration member in September 2018 revealed that many officials deliberately ignored or undermined some of the President's orders for the good of the country.[33]

The loyalty litmus test for second-term posts produced more than a few nominees with questionable qualifications for their job, but the White House pulled out all the shots to get them confirmed. Arguably the most controversial was Pete Hegseth, a former army major and *Fox News* television personality, named as Secretary of Defense despite facing allegations of sexual misconduct, alcohol abuse, and financial mismanagement of veterans' charities. What got him the job was not ability but being of the same mind as Trump that the Pentagon's "woke" culture was more of a threat to national security than Russia. It required J.D. Vance's casting vote to confirm Hegseth after three Republican Senators (Susan Collins of Maine, Mitch McConnell of Kentucky, and Lisa Murkowski of Alaska) voted alongside every Democrat against him. Meanwhile Trump fired a number of senior officers who embodied the military's commitment to DEI under his predecessor. They included Lieutenant General Charles Q. Brown, the African American chair of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) and the President's chief military adviser, and Admiral Lisa Franchetti, chief of naval operations and the first woman to serve on the JCS.[34]

[32]Nick Popli, "Trump's Early Actions Mirror Project 2025, the Blueprint He Once Dismissed," *Time*, 24 Jan. 2025, at https://time.com/7209901/donald-trump-executive-actions-project-2025; Kevin Roberts, *Taking Back Washington to Save America* (New York Broadside, 2024) (the original subtitle was *Burning Down Washington to Save America*).

[33]"The White House Revolving Door: Who's Gone?", *BBC News*, 15 Dec. 2020, at www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-39826934; "I Am Part of the Resistance Inside the Trump Administration," 5 Sept. 2018, at www.nytimes.com/2018/09/05/opinion/trump-white-house-anonymous-resistance.html. In late 2020 the author revealed himself to be Miles Taylor, deputy chief of staff in the Department of Homeland Security.

[34]Oren Liebermann and Haley Britzky, "Trump Administration Fires Top US General and Navy Chief in Unprecedented Purge of Military Leadership," *CNN Politics*, 21 Feb. 2025, at https://edition.cnn.com/

https://doi.org/10.1017/S002187582510114X Published online by Cambridge University Press

Whatever the quality of Cabinet and agency appointees, the White House staff ran a far more efficient operation in Trump II's early days than its predecessor at the outset of Trump I. Aides rigidly controlled access to the President, eschewed personal rivalries, and shut off leaks to the press. One lobbyist reported that a "total black box" and "strong silo system" kept special interests from end-running them. Many pundits credited Susan Wiles, the first female chief of staff in presidential history, with instilling unaccustomed discipline into Trump's White House.[35]

This mode of operation enabled Trump to produce an early blitzkrieg of executive orders and presidential actions. The twenty that he signed on his first day in office, more than any predecessor, changed the policy landscape inherited from the Biden administration. These included a blanket rescindment of seventy-eight executive orders issued by his predecessor, at least a dozen of which had supported racial equity or safeguarded gay and transgender persons from discrimination in federal employment. Trump reached further back into the past the next day in revoking Lyndon B. Johnson's 1965 executive order outlawing multiple forms of discrimination by federal contractors and subcontractors. Among the slew of first-day initiatives targeting immigration matters, he declared an emergency on the southern border and sought – in apparent violation of the 14th Amendment of the Constitution – to limit automatic birthright citizenship for children born henceforth in America to anyone there illegally. Another executive order reclassified thousands of federal employees as political hires, making it much easier for them to be fired – an initiative in line with the Project 2025 blueprint for gutting the "deep state." Meanwhile, as part of broader efforts to roll back climate policy, Trump declared a national energy emergency that enabled him to undo restrictions on oil drilling in Alaska and on fossil-fuel production more generally.[36]

For Trump supporters, the scale of change he brought about in his first month in office stood comparison with what Franklin D. Roosevelt had achieved in the Hundred Days of 1933. The tsunami of executive orders, most drafted by aides working from the Project 2025 playbook, spearheaded a shock-and-awe strategy that caught Trump's opponents by surprise, but is vulnerable to eventual judicial and Congressional challenge. Moving too quickly can also create chaos. Within twenty-four hours of ordering a freeze on all federal grants and loans pending elimination of DEI requirements from recipient programmes, the Office of Management and Budget had to rescind the diktat because of widespread outcry about the effect on essential services. Trump's rapid-fire offensive eliminated the transaction costs associated with the conventional framing of executive orders through negotiation within the federal bureaucracy, the main repository of neutral expertise in government. According to political scientist Andrew Rudalevige, Presidents who

2025/02/21/politics/trump-fires-top-us-general-cq-brown/index.html?utm_source=substack&utm_medium=email.

[35]Marc Caputo, "Scoop: How Trump's 'Black Box' Limits Outside Influences," *Axios*, 26 Jan. 2025, at www.axios.com/2025/01/26/trump-white-house-inner-circle-influence. Ellie Quinlan Houghtaling, "Senior Trump Aide Finally Deems Elon Musk Too Annoying," *New Republic*, 27 Jan. 2025, at https://newrepublic.com/post/190715/donald-trump-elon-musk-susie-wiles-office.

[36]For details see Bill Barrow, "Everything Trump Did in the First Executive Orders and Actions of His Presidency," *AP*, 23 Jan. 2025; Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, "Executive Orders – Trump II," *American Presidency Project*, at https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/323876.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S002187582510114X Published online by Cambridge University Press

succeeded in "harness[ing] the positive attributes of the permanent government while mitigating its problematic aspects" usually reaped significant benefits for their policy agenda. Trump may therefore discover that his unilateralism in order to circumvent bureaucratic resistance carries opportunity costs for good policy making.[37]

Some Republican pollsters cautioned that the new President was making the same mistake as his predecessor in interpreting a modest election victory as the green light for sweeping change rather than a mandate for moderate governance. Polls initially showed his approval rate hovering just beneath 50 percent, lower even than Biden's had stood four years earlier. Some of his early initiatives were patently unpopular, notably the blanket pardon for some 1,500 individuals convicted for participating in the 6 January 2021 insurrection. More seriously for a President elected in part because of widespread dissatisfaction with inflation, his protective tariff hikes may well arouse popular indignation if they generate a new cycle of price rises.[38]

Issuance of executive orders was the easy part of delivering Trump's second-term agenda. Enacting the budget legislation required to fulfil his grandiose ambitions constituted a far greater challenge. As Project 2025 had recommended, the White House intended to submit a massive reconciliation measure to Congress within a month of Trump taking office. This strategy has a Republican pedigree dating back to the Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act of 1981, which incorporated the Reagan Revolution's domestic spending cuts into a single measure, but it has never been attempted on the multipurpose scale now intended. Going for broke to deliver what Trump calls the "big, beautiful bill" was supposed to implement his transformational agenda while his political capital was at its peak, confront GOP Congressional factions with the choice of accepting those parts of the measure they dislike or losing those close to their heart if enactment fails, and outmanoeuvre Democratic efforts to delay passage because reconciliation bills cannot be filibustered under Senate rules. According to the Congressional Budget Office, the bill as finally enacted will add $2.8 trillion to the federal budget deficit by 2034, enhance the income of the wealthiest 10 percent of families through its tax-cutting provisions, and reduce the income of the bottom 10 percent through its cuts in programs like Medicaid and food stamps. After a hard-fought battle to secure Congressional approval, Trump signed the measure on 4 July 2025 to symbolize its role in freeing Americans from big government,

[37]Alex Leary and Meredith McGraw, "Why Donald Trump Is Racing so Fast to Remake America," *Wall Street Journal*, 24 Jan. 2025, at www.wsj.com/politics/elections/trump-immigration-border-pardons-26b72288; Kyle Cheney and Josh Gerstein, "Another Judge Is Preparing to Block Trump's Spending Freeze, despite White House Cleanup," *Politico*, 29 Jan. 2025, at www.politico.com/news/2025/01/29/spending-freeze-blocked-trump-judge-00201341. Andrew Rudalevige, *By Executive Order: Bureaucratic Management and the Limits of Presidential Power* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2021), esp. 201–20, quotation at 220.

[38]Aaron Zitner and Xavier Martinez, "Voters Want MAGA Lite from Trump, WSJ Poll Finds," *Wall Street Journal*, 17 Jan. 2025, at www.wsj.com/politics/policy/donald-trump-policy-approval-poll-849feb84?st=opUZkL&reflink=desktopwebshare_permalink&mod=article_inline; Kate Linderman, "How Do Voters Feel about Trump's Day 1 Executive Orders? What New Poll Found," *Miami Herald*, 27 Jan. 2025, at www.miamiherald.com/news/nation-world/national/article299246709.html.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S002187582510114X Published online by Cambridge University Press

but many critics condemned it as the biggest upward transfer of wealth in American history.[39]

A longer-term challenge facing Trump is to keep the peace between the nativist right and the tech right within MAGA. The former's deep suspicion of hyper-globalization and the latter's reliance on supply chains and markets that bind America to the global economy make them natural adversaries. Their animosity found initial expression in the dispute over H-1B visas that enable immigrants with special skills to gain work permits. Nativists like former Trump adviser Steve Bannon regarded this programme as "a total and complete scam from its top to the bottom" because it takes jobs from Americans. Big-tech entrepreneurs, a group that invested heavily in Trump's 2024 election campaign, conversely wanted their industry to have unrestricted access to international talent so it can keep America atop the global AI economy of the twenty-first century. Nativists worried that the President's apparent shift from opposing H-1B visas in his first term to supporting them in his second indicated that the tech giants were redefining MAGA immigration policy to suit their corporate bottom line. This was just the opening shot in the broader battle between the two groups to define the future of Trumpism.[40]

In the administration's early days, however, Trump's preeminent big-tech supporter, Elon Musk, focussed primarily on his brief as director of the newly established Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE) to cut $2 trillion from a total federal budget of nearly $7 trillion through elimination of fraud, waste, and abuse. The world's richest man, he secured this job through contributing some $290 million to Republican coffers in 2024, more than half of it to the Trump campaign. Operating without transparency or oversight, the Musk agency had questionable legitimacy because of the constitutional requirement that any new federal department can only be created through an act of Congress. His efforts to cut costs through decreeing personnel reductions in federal departments and agencies encountered immediate opposition from the Trump-appointed heads of some, notably the Treasury and the State Department chieftains. The rapid discovery that many of the personnel removed by DOGE were crucial to government operations also necessitated a large volume of rehirings. A detailed *Politico* investigation found that the agency, far from being a transformative force in making government more cost-effective, was using dubious accounting techniques in grossly exaggerating the savings it claimed to have made.[41]

There has never been an outside operator thrust precipitately into a high-profile position in the inner sanctums of government like Musk, but his role has been somewhat prefigured in popular culture. In *Don't Look Up* (2021), Netflix's second-most-watched movie hitherto, a Musk-like figure (played by Mark Rylance) becomes

[39]Linda Qiu, "Trump and Republicans Mislead on Policy Bill's Effect," *New York Times*, 1 July 2025.

[40]"The Fight over America's Economy," *The Economist*, 4 Jan. 2025, at www.economist.com/weeklyedition/2025-01-04; Thomas Gift, "Elon Musk and the Tech Titans v the Rest of Maga – Here's Where the Big Splits Could Happen," *The Conversation*, 8 Jan. 2025, at https://theconversation.com/elon-musk-and-the-tech-titans-v-the-rest-of-maga-heres-where-the-big-splits-could-happen-246643.

[41]Jessie Blaeser, "Just How Much Has DOGE Exaggerated Its Numbers? Now We Have the Receipts," *Politico*, 12 August 2025, www.politico.com/news/2025/08/12/trump-doge-contract-claims-savings-inflation-00498178.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S002187582510114X Published online by Cambridge University Press

close to a US President (Meryl Streep). He persuades her to give his company responsibility for deflecting and fragmenting a mineral-rich comet heading for Earth into deep ocean where it can be profitably mined, rather than having the military destroy it in space with a missile strike. When the scheme goes awry, there are apocalyptic consequences for mankind. In similar vein, Hulu's popular 2025 series *Paradise* features the world's richest woman, Samantha Redmond (Julianne Nicholson), exerting undue influence over a President out of his depth (James Marsden), by financing and overseeing the secret underground bunker in which America's elites hide following what is thought to be an environmental and nuclear apocalypse. Musk's real-world manoeuvres may not have such dire effects, but Trump may well come to consider them more harmful than helpful to his presidency.

In parallel with reshaping America, Trump moved with rapidity to change the direction of US foreign policy. It had upheld a Western alliance dedicated to preserving peace, security, and liberal democracy in Western Europe during the Cold War and expanded its remit into Eastern Europe after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. In line with this, the Biden administration rallied America's partners to support Ukraine with war materiel, humanitarian aid, and economic assistance following its invasion by Russia in February 2022. Shortly after taking office, Trump all but trashed eighty years of American international leadership through seeking to negotiate with Russia's President, Vladimir Putin, an end to the war without including Ukraine or NATO members in the talks. This aroused European concerns that Putin would gain through diplomacy the war aims his forces had patently failed to attain on the battlefield. For his part, Trump wanted to end the war quickly on whatever terms could be attained so that it would no longer be a drain on American resources. Signalling his foreign-policy realignment with Putin, on 24 February 2025 the United States delegation to the United Nations voted against a resolution condemning Russia for its aggression in Ukraine and calling for it to end its occupation, a betrayal of this organization's founding principle forbidding one nation from invading another. Accordingly, within a month of Trump starting his second term, he had seemingly shredded America's central role in underpinning the rules-based international order it had instituted after World War II.[42]

The contributions to this issue

The five articles in this special *JAS* issue on the 2024 election explore directly or indirectly issues touched on in the Introduction above.

In "Donald Trump and the Turn to Right-Wing Populism in the Republican Party, 1990–2024," Lane Crothers situates Trumpism within the broad history of right-wing politics in America's twentieth century and, more specifically, within the GOP since the 1990s. In his assessment, Trump's ideas fell outside the Republican mainstream but found support amongst conservative voters, donors, and institutions that had long held similar beliefs and sought greater influence within the party to promote them. Far from being a maverick insurgency, his victorious candidacy for the Republican presidential nomination in 2016 precipitated a power shift within the

[42] Anne Applebaum, "Putin's Three Years of Humiliation," *The Atlantic*, 24 Feb. 2025, at www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2025/02/putins-three-years-of-humiliation.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S002187582510114X Published online by Cambridge University Press

party in favour of hitherto peripheral groups. These newly ascendant elements provided essential support for his surprise defeat of Democrat Hillary Clinton in the 2016 presidential election, sustained his claims that the 2020 election was stolen, and facilitated his restoration as party leader in 2024. According to Crothers, the Trumpian brand of populist nationalism is likely to remain dominant with the Republican coalition well into the future because it is so deeply embedded in its past.

The 2024 presidential election was the first to take place in the new age of generative artificial intelligence (AI), billed as the revolutionary knowledge technology of the twenty-first century. In "Generative AI and the Nationalization of US Politics," Lauren Bell, Peter Finn, Caroline V. Leicht, and Amy Tatum offer a timely caveat that its inherent bias toward national-level information reduces its utility for analysis of subnational state and local politics. In her empirical investigation, the large-language models used to train ChatGPT and other algorithms made them less useful to understand the diversity within American federalism than the on-the-ground human expertise provided by the Fifty States or Bust! Project. Despite this, Bell et al. conclude that generative AI will likely grow in significance as a tool of political analysis, enhancing the national focus of knowledge at the cost of appreciating state and local diversity. The ultimate outcome, she warns, is the erosion of the "compound republic" that James Madison and other founders envisaged as the essence of the federal system they created.

Baseless Republican claims that Haitian immigrants were stealing and eating the pets of white residents in Springfield, Ohio was one of the headline stories of the 2024 election. In "Picturing Bad Refugees: Haiti, Vietnam, and the Racial Politics of Refugee Photography," Kodai Abe contends that American policy makers and the US news media have deployed visual representations of refugees to establish a racialized hierarchy of "bad" economic migrants and "good" political refugees since the early 1980s. This "othering" strategy initially contrasted Haitian migrants with Vietnamese fleeing communist repression after the fall of Saigon. More recently, Trump set up his own racial configuration in favour of Norwegians as model newcomers. "Why do we want these people from all these shithole countries here?" he remarked in 2018 of immigrants from Haiti, El Salvador, Guatemala, and various Black African nations.[43] Though Trump manifests greater rhetorical extremism, his racialized demonization of Black migrants from Haiti and elsewhere has a long pedigree, one supported by photographic imagery that undergirds their stereotyping as a threat to America's purity.

Trump's outbursts on this score have not prevented him from gaining greater support than Republican presidential candidates habitually win from African American and Latino voters. In "Are Ethnic and Racial Minority Voters Abandoning the Democrats?", Richard Johnson downplays media reports that he possesses a strongman appeal to many nonwhite males. In his assessment, three factors predominantly explain why he has run relatively well among Black, Asian, and Hispanic voters of colour. Owing to political polarization, ideological conservatives in all three groups have shifted towards the Republicans of late. Additionally, working-class

[43]Elly Watkins and Abby Phillips, "Trump Decries Immigrants From 'Shithole Countries' Coming to US," *CNN Politics*, 12 Jan. 2018, at https://edition.cnn.com/2018/01/11/politics/immigrants-shithole-countries-trump/index.html.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S002187582510114X Published online by Cambridge University Press

voters of colour have followed the broad trend of growing support for the GOP among blue-collar, lower-educated households. Finally, in the particular case of Asian Americans and Latinos, these groups have not been in the United States long enough for partisan socialization to solidify their Democratic leanings. As a consequence, Kamala Harris's support base in 2024 was whiter and better educated than Barack Obama's in 2012. As Johnson notes, it was ironical that the first black and Asian woman nominated for the presidency had to rely on better-off whites to compensate for the decline of Democratic support among less affluent nonwhites.

In "Defying the Demos: Antidemocratic Thought in the United States, 1930–1950," Alex McPhee-Browne offers a salutary reminder that Trumpism, rather than being a historical aberration, has parallels with aspects of conservative thinking during the Great Depression and its immediate aftermath. In this earlier period, three groups of right-wingers – libertarians, reactionaries, and native fascists – condemned the rise of the newly enfranchised masses to sociopolitical power as the harbinger of communism. They yearned for an American autocracy that would restore hierarchy, order, and national greatness by governing in the interests of the propertied and educated elite. Such thinking may have been confined to the fringes of the New Deal-era polity and receded when the United States became involved in a war against fascism, but it attested to a long-standing undercurrent within the ideology of the American right that democracy does not work.

Concluding remarks

Donald Trump arguably did more to progress his America First agenda in the first month of his second term than in the entire four years of his first. The authoritarian bent he intermittently displayed in his initial White House tenure became more focussed, disciplined and ambitious. Based on a narrow victory in the 2024 election, he set out, inter alia, to eviscerate the administrative state, repatriate undocumented immigrants, impose tariffs at the risk of provoking a trade war, roll back civil rights protections that have been fifty years in the making, override laws previously enacted by Congress, and realign America with foreign dictatorships. Supporters applaud his transformational leadership as essential for national renewal, but opponents regard it as a threat to democracy at home and abroad.

In his first term, Trump's mode of operation, his off-the-cuff outbursts, and boastful exaggerations made him the butt of talk-show comedians on late-night television. Mocking him became a growth industry that exploited his bombast, egotism, and mendacity in endowing him with a somewhat absurdist image. Satirical humor has a long pedigree in the United States stretching back to the likes of Will Rogers, Dorothy Parker, and Mark Twain. In many ways, the comedic monologues of talk-show hosts such as Stephen Colbert, Seth Meyers, and Jon Stewart formed a new front in the media campaign to hold twenty-first-century Presidents and other politicians to task. Regarding them as a contingent of "the opposition party," Trump engaged in twitter feuds with those that succeeded in getting under his decidedly thin skin.[44]

[44]For insightful analysis see Stephen J. Farnsworth and S. Robert Lichter, *Late Night with Trump: Political Humor and the American Presidency* (New York: Routledge, 2020).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S002187582510114X Published online by Cambridge University Press

Laughing at leaders is a healthy expression of scepticism about those holding power in a democratic society, but Trump II is no joke. At home he is intent on destroying the liberal state that was created by the New Deal in the 1930s and had previously survived the challenge of the Reagan Revolution. In parallel with this, his America First foreign policy seeks to upend the international order that the US built after World War II. When Franklin D. Roosevelt became President in 1933, some opinion leaders wanted him to establish a dictatorship to deal with the frightening economic crisis of the Great Depression. Media mogul William Randolph Hearst sent his production company's movie *Gabriel over the White House* for the new President to view before it went on general release four weeks after his inauguration. In this, President Judd Hammond (played by Walter Huston) establishes a "Jeffersonian dictatorship" to renew the promise of America. Having come to power with the intent of saving American democracy, FDR gave no thought to emulating his fictional counterprart. Accordingly, his New Deal programmes operated within the existing constitutional structures of American government. Trump, in contrast, has manifested a marked authoritarian tendency to act outside laws, rules, and conventions in his second term.[45]

The first signs of resistance to the MAGA juggernaut from the judiciary, the Democrats (at both national and state level), and the ordinary public were quick to emerge. Popular opinion will have a crucial role to play in sustaining any pushback against Trump by the courts and Congress. With Trumpism in control of the levers of governing power, however, there is no certainty that resistance will halt its momentum. The 2024 presidential election may therefore be looked back on in time as one of the most significant in history, alongside those of 1860, 1932, and 1980, because its outcome resulted in the greatest challenge to America's democratic norms in modern times.

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[45]Deborah Carmichael, "*Gabriel over the White House* (1933): William Randolph Hearst's Fascist Solution for the Great Depression," in Peter C. Rollins and John E. O'Connor, eds., *Hollywood's White House: The American Presidency in Film and History* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2003), 159–79; Iwan Morgan, "'A Living Force': Franklin D. Roosevelt's Vision of American Democracy," *Federal History Journal*, 17 (Spring 2025), at https://shfg.wildapricot.org/page-18401.

Cite this article: Iwan Morgan, "Second Coming: Donald Trump's Reelection and Its Consequences," *Journal of American Studies* 59 (2025), 1–20. https://doi.org/10.1017/S002187582510114X

https://doi.org/10.1017/S002187582510114X Published online by Cambridge University Press