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DISCUSSION

Conversations on the 2024 Election

Katie McGettigan and Will Norman

Email: jas@baas.ac.uk

Editors' introduction

As we planned this special issue, we wanted to include a format in which scholars could respond directly to the 2024 election campaign and result. However, we also wanted to avoid "hot takes": commentary and analysis characterized by immediacy, that may grab attention and generate discussion in the short term, but that rarely retains lasting value. We also wanted the format to reflect the interdisciplinary methods and knowledges of American studies, which produce their insight through placing disciplines in dialogue with one another, and by working across and at their boundaries.

With this in mind, we organized a series of three conversations to bring together scholars in American studies from various disciplines and from around the world to what we might learn from how the 2024 election was fought, won, and lost, and the directions in which the Trump administration, the United States, and the world might be heading in the future. We themed these conversations around "Infrastructures," "America in the world," and "Climate" to address areas of rising importance in US politics, and areas of particular concern to *JAS* as an international American studies journal. We invited participants and chairs from the JAS board and the BAAS Exec, along with other leading scholars of the history, culture, and politics of the United States, who could approach these broad topics from various perspectives. The participants met in an online video call, and the conversations were then transcribed for publication here. Taking place at varying distances from the election, these conversations together give a sense of how scholarly responses to Trump are unfolding and reconfiguring as Americanists from around the world seek to understand the pasts, presents, and futures of the United States from and through the moment in which we are living.

Coeditors, Journal of American Studies KATIE MCGETTIGAN AND WILL NORMAN

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Conversation 1: infrastructures

This conversation took place in an online video call on 3 December 2024. The participants were:

Jonathan Bell (chair): Professor of US History and Head of Department of the Institute of the Americas at University College London. His most recent book is the edited collection *Beyond the Politics of the Closet: Gay Rights and the American State since the 1970s* (2020); he has also published two monographs on American liberalism, and essays on sexuality, discourses of rights and autonomy, and the politics of health care.
Ursula Hackett: Reader in Politics at Royal Holloway, University of London. She is the author of *America's Voucher Politics: How Elites Learned to Hide the State* (2020), as well as recent articles on higher-education policy, racial policy alliances, and quantifying House redistricting from 1789 to the present day.
David Smith: Associate Professor in Politics at the University of Sydney. He is a coauthor of the reference work *How America Compares* (2020) and has also published on religion in US and Australian politics, ethics in foreign policy, and vaccine hesitancy.
Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor: Professor in the Department of African American Studies at Princeton University. Her recent books include *Race for Profit: How Banks and the Real Estate Industry Undermined Black Homeownership* (2019) and her coedited collection, *Our History Has Always Been Contraband: In Defense of Black Studies* (2023). She is a contributing writer for the *New Yorker*.

Jonathan: I think all of us on this panel are particularly interested in the infrastructures of politics, whether that be electoral or about political structures and legislative structures more broadly. I think it can hardly be doubted that, in the period since 2016 at least, the infrastructures of American democracy and governance have experienced a series of real stress tests that have placed intense strain on the core pillars of the US political system.

An example – an obvious example – is that the Republican Party, and the conservative interests that they represent, have been open about their objectives of taking control of the structures of American democracy, starting with the decision of Republican Senators to refuse to hold hearings on President Obama's Supreme Court pick in 2016 until after the election, allowing the right to go on to dominate the US Supreme Court. They certainly didn't delay in confirming Amy Coney Barrett in advance of President Biden taking over as President.

Republicans have also sought control over legislative politics, through redistricting, voter suppression, and other measures, and have led efforts to stymie government regulatory authority where it does not advance social and religious conservative or neoliberal ends. Election denialism in 2020 has only reinforced the sense that the very legitimacy of political opponents is now in question.

The prospect of a revival of Schedule F, to politicize and potentially wreak havoc on the civil service and the infrastructure of federal governments, shows how pivotal the 2024 election might be for advancing this agenda.

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For Democrats, meanwhile, the period since 2016 has sharpened the sense of democracy under threat and given the Biden administration an incentive to advance a more progressive economic agenda to counter the populism of Trump, but the party has not proven able to articulate a vision of what a functioning public realm and functioning political infrastructure would look like that speaks to a compelling majority of Americans. So they're now out of power in all branches of federal government, and a majority of state governments too.

How much damage can now be done to the already enfeebled political and governmental infrastructure in the next four years is a question of major importance and one, I think, all of the speakers today in our roundtable are going to address in their different ways.

So, I thought I would open up the discussion by looking back to the election, and the election result and the build-up to it, through the last four years of the Biden presidency, and ask why Republicans and the right have had so much more success in shaping the terms of American political debate and ideas of governance and democracy in the years since 2016, really. I thought Keeanga would want to address that first.

Keeanga: Thank you. I think there are a couple of things that I would want to highlight. One, I think, just in general: the Republicans – the Republican Party, Trump in particular – have been able to identify with, in some ways tap into, a sense of political frustration, and even anger, with the status quo in the United States, and have been able to present themselves as discontinuity with the most recent past and with the kind of day-to-day issues that people are contending with in the United States.

I would say, comparatively, the Democrats have come to be seen as part of the continuity, with problems from one administration to the next. I think, in particular in this last election, the insistence that the country had recovered from the economic turmoil of the pandemic by just simply pointing to the conventional measures of economic or financial stability, centrally low unemployment, and low rates of poverty as evidence or proof that we had turned a corner, really, I think, misunderstood the depth of financial insecurity and how that financial insecurity opened up the public to a variety of discussions as to why that financial security existed, as well as what could be done about it.

To that extent, I think it's important to say that the Democrats, in the 2020 campaign, four years ago, when Joe Biden obviously won with more votes than anyone in American history – he ran on a clear agenda of economic reform, really in response to the pandemic. But I think the missing ingredient from that – this was not just the Democratic Party championing progressive measures as usual, or championing reform as usual – is that Biden was forced to do that. The year 2020, of course, was a tumultuous period in the United States and around the world. Of course, there was the pandemic that was ineptly handled by the Trump administration, but then there were the tremendous, historic protests in the United States. The *New York Times* estimated that up to 26 million people participated in public protests, both against the ineptitude of the response to the pandemic but also in protest at the police killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis, but also a kind of generalized response to police brutality and racism in the country. So Joe Biden went from pledging to his donors in the fall of 2019 that not much would change if he were to be elected, as he tried to

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contrast himself to someone like Bernie Sanders, to having to change everything in order to turn that activism in the streets into votes.

I say that just to highlight that this was not just an initiative that came from the usual party channels. So it meant that, even though there were big promises for reform, promises for free college, for more government assistance in health care, paid family leave, public assistance for childcare, reforms of a big sort, especially in American politics, they were pledged under duress. Once the Democrats took power, once Biden was inaugurated and, effectively, the social movements on the ground were demobilized and the opposition within the Democratic Party to these sorts of reforms, particularly in the Senate, rose to the surface, they were really unable to fulfil them.

That is the lasting memory that much of the public had of the Democratic Party: big promises, an inability to fulfil them. Even though people saw money coming in from the state, the surplus or stimulus payments and tax credit income, all of these things, in some portion Joe Biden had overseen the dispersal of these extra monies for people, extended unemployment, all of those sorts of things, but they also watched as he and the Democrats were responsible for when those emergency COVID measures expired, as well.

So, I think that the failure to really follow through on the promises that were made in 2020 did tremendous damage to the Democratic Party, as well as then a misunderstanding of the political mood, probably most dramatically exemplified by the theme of joy at the Democratic National Convention last August. The presentation of Kamala Harris as the joyous contrast to the dourness of Trump really missed the extent to which people were in deep crisis over housing, people were in deep crisis over debt, and a number of other factors in American society that just seemed to escape the Democrats as they continued to insist that the economy was good. They were the party of joy, and the people should join them on their new path forward. I'll leave it at that for now.

Jonathan: Thanks very much, Keeanga. It's worth adding to that that this sort of crisis about the economic dimensions and the social dimensions to politics has been global, and that pretty much no government has been successfully re-elected in the last year, because the feeling of economic difficulty on the ground is really real. Very few governments managed to get to grips with it.

I wanted to bring in Ursula to talk a bit about her work on the sort of structural dynamics of politics that have contributed to the election result being what it is. I wondered if you wanted to come in, Ursula.

Ursula: Thanks, Jonathan. I'd certainly echo all of the things that Keeanga has to say about public attitudes on the part of the American public. Actually, one of the things that I thought was very striking in the last couple of years is just seeing some of these polls. You've got the objective measures of economic indicators doing pretty well, inflation coming down, and growth, and unemployment rates, but actually people's subjective experiences, the way the country is heading, have been diverging increasingly from those indicators. I think that Keeanga is exactly right to draw attention to this sense of fury on the part of some of these parts of the country that feel they've been left behind. There's an increasing divide between rural and urban areas.

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Another thing which we haven't mentioned yet, which I think we also need to mention in figuring into the public-attitudes question, is the role of segmentation of the media, and the polarizing media, and actually how much that has changed, even since 2016, that people are more and more "siloized" in terms of their media consumption habits, in terms of the sort of information and opinion that they're exposed to. I think that has a role to play in fuelling some of that fury and anger on both sides of the divide – the partisan divide.

But if the question is about Republican successes and how they, Republicans, have shaped the terms of American politics since 2016, I would draw attention to two further things. I think public attitudes are important, but I would suggest that we focus our attention on some of the minoritarian institutions of the US, and some of the demographic trends that we've seen. I would also focus our attention on institutional explanations. That's where some of my work would come in.

So, on the demographic explanation, we know that Republicans do well, or do better, in low-density areas of the country, like rural, more sparsely populated areas, white areas. Those areas get a large and growing bonus in the Electoral College and in the Senate, of course. That was originally by design, and from the founders, but actually, over time, that degree of malapportionment has extended and expanded quite substantially. So what you've got is differential incentives on either side of the partisan divide. On the one hand, you've got Democrats that have got to compete on a broader terrain to try to get majorities. There is an incentive, therefore, for them to moderate because they are competing on more conservative and mixed terrain. Republicans, by contrast, can go narrower. There are fewer incentives for them to moderate, and there are more incentives for them to polarize. The past fifteen or so years have seen a polarization of American parties, but it has been particularly pronounced on the right. It has been an asymmetrical sort of polarization.

You've seen also, during that time, the mobilization of the Tea Party during the Obama presidency, which helped to shift Republican representatives to the right. So all those trends, I think, are factoring into some of the successes, and also the incentives, on the part of Republicans, but I think, if we're thinking about Republican successes, we do also need to talk about some of the institutional explanations here.

Trump did not come out of nowhere. He is the culmination of a many-decades-long push by conservative organizations that are collaborating more effectively than they have done in the past, by the Koch Network, the Americans for Prosperity, by white evangelicals, gun owners, white fraternal police organizations, that have worked together in the past but that are working together very, very successfully, and conflict extension that has occurred by means of policy activists pushing on both the left and the right, but particularly on the right, and a more tightly organized, nationalized interest group system.

Within that system, the Republican Party has pursued a very long-term and strategic vision to enact their policy priorities. One of the things, of course, that really shaped their successes in 2024 dates back fifteen years, to the gerrymandering cycle of 2010. That's the big year in which Republicans gain hugely across the states because they are able to enact partisan gerrymanders that effectively freeze out Democrats, even in states where Democrats have statewide majorities. I mean places like Wisconsin, North Carolina, and Georgia, places where Democrats are really being disadvantaged by those gerrymanders. Republicans have the edge in state seats. It

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also helps them at the Congressional level, of course. And it provides them with the sort of personnel and the talent pool that they are able to use then when it comes to people choosing to run for higher office as well. So the state level – which I hope we can come back to in this conversation – the state level is the proving ground for the people who are then going to go on and compete at the national level.

I've done a lot of work on redistricting recently, and I find that this partisanship has always been the case since the founding. They have always redistricted for partisan advantage. Indeed, in the colonial era, the mapmakers were drawing lines in ways that enabled their fellow partisans – or their fellow policy demanders, shall we say? – to actually achieve their collective aims. But they've also strategically retained district boundaries as well, over time. So they have engaged in what Robert Yablon, the legal scholar, has called "gerrylaundering," which is where you gerrymander in one cycle and then you sustain that gerrymander across subsequent cycles by freezing those boundaries. We've seen that very clearly in Wisconsin in the last cycle: one of the minimal-change states, after having been one of the highest, most active gerrymandering states in 2010. But that also has racial dimensions. We haven't talked yet about race. I think it's really crucial here. Racial gerrymandering and racial gerrylaundering, I think, are really important also in diluting the vote of communities of colour in crucial states.

There has been some rebuff there, around these practices, from the courts, but I think there's a position, on the left in particular, that has assumed that says that the growing use of citizens within redistricting, through independent redistricting commissions, is going to break the stranglehold of elites. The use of these commissions has increased recently: more than a quarter of seats in the last redistricting round were decided by independent redistricting commissions, up from 4 percent, something like that in 2020. There's a sort of complacent sense that, with greater involvement of citizens in redistricting, and through public testimony as well, they're going to open up this process to a more transparent, and less polarized, and more democratically responsive mode. I think – and I've been doing some really interesting survey experiments on this – that's absolutely not the case. Actually, public preferences tend to favour that sort of district protection that we've seen on the part of elites, incumbent elites, that have produced such fabulously and fantastically – in the old-fashioned sense – low levels of competition – electoral competition – in many of these jurisdictions.

Jonathan: You can see in the 2024 election, in places like North Carolina and historically in Wisconsin, that the judiciary has also not been very good at contesting these very clearly race-based gerrymanders. Once you have control of courts as well, it's very difficult to undo. It seems like, from what you've been saying, Ursula, that the Republicans, since 2010, have had real dominance in controlling the infrastructures of electoral politics, with really serious consequences.

I wanted to bring David in here, thinking about the 2024 election itself and about whether you would say, then, that the Democratic Party is not just not as coherent in terms of dominant ideas, but it's structurally much weaker now in the American electoral process and in the structures of American politics than the Republicans. David, would you agree with that?

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David: I would agree, but I would also say that, from a global perspective, both American parties are very organizationally weak. The paradox of American politics is that the parties are organizationally weak, but the loyalties they command are incredibly strong.

If we look at the most expensive electoral races in the 2024 election, the amount that candidates were actually spending, backed by parties, was dwarfed by the amount that was being spent by outside organizations that were affiliated with one side of politics or another. Looking at the Ohio Senate race, the most expensive, candidate spending was $121 million. Outside spending was $308 million. The Pennsylvania Senate, candidate spending was $49 million or $50 million. Outside spending was $240 million. The Montana Senate, candidate spend was $105 million. Outside spending was $165 million. The incoming Senate majority leader of the Republican Party, John Thune, when he won his South Dakota Senate race for the first time, back in 2004, $32 million was spent in total on that race. That was regarded as astronomically expensive at the time. So the amount of spending that goes into electoral races is just multiplying, and multiplying, and multiplying. It means that individual candidates are very much responsible for assembling networks of donors and assembling supporters that dwarf anything that is provided by the party infrastructure. When you have a look at the parties, they are one factor in American politics, but these networks of donors, networks of supporters, and media networks that coalesce around individual candidates are arguably a lot more powerful than the parties themselves.

When we look at the parties as legislative entities – and I want to go back to points that both Keeanga and Ursula made about the immense frustration that American people have, not only with the economy but with politics – a lot of that frustration is with Congress. Congress's approval ratings are incredibly low, and have been for a very long time. The fundamental reality that any President has to face – Presidents as different as Obama, and Trump, and Biden, and Bush and Clinton – they all have to face the same reality that it is very, very difficult to get major legislation through Congress.

Part of that is because of the robustness of the two-party system in the United States. The United States is the only advanced industrial democracy I can think of where the major parties are not losing vote share. Everywhere else, even if you just look at the English-speaking world – Australia, the UK, Canada, New Zealand – major parties are haemorrhaging vote share, and have been for a long time. Not so in the United States, because the American system is uniquely hostile to entrants from outside the two-party system, because it's single-member-district, first-past-the-post, all the way down, and because the vast amounts of money that are involved in elections just make the barriers to competitors prohibitive. So Americans are stuck with a choice that is, basically, institutionally determined between two parties.

It's not surprising that under those circumstances you've got a norm of very close results, and it's very difficult to get anything through closely divided houses. Part of that is because of the lack of party discipline in the United States, which once again comes back to the fact that candidates are responsible for their own election and reelection, which means that party leaders, to the extent that they exist, have very little leverage over their own members.

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Looking at Congressional majorities in recent years, in both houses, they have been relatively tiny. If you look at the Congress after the 1934 elections, when Democrats were able to accomplish all of these New Deal measures, in the House of Representatives, Democrats had 322 seats, compared to the Republicans' 103. In the Senate, they had 69 seats, compared to the Republicans' 25. So those are the kinds of majorities that you need to get something like a New Deal through.

If we look at the kinds of majorities that have been in place in recent years, Obama had a pretty big one [in the House of Representatives] after the 2008 elections, and briefly had a filibuster-proof Democratic majority in the Senate. Even under those circumstances, the version of the Affordable Care Act that was passed, after two years of political conflict, was a very, very watered-down one compared to the long-standing Democratic Party aim, that had been there since the 1930s, of universal health insurance. The Democratic House, after the 2020 election, was remarkably united under Nancy Pelosi, even with a majority of only five. That was absolutely critical to getting these major COVID relief packages through in 2021, but what we saw after that was that these packages dried up. There was nothing more coming after them. So, by 2024, we had three-quarters of Americans saying that their personal financial situation had worsened, and we had an increase from about 31 percent to 39 percent of Americans saying that they were enduring financial hardship.

It's not been any easier for Republicans, though, when Republicans had a very similar majority in the House of Representatives and weren't really able to do anything with it, because the way that Republicans in the House saw that was that every individual member had all of this leverage because their majority was so small. The result was complete chaos.

Even where Republicans have been very successful in, as you say, capturing the infrastructure of American politics with the Supreme Court, and then using that to enact severe and sweeping legal change, they have not always got the results they wanted. They got the downfall of *Roe* v. *Wade* and the enaction of all of these very strict abortion laws across so many states – but the *New York Times* reported, in October this year, the number of abortions in the United States has increased by 12 percent. Now, what that suggests is, even when parties can seize the political infrastructure, even when they can enact legal change, it is still very hard to do anything in the United States. It is very hard to actually achieve anything through policy, because of the way that politics and government is set up. As long as that continues, the frustration of people is going to continue.

This will benefit figures like Trump. It'll also create very unstable cycles, though, because the way that Trump approaches this is just to promise far more than any conventional politician would promise. We saw where that got him in 2020: a massive electoral rebuke because he wasn't able to fulfil any of these promises, especially during the COVID era, where he was promising that the virus would just go away of its own accord. So I think that, if politics continues down this Trump path, we're going to see more and more extravagant promises with no hope of being fulfilled. We'll probably see these quite aggressive cycles of swinging from party to party, between elections.

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Jonathan: Yeah. I think one issue, though, isn't it, David, is that there has been difficulty trying to get major change through at the federal level because, as you say, there are so narrow margins in Congress, generally?

It's worth saying, with the sort of eye-watering figures that you talked about with the Ohio and Pennsylvania Senate races, the incumbent Democrats still didn't manage to win. The Republicans, by the same token, didn't manage to win in key battlegrounds, like Nevada and Arizona, even with all the interests trying desperately to get that bigger Republican majority in the Senate. But what they have managed to do, both through the courts and through state legislatures, is do quite devastating and serious change. Things like reproductive care at the state level, and depending on where you live now, can be a real life-or-death situation about whether you'll be able to access the care you need. Keeanga, did you want to come in on that?

Keeanga: Yeah. There's a lot to respond to. I think one of the ... The brokenness, I would say, of American politics – in terms of the absolute inability for the government, except in very, what feel like, fleeting occasions to function – has contributed to the failure of, really, the Democrats' attempt to frame the election – the last two elections – as struggles for democracy.

I think the failures of the state have rendered the so-called "struggle for democracy" into an abstraction. When government doesn't really work for people on a federal level, which then impacts the functioning of government on a state and local level, it makes the question of "What is the quality of the democracy beyond the right to vote?" a reflection, I think, of the lack of control that people have over their lives, as it becomes increasingly difficult to get politics to be responsive in a meaningful way.

I think that for the Democrats in particular, hinging their campaigns on this question, hinging the reputation of the party on this question, has really proven to be ineffective. I think the question of money, and the way that money completely dominates political elections in the United States, is a part of the same problem, as well as the political disconnect between the population and the House of Representatives, the Senate, in terms of who these people are. What I mean by that is that, if you look at the House of Representatives, there's something like the average wealth of a single representative is somewhere between $900,000 and $990,000. In the Senate, it's over $1 million. Then, when you look at the general population of the US, the median income is like $71,000. When you break that up, I think, for Black families, it's $57,000. There is a general mismatch between what is happening amidst the population and what is happening with their government representatives. Combined with the political sclerosis that continues to grip the American government, it creates the conditions for the kinds of political volatility that we have seen flashpoints of over the last ten years.

I think it is important to point out that the Republicans have been masterful at manipulating the conversation in ways that Democrats have been completely mystified by. And what the Republicans are proposing, in terms of a political agenda, is only going to make the situation worse. The attacks on the state, the attacks on public services, the attacks on infrastructure, are something that is going to make the political situation worse.

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The last thing I want to say about that, because I do think that there is a way to read this election – and this is sometimes how it is reported in the mainstream press in the United States – as a reflection of a conservative turn, a right turn in the American population. I think that it's important to point out that, in major polling of the public, there is still a tremendous amount of support for government infrastructure. So at least 65 percent of Americans believe that the federal government has a "Responsibility to make sure all Americans have health care." More than 50 percent insist that "The government aid to poor does more good than harm." Nearly 80 percent of people believe that Social Security or retirement benefits in the US should not be reduced in any way. Most Americans believe that the government should do more to help "the needy," even if it means going deeper into debt, even if it means growing the deficit. Nearly 70 percent of Americans are concerned about the costs of childcare, and 80 percent support some kind of government-subsidized affordable child care initiative. Overwhelming majorities agree that the US is enveloped in an ongoing housing crisis. Sixty percent of voters agreed with the statement that "Housing is a basic necessity and the private market is unable to address many Americans' affordability concerns." So these raise big questions about the role of federal government. People agree with policies that are completely anathema to the politics of the Republican Party.

The problem, of course, is that there's big debate and disagreement within the Democratic Party about what the posture or stance of the party should be towards this kind of government assistance. And that disagreement also has to be a part of any serious debate about what is wrong with the Democrats. It's not just about political messaging. It's not just about the structure of the party itself. There are deep ideological divides within the Democratic Party about what the role of government is, what the role of their party should be, in ways that the Republican Party has coalesced around a set of political ideas. It doesn't mean that there aren't warring factions within the Republican Party, but around some key ideas there has been some coalescence in ways that don't necessarily exist within the Democratic Party. The attempt to create the big tent that tries to include everything, from centre to left of the Republican Party, has brought these tensions to the surface in ways that has made it difficult for the party to function in any kind of united or coherent way.

Jonathan: Thank you very much, Keeanga. I think that's a really compelling analysis. Just thinking of those polling numbers on some of those key social and economic issues, it seems to me that one of the things that Trump has managed to do is to portray popular support for a lot of important issues – like health care access and housing, as something that he somehow shares – but that the access to those is being favoured for people who are not the majority of Americans. He has managed to weaponize the populism of those ideas, in ways that Democrats haven't been able to work out a way of countering, at least not the people in the leadership of the Democratic Party. I don't know if you wanted to come in, Ursula, on that.

Ursula: Yeah, I just wanted to pick up on a couple of things that David and Keeanga have both mentioned about Congress and how it functions, because I think that David is right to talk about some of the gridlock and the challenges of legislating. But you've got to think about the outcome there and that actually, whose policy

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desiderata are served by the challenges of legislating and the increasing difficulty of achieving anything with an effective super-majoritarian threshold?

It's clearly the Republican Party because major policy priorities are very difficult to pass, major new policy initiatives, new bureaucratic apparatus, to administer them. Tax cuts, on the other hand, are things that you can achieve with a simple majority, and actually a lot of the deregulatory agenda that Trump and the conservatives are pushing can be accomplished through executive action and can be accomplished through also sympathetic court rulings. Of course, Trump has been very successful in terms of shaping the judiciary during his first term, and I think he's very likely to be as successful, if not more successful, during his next term. So, I would say there's an asymmetrical component to this, the question of Congressional gridlock.

I think also, related to the disconnect that Keeanga mentions – quite rightly – between elites, members of Congress and the general public, I think it has always been the case that Congressmen and -women, and Senators, have been far wealthier than the average person. That is not something that has changed, particularly, over the last eight years. What I think is, perhaps, helping to drive that sense of the disconnect between representatives and the public, and more generally public anger on the right, is to do with the ways in which policy is delivered. Because it's so difficult to create new benefits and to pass legislation through Congress, tax credits, for example, are a major mode of policy delivery. So for a lot of people, the way that that is experienced is as a private-sector delivery mechanism, and actually the role that the government is actually playing in providing a particular benefit isn't obvious when that benefit is delivered through the tax system or through various secondary, privatized policy intermediaries.

Jonathan: Yes, absolutely, and I think that looks like being part of the agenda, going forward, as well: deregulation, tax cuts, an idea that there are private-sector solutions to some of these key questions. How much they'll tackle the health care issue and mess with the Affordable Care Act, we shall see, because they didn't manage to do that in 2017. So, it'll be interesting to see whether they can carry public opinion on that.

I wanted to ask all of you, as a last main question, about the prospects, building on what Ursula just said, of further serious erosion of the public realm: through rollback of progressive legislation, through taxation, through Schedule F by executive order – to try and politicize, and potentially slim down, dramatically, the capacity of the civil service – broader questions around Project 2025, further capture of the judiciary. Is it basically going to be a significant augmentation of an already quite powerful right-wing control over the apparatus of American governance?

I don't know who wants to go first on that. Ursula, do you want to come in?

Ursula: I think it has always been the case that, when there's a new presidential administration that bureaucrats that were appointed from the previous administration – partisans – do tend to leave in slightly larger numbers. But that trend, accelerated with the first Trump presidency, I think it's very likely that we'll see a greater exodus on the part of many of these bureaucrats because, of course, Trump has signalled that he is keen to politicize the civil service. There's a reason that he

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chose Andrew Jackson's portrait for the Oval Office during his first term: the spoils system. So, I think that's absolutely right.

But I think there are two things I really wanted to draw attention to in terms of the extent of the challenges and the opportunities for the Trump presidency over the coming term. One is the fact that, because Congress is so gridlocked, huge amounts of policymaking is going on at the state level. I talked a bit about redistricting. That's a state-level responsibility, but also loads of these policy areas. I mean things like education, for example. That is a state-level responsibility.

People have talked a lot about the Trump presidency's priorities with respect to the elimination of the Department of Education and National School Choice voucher programmes and things. But there are few levers for a President because so much of this policy, the policymaking initiative, occurs at the state level or, indeed, at the local school board level – in terms of the control of the curriculum, for example, that is one of the concerns of Project 2025.

The other thing: we talked a bit about policy volatility. Keeanga mentioned policy volatility, or political volatility more generally – but actually, at the state level, very little changed in terms of the partisan composition of state legislatures in the 2024 elections. There are thirteen Democratic trifectas. There are twenty Republican trifectas. There are eleven divided governments. Republicans clearly have the edge at the state governmental level. That's very similar to the numbers that there were prior to the 2024 elections, as well. So Republicans have neither gained nor lost trifectas. I think that's going to be very consequential in policymaking terms because they are able to set the agenda in the states.

Then the other thing to say is that the judiciary, I think, is going to be really crucial in terms of how this next presidency plays out. Trump did very well in terms of being allowed to appoint three Supreme Court justices during his first term, and solidified a 6–3 conservative majority that is going to be in place at least until the 2050s, according to some of the simulations. But it could be much longer if anything happens to Sonia Sotomayor or if two of, or even three of, the conservative justices that are seventy or above decide to resign in order that Trump can appoint some much younger and very conservative Federalist Society-vetted justices that will continue to prosecute that agenda far into the future.

Jonathan: Thanks, Ursula. David, do you want to come in on prospects for the Trump presidency, going forward?

David: This is the first time since the 1890s that we've seen a new President come in who has a maximum of four years left. What we've seen with every recent presidency is whatever they're intending to do, they have to get it done in the first two years. That's even the case for Presidents who have eight years in front of them. Their power just really wanes after that.

It's going to be fascinating to see, given Trump's current grip on the Republican Party, how long this power actually lasts – given the fact that he is not going to be there in four years, given that you've got a Senate that includes people who have just been elected and won't have to face reelection for six years, as well as people who are retiring in the next two years. I'll be really fascinated to see how long his grip on the Republican Party actually lasts.

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Even though we see Trump as this very unique figure who has completely taken over the party and remoulded it in his image, that really has the potential to weaken and destabilize the party in the long term because, when he's not there, there's not very much holding it together at all. His charismatic authority is holding together a lot of different strands of right-wing thought. You've got a lot of people who are completely committed to, essentially, the destruction of the state. But then you've got others who are looking to people like Viktor Orbán and thinking, "No, we actually need a state that is strong enough to achieve conservative ends." Then you've got more traditional libertarians in the mix as well, as well as a kind of rump of what we would see as traditional Republicans, Bush- or Reagan-era-type Republicans. At the moment, Trump is the only thing who's holding them all together. There's going to be a huge contest, I think, when he has gone, over who is the rightful heir to Trump, which is going to get very messy and chaotic.

Ursula is absolutely right in terms of the stasis of the system, overall, benefits traditional conservative aims, and especially the aim of the Republican Party ever since World War II, or even before that, which is dismantling the administrative state. That will continue on in the background as this project that keeps getting advanced every time you have this kind of stasis, but, no matter what kinds of victories they achieve, what we've seen over the last twenty or thirty years is conservatives never see them as victories. They only ever see them as disappointments.

It's hard to remember now, but at the end of the first Trump presidency there were a lot of conservatives saying, "What did we actually get out of this?" It turned out they got quite a lot out of it in terms of the Supreme Court appointments, but the same thing at the end of the George W. Bush administration. They couldn't see what they were getting out of it, even if it does seem that conservative ends were advanced just by this picture of continuing sclerosis and stasis. So whatever happens over the next four years, I don't think that the conservatives or Republicans are actually going to find it very satisfying. I think that the state of the party after Trump is gone is going to be a pretty chaotic one.

Jonathan: Thanks, David. Keeanga, you've painted a pretty depressing portrait of where the Democrats are now and where they need to go. What are the prospects, do you think, of any kind of resurgence of progressive politics in the United States, in this context of the Trump moment?

Keeyanga: Let me just say that I think David is right when he emphasizes that the nature of Congressional politics means that there's a two-year window to really try to achieve your electoral ambitions or to fulfil your electoral promises. I think, in the case of Trump, that that's going to be brutal. So I just want to say that for the record: beyond the machinations of the political parties and, philosophically, what this may mean, I think Stephen Miller will kill himself, trying to figure out how to deport as many people as possible in the United States, with the window of time that he has to do so. They have talked about using the American military to do this. I think that that will be the outermost brutal edge of what the initial, perhaps, shock and awe of this new Trump regime will look like.

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I do think the issues of political volatility are quite real. I think the dynamics of the world's richest man, Elon Musk, actively involved in dismantling federal programmes that are intended to assist those people making $40,000, $50,000 a year, creates the potential for problems, especially as the US engages in – at least attempts to engage in – a massive deportation operation. Continuing to blame immigrants on their way out becomes more complex, even though I'm sure they will continue to engage in that.

I think the complete collapse of the American left, the disarray of the American left, means that there will be challenges to the Trump administration's effort, but they'll be inconsistent and probably, early on, ineffective. I think that, at the same time, the intense debates that I referenced before with the Democratic Party, as to what it is, will continue. There has been no agreed-upon analysis of what happened in this election. There continues not to be an agreed-upon analysis, which is then borne out in the debates about who should be the next leadership of the Democratic National Convention. Should it be Rahm Emanuel from the old Obama administration, in many ways an old guard of the Democrats? Should it be someone from Bernie's progressive faction? Should it be one of the Blue Dog Democrats? There is no coherent vision around what the party should be.

I think that, because of that, it will undermine their ability to articulate a clear message in opposition to what Trump is doing, beyond, "The Republicans are cruel. Yeah, the Republicans are undemocratic. The Republicans are un-American," but not able to actually cohere a positive message about what they have to offer. So, what I think that it means is that politics will find expression elsewhere. If it's not expressed through formal political or party structures, it will find expression elsewhere. As the police are emboldened to act in ways that have provoked protests and social movements before, as the attacks on antiracism are emboldened, that will provoke responses, as it has provoked responses before.

I think there's a lot of belief that there won't be mass deportations. As the reality sets in that this is actually happening, that this wasn't just campaign rhetoric, that will provoke a reaction. So, if there's not a political party capable of organizing that around a message of formal political opposition, then the Democrats are going to have a problem – but the Republicans will have a problem with this as well. We saw what the potential of that can look like, in 2020. I don't think that there will be an exact replay or anything like that but I think that where there is political frustration and disappointment, and no formal party through which to express it, it creates the conditions for conflict. It creates the conditions for, as I've said before, political volatility, and I think that is really what we're in store for, particularly in the next two years.

Jonathan: Thanks very much, Keeanga. That reminds me of the enduring traditions of American grassroots politics: that it's easier to tear things down, infrastructurally, than build them up. That has always been true of American politics, and that's why, historically, so much political activism on the left has had to –consistently has had to – take place in communities of care, in grassroots local activism. Health care activism is a very good example, through things like the HIV/AIDS crisis in the 1980s and beyond, and now through the reproductive-rights advocacy across the United States,

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including, of course, where it is now illegal to make sure that people continue to get the care they need.

Those communities of care will continue to be there. I think that's something we can see as a sort of continuity of the American experience: that structures of politics are ill-equipped to tackle the diversity of American society and American life. That's where the community activism and community group formation has become – has been – so important, and obviously will continue to be.

Thank all of you for participating. It has been a really rich discussion.

Conversation 2: America in the world

This conversation took place on an online video call on 24 January 2025. The participants were:

Kaeten Mistry (chair): Associate Professor of US History at the University of East Anglia. His recent publications include the collection *Whistleblowing Nation: The History of National Security Disclosures and the Cult of State Secrecy* (2020), coedited with Hannah Gurman, and essays on the history of the CIA in Latin America; he is working on a monograph on the cultures of state secrecy.

Mario del Pero: Professor of International History at Sciences Po. His latest book is *In the Shadow of the Vatican: Texan Evangelical Missionaries in Cold War Italy* (2025), and he has also published widely, in English, French and Italian, on the Trump and Obama presidencies and the history and legacies of the Cold War.

Elizabeth Ingleson: Associate Professor of International History, London School of Economics. She is the author of *Made in China: When US–China Interests Converged to Transform Global Trade* (2024), and several essays on US–China political and economic relations in the twentieth century.

Donald E. Pease: Professor of English and Founding Director of the Futures of American Studies Institute, Dartmouth College. His recent publications include the collection *American Studies as Transnational Practice: Turning towards the Trans-Pacific* (2015), coedited with Yuan Shu, and essays on the first Trump presidency, the post 9/11 novel, and *Moby-Dick*.

Kaeten: I want to start by talking about the election campaign that has just taken place, particularly what it tells us about the US role in the world. What historical narratives or national myths were most powerful during the election campaign and why?

Elizabeth: I think there are a number of different narratives and threads that Trump was able to instrumentalize during the campaign. One that very much stood out to me, partly because of the research that I do, was the ways that Trump was able to present China as not just a foreign threat, but an *Asian* threat. In so doing, he was able to weaponize a larger fear of Asian invasion and Asians stealing our jobs, which has a very long history, well before the twentieth century, back to the nineteenth century

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in particular. He manipulated that fear in a way that instrumentalized a domestic imperative – the perception of a decline of US manufacturing.

So he brought together two narratives: this fear of an Asian threat with an idealized vision of a manufacturing-based economy. This is a mid-twentieth-century vision of manufacturing and hard-hat-wearing men that overlooks the fact that the vast majority of Americans work in the service sector. But these two threads worked really powerfully together, in a way that really obfuscated the fact that Trump is so supportive of capital and institutions that are very much not in the interests of working Americans.

Kaeten: We'll return to that question of capital, and the narratives that Trump taps into, often in a very superficial way. Mario, what are your thoughts about the key historical narratives around the election.

Mario: I'd like to follow up on what Lizzie just said. In a way, both sides [the Republicans and the Democrats] spoke, when it came to the US in the world, some kind of nostalgia, some kind of very nostalgic narrative. In the case of Harris, the nostalgia was Cold War, liberal nostalgia, the free world, the community of democracy. She tried to build upon that kind of rhetoric that Biden has used with regard to Ukraine, but not just Ukraine. You remember the speech when he cited FDR: "We will be the arsenal of democracy." Paradoxically, that somehow provided even a connection to liberal neocons. Having Liz Cheney with her all the time, that, politically, was not a very smart move, I guess, but somehow was built also on this element.

As for Trump, one nostalgia was the one Lizzie just mentioned. It's also pre-2008 nostalgia: nostalgia of deregulation, cheap credit, in-debt consumption. People are happy. Inequality becomes invisible because consumption equality, or in-debt consumption, somehow makes up for income and wealth inequality.

That was the first big nostalgia, and the other big nostalgia was also a Cold War nostalgia: nostalgia for the 1950s. You saw all those photos of suburbs assaulted by immigrants, right? These are, kind of, a very Edenic representation of the 1950s: prosperity, affluence, clear racial hierarchies.

Those are, I guess, and I'm simplifying a lot, but the two big nostalgias that Trump often writes, I think. During the campaign, those nostalgias were there, and on steroids in the last big happening, the Madison Square Garden carnival, circus, you remember, just a few days before the election.

Donald: Yes, I agree with both Elizabeth and Mario about the nostalgia. Perhaps the affective underside of this nostalgia is fear. Trump mobilized fear and anger in relation to the economic crisis that has had an afterlife for most Americans since 2008. COVID intensified those fears and anxieties.

He was able to establish a correlation between the internal factor that was imagined responsible for both the economic inflation as well as the fear of the loss of the idealized manufacturing economy, namely the "illegal" immigrant. The newly criminalized immigrant enabled Trump to reject the friendly, beneficent, liberal internationalism of the Biden–Harris administration, and to replace that ethos with an illiberal nativist America that has always been the underside of the

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foundational image of American liberal democracy. There is a world of difference between Tocqueville's liberal, exceptionalist, benevolent America and the settler colonist's expansionist capitalism that empowered the United States to achieve its status as, in the late nineteenth century, one of the players in the great game of global imperialism.

So Trump was able to utilize the fear that immigrants were primarily responsible for the loss of Americanness, in the nostalgic sense that has already been pointed out, and to transmute that fear into the backdrop for displays of spectacular violence with which Americans were encouraged to become complicit by tacitly authorizing immigration officers at the border, but also deportation officials within cities, to use lethal force. In doing so, Trump fostered Americans' cruelty to immigrants, which has always been the underside of the image of the United States as a nation of immigrants. He was able to deploy this fear-driven antipathy towards immigrants in the domestic sphere as a motivation for US citizens' acceptance of the second tier of his global strategy. Trump, that is to say, turned Americans' cruelty towards immigrants into their newfound desire to replace the multilateral liberal international order forged in the late twentieth century with unilateral imperial rivalries with China and with Russia in the twenty-first century.

Mario: Can I just quickly follow up on fear? We use the category of interdependence to describe global integration – all the actors are mutually dependent on each other, dependent on imports, dependent on raw materials, part of transnational supply chains, right?

Now – and I'm using Jeremy Adelman's definition here – interdependence makes you dependent on someone else. Global interdependence makes you dependent on a stranger, an "Other," and then can generate fear. If you depend on China, right, for vital technological goods, or you depend on someone else for vital commodities or raw materials, that dependence on a stranger feeds fear? That fear has been successfully exploited by Trump: the fear of China Lizzie was mentioning.

Elizabeth: Can I just pick up on that point? Because I think that's a really important distinction, right, about the ways in which, particularly since the mid-twentieth century, an increasingly globalized world has led to these dependencies.

One of the things that is particularly pernicious about what Trump is doing, though, is that his actions are not addressing or redressing the problems that interdependence does bring. So he's speaking of decreasing corporate tax even further, undoing international agreements on multinational corporate taxes. He's bringing a nationalism to multinational corporations themselves.

What that's doing is bringing an element of superficial nationalism to the economic structures of our globalized world, but it's not actually shifting the dependence aspect of this interdependence you're describing, Mario. It's enabling capital and pushing capital to shift its gears somewhat, but it's still allowing capital to be the core function of our international society, and the core beneficiaries of it as well.

Donald: I think Mario and Elizabeth specify the exact inflexion point at which Trump transposed Americans' feared loss of economic independence into his arrogation

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of the power to dictate the terms of United States' military and economic interdependence. During his first term Trump used tariffs to offset what he called the unfair trade practices of China, the EU, Canada, and Mexico. Trump also threatened to withdraw from NATO, break international treaties, dismantle global institutions, and defund assistance to developing nations. However, as both Elizabeth and Mario have pointed out, the global economic order requires relations of interdependence for capitalism to work, and Trump's compulsive repetition of the need to display unilateral control over the precise conditions of dependence rendered hypervisible America's imbrication in multiple and complex networks of global interdependence.

Kaeten: Okay. So, one of the things that has come up is this idea of the nostalgias and where we are going back to – what are the turning points, if you will, in terms of recent US history? Trump is often depicted as an anomaly. What are your thoughts about this? We can perhaps see this in his modus operandi although it's less clear in terms of policy.

Another issue that has repeatedly come up is nostalgia and looking back at a supposedly glorious past. We've already heard about nostalgia for the 1950s. And the Reagan themes are self-evident.

Many of these correspond with traditional break points in modern histories of the United States – early Cold War era, end of the Cold War, 9/11. Is there now a stronger case for us to look at different break points? We've discussed the 2008 economic crisis and, thinking about some of Elizabeth's work, the shifts in the 1970s. Are there other break points that we historians need to consider beyond the traditional ones (World War II, Cold War, 9/11) that better explain the present?

Donald: I wonder if one of the absent causes of Trump's reelection was the pandemic, whose vectors of contagion circulated outside the provenance of what enables politics as usual to function.

Trump is not a political actor who is primarily interested in mobilizing nostalgia. For demonstrable reasons, Trump refused the lure of '50s or '60s or even Reagan-era nostalgia to activate the illiberal obverse of idyllic images of American democracy's "greatness." The political entities that Trump afforded legitmacy within the Overton window of political possibilities include groups – Oath Keepers, Boogaloo Bois, Patriot Front, Proud Boys, Atomwaffen Division – that from Eisenhower's 1950s to the final days of Barack Obama'a presidency were regarded as extremist white-supremacist organizations. Throughout his 2020 presidential campaign, Joe Biden correlated the anti-vax, anti-quarantine stance taken up by members of the MAGA movement with the failure of the Trump administration to adequately protect Americans from the ravages of coronavirus.

Trump's 2024 presidential campaign revolved around his effort to change the meaning of the January 6th insurrection from an attack on the foundations of the American democratic order, to changing the image of American democracy from liberal internationalist to illiberal nationalist manifestations. Throughout his 2024 presidential campaign Trump relitigated the lawfare directed against him in a way that restored political legitimacy to the members of extremist white nationalist groups who took part in the January 6th insurrection.

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Elizabeth: Yeah, I've been thinking a lot about this question that you're raising, Donald, about this strand, very long thread within American history, of authoritarianism, of white nationalism, of violence, of fascism, that is showing different aspects of itself in our current moment, to greater or lesser degrees. And I've been thinking additionally about the extent to which this is a crisis of politics or if it's a crisis of economics. To your question, Kaeten, about, "To what extent is Trump an anomaly?" I do think there is an aspect to which he is part of a much larger change that we are living through globally, and that is a crisis of capitalism.

It helps, I think, explain why, across Europe, across Asia, across many parts of the world, we're seeing a real desire for change and sometimes quite extreme alternatives that aren't necessarily to do with a desire for authoritarianism per se, but so much to do with a real sense, on the part of ordinary people, that there is something fundamentally wrong with the way that they're living, and the conditions in which they're working.

So I think one way to think about Trump is part of a crisis of a particular kind of capitalism that began to emerge in the 1960s and '70s, and solidified after the breakdown of the Bretton Woods system in the mid-1970s and into the 1980s, sometimes referred to as "neoliberal globalization." Part of how we can see beyond the politics per se of Trump is if we think about the 2016 election and the appeal at a grassroots level – not at the Democratic Party level, but at a grassroots level – of someone like Bernie Sanders, who was able to similarly tap into a real desire for change at an economic level and for structural solutions to these crises that were coalescing in the 2010s. So, in some senses, it's a crisis of politics precisely because the Democratic Party refused and actively undermined Sanders's ability to become President. But if we think about the relationship between Trump and Sanders's appeal, there are some points at which they overlap in their identification of the problems the United States faces. The difference, of course, is in the solutions they look to. But that overlap can help us get to this idea of Trump not as an anomaly at all, but as a part of a much larger phenomenon.

Mario: Can I jump in? I do believe there is an element of anomaly, though, in Trump. Think about it: in his inaugural speech, the historical references were Manifest Destiny, McKinley, and Theodore Roosevelt, and the implicit corollary was Roosevelt with regard to Panama.

Find a post-1930s US President who will use those historical references in an inaugural address. It's impossible, so there's something. Of course, there is a long tradition, and Trump is relying on that tradition, redefining that tradition. There is something extreme, radical, and different. So, I do plead for the idea there is something anomalous in the Trump phenomenon, although I understand very well what you mean, Lizzie.

Speaking of turning points, watersheds – they are invariably artificial. We historians play with chronology and periodizations, but 2008, to me, perhaps combined with post-9/11, those are two key moments because they produce multiple forms of delegitimization. Globalization is delegitimized. The idea that neoliberal globalization is a win–win system – everyone wins, American consumers, China exports and everyone – doesn't work. I mean, as in any major transformation, there are winners

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and there are losers. Our democracies, not just the US, failed in somehow finding solutions for the losers of globalizations, point one.

Delegitimization of elites, international elites, including those elites, those experts, pundits, arguing that going to Iraq will reshape the Middle East, the experts claiming that Saddam Hussein had a WMD programme, etc., etc., etc., delegitimization of politics and institutions as a consequence.

So I do believe we live under the shadow of a crisis that basically delegitimized all the major pillars of the previous order. Trump has been able to ride and exploit that, with a language which is as extreme as it gets. As I say, citing Manifest Destiny in an inaugural address in 2025, to me, was shocking.

Donald: I want to rejoin the discussion at this point and say that I agree up to a point with both Elizabeth and Mario. Trump is an anomaly, as has been suggested, but he's an anomaly that is now receiving historical – how should I say? – normalization.

Most establishment histories of the United States embraced Tocqueville's American-exceptionalism narrative that described the founders of American democracy as inheritors of the political principles of liberty, equality, and social justice that emanated from the great centres of the European Enlightenment. But this narrative disavows the agents who advanced the fiercely militant economic juggernaut chiefly responsible for the United States' ascendance to power on the world stage. It was the American settler colonists' aggressive modes of capital accumulation that expanded the techno-economic domain of the "Empire of Liberty" onto the global stage.

Trump is not the first President to opportunistically revive the trope of Manifest Destiny. President Reagan decribed his Strategic Defense Initiative (aka "Star Wars") as his divinely commissioned mandate to destroy the "Evil Empire." In the wake of the cessation of Cold War hostilities in 1990, President George Herbert Walker Bush invoked the doctrine of Manifest Destiny to authorize his inauguration of a New World Order. After the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, President George W. Bush's administration borrowed "shock and awe," "Infinite Justice" and comparable biblical phrases to endow the Iraq and Afghanistan phase of the Global War on Terror with divine warrant.

But no other President found a way to persuade huge swaths of an American populist movement to embrace the economic imperatives of America's plutocracy. Trump does not compensate constituents of the MAGA movement with actual capital. He rewards them with the symbolic wages of revenge, retribution, and vindication. The targets of the MAGA-ers' retribution are not the architects of the unfair distribution of American capital but members of political, media, academic, managerial, and social justice elites. Over the past decade, Trump has accumulated a mounting reserve of this type of symbolic capital.

Mario: No, to me, Manifest Destiny was in combination with McKinley and the Roosevelt corollary, which is, kind of, a combination, if you think about it. Anyhow, that was my point.

Elizabeth: Just on McKinley, in a symbolic sense, we see Trump's renaming of Denali Mountain, right, that he has now reverted back to McKinley Mountain? There is a real nineteenth-century symbolism to Trump, which – when you think about just

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how limited US global power was – is just undermining his point of making America great again.

Kaeten: Which is what we see playing out with the Panama Canal and the overtures towards Greenland. There are strong echoes of nineteenth-century US imperial territorial expansionism, including through purchase, like Alaska.

Donald: It's McKinley with Teddy Roosevelt. It's the combination of the two. President William McKinley's expansionist policies, including his weaponization of tariffs, expedited the United States' entry into the great game of global imperialism. President Theodore Roosevelt gave it a masculinist edge that Woodrow Wilson muted. But there's a lineage and a series of historical mutations of the trope Manifest Destiny from McKinley to Trump – so it is not quite accurate to call Trump's iteration of Manifest Destiny "anomalous."

Kaeten: Let's consider the "world" element of this now. There has been a significant shift in terms of the people the President surrounds himself by. If we think about Trump's first term, he leant on establishment figures, a lot of people from the Republican Party, national-security hawks. This time around, we don't have that. He is surrounded by his supporters: some are loyalists, some are media types, and there are newer ones from Silicon Valley – the tech bro types.

Now, as we know, there is nothing new about technological and financial elites being close to political power. But I wonder how we understand these influences, these kinds of figures who are playing a prominent role in the Trump administration, and particularly what it means for how the world engages with the US?

Mario, perhaps you could talk about this in terms of Europe, especially given Musk's entrance into the political debate in the UK, Germany, and Italy, particularly bolstering far-right causes and seeking to undermine elected leaders?

Mario: Yeah. The first point seems quite simple to me. In 2017, there was still a Republican establishment, and a Republican establishment which was trying to somehow contain and control Trump. In 2024, that establishment vanished, or was co-opted, or was MAGA-ized. It became part of a Republican Party that was, kind of, taken over by the MAGA movement. Think of Marco Rubio, what he was saying in 2017, and then now he's Secretary of State.

Now, the second point is more interesting. You have big tech operating globally and fearing global regulations and control, such as the regulations that the EU has been trying to discuss, the regulation Indonesia has tried to apply, or Brazil. Big tech has a vested interest in avoiding those kinds of regulations, along with some sort of global coordination on corporate tax: taxes and deregulations. You don't have to look for elsewhere.

That also explains why Europe is now facing the Trump cyclone. There are other issues that it's burden-sharing within NATO, of course. There are environmental issues, and trade and tariffs. But the big, big issue is that those people who were in the first line of Trump's inaugural, they want Trump to force Europe to abandon its plans to re-regulate what has been highly deregulated, or to undertake a serious anti-oligopoly effort, and somehow to restore some basics to our democracies, because one of the major failures of our democracy is that we allowed a similar concentration

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of – indecent concentration of – wealth and power in unaccountable actors, like Musk and Co.

Elizabeth: Yeah, I think this point is really important, Mario, that you're raising. One of the things that is really powerful about this appeal of Trump's – this appeal that he will be deregulating the tech industry specifically, but other parts of capital order as well – it ties into a larger political culture that Trump has been able to really ferment, which is about decentring the role of government. It's the reason that DOGE is having the political appeal that he desires with his supporters. It's about scapegoating government as a whole, as an institution and a structure that is part of the problem rather than the solution. So this global application of deregulation is also having a real impact on the political culture within the United States, as well.

I think part of why that is working is that it's tied into a larger culture. I don't like to use the word "culture wars," but a culture of concern about gender and about equality. It's why you see the tech leaders come out – like Mark Zuckerberg saying he never wanted to have the Equity, Diversity, Inclusion Acts.

These ideas of deregulation aren't just at a material tax level. They're not just about pushing out the role of government in your lives, but about tapping into a much larger cultural violence that allows for and encourages a white supremacy – a white, masculine supremacy at the core of it. So what we're seeing with Facebook and others is this real movement away from EDI initiatives, Trump himself speaking about there being only two genders. I think these things are all connected and they have ripple effects in different ways, both at the corporate level but also at the larger cultural space within the United States, as well.

Donald: I agree with almost all of what has already been said. I think that you have to also see the ways in which Trump is generating a balancing of otherwise noncomparable spheres of politics and culture. He wins popular consent for the deregulation of national market and commercial transactions with the deregulation of misogynist, racist, xenophobic, sexist, white-male-supremacist speech on social media. The principal way in which he manufactures consent to the deregulation of domestic market transactions involved the use of tariffs and other forms of trade protectionism in the global economic system. But he won popular consent for his deregulation of national commercial transactions in part by gratifying the demand for the elimination of customary forms of social media censorship.

As Elizabeth has suggested, this strategy primarily addressed masculinist – white masculinist – anxieties that were triggered for at least the last three decades by "wokeism" on the left. But notice the tactical dimension of Trump's MO. He places in the Secretary of Defense position Pete Hegseth, a person who belongs to a warrior culture, who, as a political commentator on Fox News, violated many of the cultural rules and conventions that would customarily govern the behavior of the head of the world's largest military–industrial complex. But Trump tactically balanced that MAGA-pleasing appointment with the selection of Senator Marco Rubio as his Secretary of State. Rubio could not be more unlike Hegseth. A member of the Washington consensus political class, Rubio has taken up the task of normalizing Trump's frequently outrageous, at times nonsensical, often fragmented, always agrammatical assertions by translating them into measured, grammatically correct,

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thoughtful and coherent sentences. Rubio, who strikes me as a Bush/Romney Republican in MAGA disguise, has even come up with a way to translate Trump's aberrant foreign-policy statements into what might be described as "expected mutations" of the New World Order that was put in place by President George Herbert Walker Bush more than three decades ago. He also has in Scott Bessent a Secretary of the Treasury who is able to produce a plausible Wall Street-friendly rationale for what would otherwise be regarded as Trump's ignorant, potentially catastrophic, tariff policy.

Moreover, to elaborate on a point made by both Mario and Elizabeth: he has turned MAGA into an extension, a tactical extension, of the state.

Trump did not govern as a President whose actions and policies were authorized by the guardians of the sacred epistemes of US liberal democracy. Trump based the authority of the policies, actions, and decisions he made as President on the sovereign power of the people that, in his 2017 inaugural address, he made "rulers of this nation again." Whenever members of the House or Senate impugned his policies, Trump traveled to one or another rally site where Trump's people claimed a power higher than the constituted authorities to endow their leader with an extralegal legitimacy. Members of the Make America Great Again movement who hatched the so-called "Birtherist" narrative asserted the state's power to decertify Barack Obama's birth certificate.

QAnon, which was puportedly founded by former CIA and FBI agents, provides members of MAGA's pseudo-state formation with state secrets that serve as the raw material for the conspiracy theories that circulate across alt-right social media stations. Trump might be said to have afforded subsumed QAnon within his state apparatus when he appointed Kash Patel the head of the FBI.

Kaeten: There was a sense in the first Trump term, particularly when he was first elected, that this was an anomaly. This could be a one-term President. The Democratic Party certainly set itself up around that idea – Biden's entire campaign in 2020 was about resetting the US. Many foreign countries, particularly in Europe, braced for a four-year storm and then, perhaps, a return to normality.

What does Trump's return do to that calculation? As scholars, we're notoriously bad at projecting forward, but how do we see the state of the world in four years' time? Can the rest of the world adopt and adapt the tactics it used last time, or is this a more permanent shift that requires rethinking approaches entirely?

Elizabeth: One of the things, I think, Trump's victory in this election will do, I think, is make this period seem more cohesive than simply a Trump first term and Biden agenda that could have gone in another direction. So, in other words, Trump's victory has meant that the Biden administration is the blip. It is the moment, the hinge moment, in between a much larger period that is now dominated by Trump.

In terms of what the rest of the world will do – the answer is, "Depends on the part of the world you're looking at." (Laughter.) But the period, the place, that I'm particularly focussed on is, of course, China. Trump's victory comes at a time when China is in a very different space to the one which Trump was engaging with in 2017. Its economy is much more rocky, but its politics is also very different. In more recent years under Xi there has been a real push to connect security with economics,

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and think of economics in national-security terms. And so Trump will be engaging with a China that is far more shaky but also more concerned with asserting its own national-security interests via economics, as part of what we saw with the Belt and Road Initiative, for example.

So I think one of the ways to think about the impact of Trump on the rest of the world has to do with what other parts of the world are aiming to do. In terms of China specifically, I think we might see a real sense in which preexisting attempts by Xi to create a world that is more beneficial for China, that those attempts may be more enabled by a Donald Trump presidency. I think there's a real potential for that, but that's as far as I'm willing to predict, as a historian.

Mario: I'll follow the same kind of methodology and focus on Europe and transatlantic relations, which is more my field. I have the impression that this election is way more consequential than 2016, first because somehow there is a full Trump-ite universe now, way more, that it has consolidated. The GOP, basically, doesn't exist anymore. It's just, as we say, MAGA. That's the first point.

Second, in the case of Europe, there are MAGA's Trojan horses ready to do Trump's work in Europe: Meloni, Orbán, and many others. More important, which is the key element, you don't have that French, German, Carolingian core, which in the past, somehow, responded to US unilateralist actions and pressures, as Schröder and Chirac were able to do during the Iraq crisis in 2002, 2003.

The two natural European hegemons, the security hegemon and the economic hegemon, they are undergoing deep political crisis. So you don't see who, in Europe, certainly not the EU Commission ... I assume you haven't followed closely how it was formed, but it's just it's, kind of, a joke of EU government, so to speak. You don't see who, in Europe, can stand up to address what I said, what I call "Trump's cyclone," which is about to invest Europe.

Donald: The second Trump administration, just to follow on what has already been said, transposed the first into its cocoon. The first Trump administration had guardrails all around it. Trump's selections for the position of Secretary of Defense – James Mattis Patrick Shanahan, and Mark Esper – were Bush/Romney neoconservatives. His Secretaries of State Rex Tillerson and Mike Pompeio wished to restore the role of the nation-state in the liberal international order.

In the March–April 2018 edition of *Foreign Affairs*, the MIT political theorist Barry Posen contributed an article titled "The Rise of Illiberal Hegemony: Trump's Surprising Grand Strategy." Posen argues that, at least since the beginning of the George H. W. Bush administration, the United States has wanted to alter significantly its relation to the post-World War II liberal international order, but no self-respecting political actor would ever have risked doing what Trump has done.

Trump, like a bull in a china shop, has dismantled what Mario has called the "pillars" of that liberal international order, and I do think that Trump will be followed by JD Vance, who possesses the political savvy to transform the disruptive logics of Trump into institutional formats that can give longevity and durability to Trump's ad hoc, impulsive, frequently chaotic set of moves.

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Kaeten: A final question that I'd like to pose to you all regards researching and teaching US empire in the Trump era. I'm thinking of us – as scholars and teachers – and how we examine US imperialism. And how do we teach Trump's words, posts, tweets, and actions in the classroom?

Mario: I'm just back from our regional campus in Reims, north, in the Champagne–Ardennes, where I taught an intensive one-week class on transatlantic relations. Yesterday's last session in the afternoon was on Biden and Trump, on today. I contradict myself a bit because I say, "Trump is an anomaly," but at the end of the day, when I was presenting Trump, I was looking for continuities, analogies, similarities. I guess that's what we will do, as historians. We will try, and we should try, to somehow place Trump within a larger, and much bigger and longer, story, which is the US, but, as Lizzie was saying earlier on, it is global.

It's linked to neoliberal globalization, its failures, its contestation, and the inability, in my view, to imagine an alternative or to promote an alternative. So that's, I think, what we should do: periodize, contextualize, and ... I know it sounds, kind of, rhetorical ... It is rhetorical, but we will be called to do a global history of the Trump age. That's what we will have to do.

Donald: I think we have to look at the victims of this and begin to think about rewriting history from below. After Trump tagged immigrants, who are among globalization's primary victims, as the causative source of his followers' economic, political, and social dispossession, *the immigrant* became the general equivalent for a vast relay of imagined threats to the American way of life. Migrants who have been made to bodily suffer its consequences possess an intimate knowledge of what Trump has actually put in place. It has not yet been transposed into a series of codified and organized structures and modes of analysis that, I think, have the potential of enormous, both intellectual as well as economic and political, force.

In a previous discussion, Elizabeth mentioned, in Greenland, the persons who had experienced what Trump was propagating by his demand that Greenland become US territory. The indigenous peoples of Greenland, and the ways in which they articulated a decolonial resistance movement, are beginning to gain audibility.

The "global South," so-called, I think, is in a position to articulate an opposition to what Trump is putting into full global propagation. I'm looking forward to voices from the so-called "global South," for an alternative historical, economic, as well as political, explanation of what's happening now.

Kaeten: Elizabeth, final word to you.

Elizabeth: One of the things that, I think, is really important and that I taught with, actually, this week. It's the first week back of classes and I was thinking through with my students, a lot of this rhetoric that we've been discussing, this nineteenth-century rhetoric that Trump has been propagating.

The class that I teach, this particular class, is US in the world, from colonization, right through to the present, so a lot of nineteenth century, a lot of twentieth century. One of the things I showed my students was a clip of the Mexican President, who, in response to Donald Trump's claim that he wanted to rename the Gulf of

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Mexico – wanted to rename it to the Gulf of America – she stood in front of a very large map and spoke of the seventeenth-century continent, in which a significant proportion of the continent was Mexican. She was giving a tongue-in-cheek but important lesson about the contingencies of land and the ways in which borders and borderlands are constructed and contingent. So as much as Donald Trump is speaking to a frontier-expansionist narrative – a nostalgia, if you will, for a frontier expansionism – what we heard, when we did see the Mexican President's lesson in front of this map, is the ways in which this expansionist action was contingent, and certainly not inevitable, or natural, or a manifest destiny, an obvious destiny, not at all.

So one of the things that I think the Trump administration is allowing for, in terms of teaching, is a real investigation of the distinctions between a rhetorical hubris and the realities underpinning that, in the ways in which contingency infuses all history, regardless of what a politician may assert otherwise.

Conversation 3: climate

This conversation took place over Zoom on 3 July 2025. The participants were:

Judith Madera (chair): Associate Professor of Literature and Faculty Affiliate in African American Studies and Environmental Studies at Wake Forest University. Her publications include *Black Atlas: Geography and Flow in Nineteenth-Century African American Literature* (2015), and essays on early Black worldmaking.

Georgiana Banita: *Privatdozentin* (Senior Lecturer) in the Institute for English and American Studies at Otto-Friedrich University, Bamberg. Her publications include *Phantombilder: Die Polizei und der verdächtige Fremde* (2023) and the edited collection *Artful Breakdowns: The Comics of Art Spiegelman* (2023).

Elsa Devienne: Assistant Professor in the Humanities at Northumbria University. Her publications include *Sand Rush: The Revival of the Beach in Twentieth-Century Los Angeles* (2024), and an essay on citizen beach cleanups and the ocean plastic pollution crisis in *Environmental Humanities*.

Jan Selby: Professor of International Politics and Climate Change at the University of Leeds. His publications include *Divided Environments: An International Political Ecology of Climate Change, Water and Security* (2022) and essays on environmental security in the *Annual Review of Environment and Resources* and *Geopolitics*.

Judith: I'll begin with a word of thanks to the coeditors of the *Journal of American Studies*, Katie McGettigan and Will Norman, for bringing this conversation to a start. As scholars of transatlantic and US literatures, Katie and Will assembled a group of environmental humanists and social scientists to think about climate change and politics in the frame of American studies.

When we first discussed the topic of climate and US political ecology, the immediate context we were facing into was the 2024 US election cycle. The phrase "climate change" was being scrubbed from US state statutes. Climate was not being established as a priority – not by major media networks and not by the presidential candidates.

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When we next convened as a group, the election had passed. It began with one Democratic incumbent, President Joe Biden, and ended with another, Vice President Kamala Harris. It brought the former US President and defeated 2020 incumbent Donald Trump back into office. And along with this came a battery of major questions. What did the election as a springboard make visible about climate in the context of American policy and politics? What did the election polarize?

As we regroup today, I think we all feel a sense of distance from the initial editorial prompt. We acknowledge that we are responding to a moment of multiple crises. Keeping climate in sight, do we have any thoughts about how we want to frame the conversation? If the election is no longer the touchstone it was a few months ago, what issues are important to think forward?

Georgiana: Maybe we could speak a little bit about acceleration. With Trump, I get the feeling that we have to move along at a dizzying pace with all the executive orders and all the measures he's been taking. There's also a deep contrast between his speed of governance on the one hand and the *longue durée* of climate change and how he's trying to pack one into the other, right?

So he's trying to say, "This isn't really happening," on the one hand – the denial of it. And on the other hand, he's already compressing time to say, "Fine, so we'll be over two degrees. We've already missed the 1.5-degree warming limit. What's two degrees anyway? There's a two-degree difference between my living room and my bathroom, and that doesn't bother me at all." He's trivializing and repackaging climate change as something that develops over time. He's pretending it's already here and it's not really as disruptive as everyone thinks it could be.

So in terms of temporality, I think that with Trump, we have to bear in mind the sheer acceleration, really, of his politics and his policies and how he's using that as a tool of governance – maybe as a tool of authoritarian governance, flooding the zone with all sorts of new legislation and not giving anyone time to come to terms with something before the next thing happens. I think that's part of what defines him as a leader and what makes his administration so dangerous.

Judith: Speaking from the perspective of someone inside the United States, I think there was a real shock that was experienced by people here as to the speed at which the new administration has begun to act. I live in the state of North Carolina, where many people in North Carolina went to the polls and voted for Trump. Many have voiced a massive shock in the difference between Trump 1 and Trump 2, and they're seeing impacts that they did not anticipate.

But from the international perspective that each of you brings – Jan, just thinking about the difference between Trump 1 and Trump 2, what kind of international implications do you see as very pivotal for our current moment?

Jan: I often emphasize continuities and in other respects I would in relation to Trump, but I think the contrast between Trump 1 and Trump 2 is massive in terms of both climate and energy-related stuff and beyond, both in terms of policy platform and actions taken and in terms of their international reverberations.

With Trump 1, the impacts on climate policy within the United States, and on international climate regime and actions by other states, was quite limited, and was,

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in certain respects, positive: Trump became a spur to action elsewhere. Whereas what we're seeing this time, at least so far, are very clear negative international reverberations in all kinds of ways.

With Trump's first term, the impacts on international action on climate change, as well as, frankly, domestic action, were relatively limited. Domestically, there are obviously a lot of different power bases at state and so on level within the US, and a lot of those were not greatly affected, but in some respects stepped up within the context of Trump 1 to launch more ambitious action.

And I think you saw this on an even larger scale internationally. So it was really during Trump 1 that we saw the rise of Extinction Rebellion and an international climate protest movement on a scale that had never been seen before. At the same time, it was during that period that the idea of net zero started to be adopted globally. And it was the period when states were trying to formulate their first plans under the 2015 Paris Agreement. And so internationally it was a relatively positive period, really.

It's maybe putting it too strongly to say that the existence of Trump helped with that, but in some respects it probably did. And I wrote this at the time, I wrote an article that was published in 2019 in *Review of International Studies*, which basically made the case that the impacts were relatively limited.

But it's clearly very different this time around, partly because Trump and the administration are more ambitious and more prepared, and partly because the international context is more difficult. So the difference is evident, for instance, in how few countries are preparing more ambitious climate plans; they're all meant to be preparing them and submitting them internationally at the moment, and countries are way, way behind on that.

There are impacts in terms of the diversion of climate finance and development aid to military expenditure; there are impacts in terms of lots of countries deciding to invest more in fossil fuels at the moment, given the international context. So in Canada, for instance, within the context of deteriorating trade relations with the US, they have decided on a big push for more LNG [liquified natural gas] production, led by Mark Carney, even though he is historically someone very much associated with climate action.

Just one final point on this: some of those impacts started immediately after the election and before Trump had even taken over. So at the COP29 summit in Baku, the 29th Meeting of the Parties to the UN Framework Convention, the main focus of the negotiations was meant to be over finance for the global South in particular, and the finance agreement reached was very thin. There was huge anger.

But the common refrain from lots of northern negotiators was, "It's going to get even worse under Trump, you're going to get a worse deal once Trump comes to power. So you need to take this deal, even if you're deeply dissatisfied with it." So there was basically a blackmail coming into play even before Trump took power, and I think that dynamic has continued.

Sorry, that's ended up being quite a long answer, but I think there are some quite striking differences between Trump 1 and Trump 2 so far.

Georgiana: There is also the question of how Trump's denial of the climate crisis is changing the positioning of the Democratic party in the coming months and heading

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into the midterm elections. We can already look into the future and from the first six months of the Trump administration and try to speculate on how this will develop and will perhaps change, not just the atmosphere, the political atmosphere in the US, but also the way that the parties position themselves regarding the climate question.

I find it so spectacular, the political rise of [mayoral candidate Zohran] Mamdani in New York and the fact that he's running on a decarbonization platform. And it will be interesting to observe how that develops because he's often spoken in Marxist terms about his policies and he's a self-declared democratic socialist. It's interesting how he's combining this idea of justice and climate with a focus on the 99 percent, right? So climate justice for the 99 percent rather than just for the privileged who can afford to deal with rising temperatures by going to the Hamptons or something like that.

Judith: If we think about Mamdani a little more – which is another election that seems to have garnered international attention – he's being asked questions about international policy, about Israel's right to exist, things that don't have much to do with what his on-the-ground job will be as a mayor of New York City. What does Mamdani's success and the platform that he's now afforded reveal to us about certain fissures or certain platforms in the Democratic Party? What does his victory against a very well-known, establishment Democrat [Andrew Cuomo] reveal to us about the stakes of politics in this moment?

Georgiana: We have this New York mayoral race as something of an echo, I think, of the election last year, where it's interesting that Mamdani doesn't seem to be running so much against Cuomo or the current mayor Eric Adams, but more against Trump himself.

So I think it's part of Trump's strategy of filling the airwaves with everything that represents his politics and trying to suppress everything else, that he's become part of the discourse around the election in New York. Of course, he's a famous New Yorker himself, and he's influenced New York elections in the past. He famously took out a full-page ad in the *New York Times* after the Central Park Five incident, asking for the reintroduction of the death penalty.

So he's a New Yorker mover and shaker. He's also setting the tone, I guess, for a larger upcoming conflict within the Democratic Party between the establishmentarians, who are now withholding support of Mamdani ...

Judith: By whom, you mean people like the minority speaker, Hakeem Jeffries, also from New York?

Georgiana: Yes, those who have not endorsed Mamdani, and the AOC and Bernie Sanders branch of the Democratic Party, who are looking at Mamdani's success as something of a litmus test for how the Democrats are going to position themselves in future elections.

In terms of time, we're also dealing with two political periods simultaneously or two political ages, ages in the broader sense of the term: a very young Mamdani who's only thirty-three, and Ocasio-Cortez, who is also very young, and an older generation represented by people like Cuomo and Chuck Schumer. I think they also

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represent different temporalities with their politics. I mean, these younger people coming up and wanting swift transformation, wanting things to change overnight and have a sense of crisis or emergency behind their claims and their policies, versus the older establishment, who has a more temperate approach to things.

Judith: Would anyone else like to pick up on any of these threads?

Elsa: I did think it was interesting, after Mamdani winning the mayoral primaries in New York, to think of those two elections together. I think what Mamdani's team has done so well is really draw the lessons from Kamala Harris's election loss last year – that is that she lost on the cost-of-living crisis, she lost on inflation, that's what everybody's been talking about. Trump won, because he said that on day one he would lower the price of groceries and Mamdani really took that on and he went out into the streets with his team after the Trump victory in November and asked working-class New Yorkers, "What is it that you want? What is it that you're worried about?" And everyone was talking about the price of groceries and the price of everyday life, and what is it that Mamdani is promising? He is promising climate action that lowers the cost of living, precisely for those working-class New Yorkers. One thing that I loved about his campaign promises was free buses, which might be, to some, a populist proposal but, when it comes down to it, is actually a very straightforward form of climate action that focusses on the people who need help the most, and that has a huge potential to attract new voters to the voting booth.

And we can make the link with the price of eggs, which was a topic that kept on coming back during the last presidential election. It's nice to see someone capable of translating climate action and the climate crisis in terms of how that reveals itself in everyday life, in the price of groceries and specifically a staple that you'll find in every American's fridge, like eggs. The rising price of eggs is highly connected to climate change but in ways that are not obvious to most people and that are quite complex through bird migration and avian influenza, etc. But there are ways to make this connection and that would be, I think, by showing how it directly affects people's purses and how climate action can lower the price of groceries or at least prevent the spikes we are currently seeing. And that particular form of everyday climate proposals, how much does your commute cost, how much do your groceries cost, that might be the best way to fight back against Trump's particular attempts to bring on another green backlash, which is part of a much longer trend of course.

Judith: So it sounds like you're speaking to making climate action actionable through everyday economics and questions about the cost of living and consumer choice. But also that there's a momentum that, at least it seemed to me you felt was being capitalized on by Trump. We certainly have seen the shutdown of Environmental Protection Agency websites, the defunding of climate labs, the withdrawal of support for thousands of people who are employed by and who deal with national atmospheric and weather changes.

And we're told here from our federal government that climate assessments are needed. So there's certainly a green backlash, if that's what you were referring to. But do you view the local, the spaces of everyday life, as a space of resistance? A space for people to respond to what is certainly a withdrawal of federal support

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for addressing the issue of climate change and the exacerbation of fossil fuels and government interests, frankly, in protecting polluting industries?

Part of the megabill that we spoke about earlier has to do with AI as an industry not being subject to pollution controls, and they generate a tremendous amount of electricity. So, do you view this question of backlash as somehow baked into what we take to be local action?

Elsa: Just to be specific here, the term "green backlash" I'm borrowing from Andy Rowell, who wrote a book about this in 1996. The green backlash is this idea that after the big wins, the big victories of the environmental movement in the 1970s – the Clean Air Act, the Clean Water Act, the creation of the EPA – that after that moment, starting in the 1980s, there's been a very active, aggressive movement funded by the industrial lobbies, especially fossil-fuel lobbies, to counter what was at the time a very popular, very consensual-across-the-political-spectrum, environmental movement. And that came in mainly two forms: one was the climate denial PR campaign funded by and led by right-wing think tanks. And at the same time, there was also the more grassroots movement coming from the "Wise Use movement" which brought together a motley of groups, including western farmers, pro-gun advocates, etc. They called themselves the Wise Use movement because they believed that the environmental movement had gone too far and they painted environmentalists as hysterics that were putting the industrial civilization at risk, and the American exceptionalism at risk.

Trump is a long continuation of that green backlash that harks back to the 1980s, at least, and that has had from the beginning, as its goal, exactly what Trump 2 is doing: getting rid of the EPA, getting rid of every single federal agency that is trying to protect and regulate. They're just trying to regulate industrial pollution and protect industrial pollution and protect natural resources from industrial uses and abuses. So in a sense, Trump 2 is a continuation. All of this has been played out before: cutting the budget of the EPA, traumatizing EPA staff, opening up the National Arctic Wildlife Refuge for drilling. One thing I've been wondering is: what is it that is new, because as Jan mentioned, Trump 2 is definitely new in some aspects, and in the dizzying pace that Georgiana mentioned.

I mean, from my perspective as a historian, one thing that is new also is this very pointed attack on environmental justice specifically, which wasn't as clear back in the '80s, back in the '90s, pre-Obama. I think what's really interesting is that in Project 2025, specifically within the EPA, what was it that was targeted? The Office of Environmental Justice: environmental-justice programmes, on all kinds of environmental-justice tools, etc. And here I want to give a shout out to EDGI, the Environmental Data and Governance Initiative, which was started in 2016, to track and observe and document the attack on environmental federal data by Trump 1. And they've been keeping track of what's happening now.

Georgiana: I could pick up from here, if I may. I would like to go back briefly to what Elsa was saying about free buses and Mamdani's promise that he was in favour of a kind of decarbonization that would start from below. So this notion of environmentalism from below is very important when we talk about scale and, by extension, also about time, what can be done within a human lifetime and how we can even imagine

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the progression of climate change beyond our own agency, beyond the reach of our own interventions.

I wanted to mention briefly that a very similar debate is going on in Germany with an upcoming referendum in Berlin about banning automobiles from the city in the entire area that can be serviced through public transportation. It's a very convoluted, very polarizing debate because it's not just that some conservative forces in Germany are still defining cars as works of art, as part of cultural heritage, but also because there's an imbalance of justice at work there in banning cars that a lot of working-class individuals use to be able to commute to the city from the suburbs around Berlin. So there's a sense of privilege attached to environmental action, in that there's a cost to be incurred by giving up cars, for instance, and using public transportation. And this cost is affecting communities that are maybe on the lower rung of social mobility, of social access.

There's a grassroots backlash against the green movement as well, that is based on class issues and the resistance of a lot of working-class people of the kind who vote for Donald Trump as well, and who vote for parties like the Alternative for Germany here. These people feel that their freedom is encroached upon, that their access to work, access to labour, and whatever small individual freedoms they might have, that those are being lost as a result of what is considered an over-privileged green movement. Which is, as some criticism of the Green Party in Germany suggests, carried by a bunch of very well-off people who can afford to implement a lot of climate changes in their own lives.

And it's difficult to separate the climate from all of the other things going on, right? So when Trump is calling Mamdani a socialist, or actually a communist, lunatic, he doesn't just refer to climate policies or socially friendly measures that Mamdani has in mind, but to a sense of what Trump appears to see as deludedness on the part of the Democratic Party. Like they're not realistic, they don't know where people's real problems are, and they're just creating very elitist discourses around the future and what we can do for future generations and so on.

So I don't think there's any consensus right now in the party about where the party is going. And to quote Bernie Sanders, there probably won't be any lessons learned from Mamdani's success. He's not guaranteed to win the election. There's going to be a lot of resistance to him. I mean, only 500,000 people voted for Mamdani in the primary, and there are five million registered voters in New York City. So it's not really a sign of any sustained popularity of a socialist platform right now.

Moving forward, I can see another establishment movement growing within the Democratic Party that is going to marginalize some of what is considered to be more extreme positions, and climate is going to be one of them, I think. The Democratic Party will try to move to the centre again and probably lose again.

I think it also has to do with the atmosphere in the United States at the moment, that climate is not a priority. Trump is bragging that America is the hottest country in the world right now. But he should probably pay more attention to the heatwave than to the media heat that he has in mind. It makes me wonder, guess who had the hottest country in the world in 1933? But anyway – "the hottest country in the world" is a way to perhaps ridicule the idea of rising temperatures and to bring that into a different conversation around popularity, around personality cults and charisma and things like that. So I don't think that the Democratic Party is going

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to rally around climate protection ideas. That actually leaves the door open for a third candidate, something that we've had before in the US and perhaps will happen again.

Judith: Maybe I could jump in to say that I think we do see a lack of responsiveness in the DNC at the level of the Senate to the people they purport to represent, to the needs of poor people, to people forced into precarity due to loss of income, loss of homes, and the withdrawal of federal and state support for matters that have a lot of impact on everyday life. And by that, I mean we are living in an epoch of climate disaster where we saw, just in these last few years, these one-in-a-hundred-year storms or these mega-disastrous events.

So, yeah, the DNC has let many people down, but it may be that we see climate impact on the primaries. Representatives who perceive themselves as safe in their positions and have accepted a tremendous amount of money from lobbyists might become vulnerable if there is a groundswell of people whose lives are being impacted in the immediate term by climate and by climate disaster. That's a possibility that, sadly, we're very open to and that I think could happen.

Jan: Yeah, if I might just come in quickly on that. I think in relation to the Democrats in the US, I mean, I won't use the term "populist." I don't like that phrase in relation to this. I think that's quite misleading and is a dismissive elite concept. But I think, to me, it's clear that the Democrats, if they want to be electorally successful in the future and reimagine themselves, they need to move in a more socialist direction.

And more broadly, I think that climate policy and climate action are going to have to move in that direction across most states in the global North if they're going to sustain the coalitions necessary to being successful. Climate policy and climate action everywhere, and in most places with good reason, is associated with middle-class and knowledge elites and is insensitive to the huge material inequalities that have been growing across the global North, and the inability, for obvious financial reasons, of those on lower incomes to be part of the transition in a meaningful way.

It was often said that, even though Biden's Inflation Reduction Act was in many ways really progressive in supporting climate action, what the IRA helped build was a Prius economy, and a bus economy is obviously the sort that's much more needed to build mass support for transition to post-fossil-fuel economies.

Elsa: I don't have much to add, but, as the historian in the conversation, we have no idea where the Democratic Party is going to go, you know, time and time again, over history, we see events, wars, crises completely change the course of history.

What happened in LA, the fires earlier this year, last year, Hurricane Helene, the ways in which this is directly affecting people's livelihoods, houses, etc. How is it going to translate itself into politics? Whether it's going to translate itself into politics, this remains to be seen. I don't know, I have to remain hopeful that the Democratic Party will draw the necessary conclusions from recent events.

Georgiana: But I also want to bring it back a little bit to the international level and engage briefly with what Jan was saying about how, across the global community, we are going back to fossil fuels. So it's not just that Trump is empowering the extractive

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industries in the US, but all over the world, and Canada is not the only example, Germany is doing that too, and other countries in Europe, are going back to fossil fuels as part of a conservative political agenda, as part of perhaps the authoritarian current that we're experiencing in many governments throughout the world.

So maybe a question to Jan, how he would contextualize this, because I like the slight exaggeration in the term "fossil fascism," suggested by Andreas Malm, the Swedish geographer and eco-Marxist, and how he's talking about this authoritarian movement towards consolidating fossil power, and whether that's something that is not just limited to the United States.

Jan, you were suggesting that in Trump 1, there was a reaction from the world against Trumpism, right? So the more chaotic, the more irresponsible the Trump administration is, the more responsibility other countries will be feeling to act in environmental terms and to protect ecosystems and future generations. I wonder if that's still the case, though? I feel like Trumpism is spreading throughout the world, that it's really a contamination, that his style is gaining popularity everywhere. And this fossil-fascism idea seems to me useful, though slightly overblown, because in Germany at least we're being very careful with the inflationary use of the term "fascism."

If you put that return to fossil fuels on an international level, whether time-wise or scale-wise, the Trump administration is perhaps more powerful than we imagined in creating a precedent and a framework for international anti-action regarding climate change.

Jan: I very much agree with you, and I agree with your sentiments on the term "fossil fascism" as well. It's very clear that commitments to fossil fuels and the types of labour and consumption associated with them – coal labour, use of the combustion engine automobile – it's very clear that they are classed, they are raced, they are gendered, and they're associated with nationalism. That's pretty clear globally. But how strong these commitments are and how strong the divisions are on each of these axes varies by country and region. And in the US, they're clearly stronger than elsewhere. So all of that is pretty clear to me.

Just a couple of things to emphasize, though. I wouldn't use the phrase "return to fossil fuels." We need to realize that the world, and especially the US, have never got away from fossil fuels. Coming back to the theme of continuities, if you want to understand the last twenty years of US energy and climate policy, the big change happened under Obama, during late 2015 when the Paris Agreement was negotiated. Obama played a key role in negotiating this agreement. But then he came back to the US, and exactly seven days later he lifted the forty-year-old ban on US oil exports.

And it's really from that moment that US oil and gas production and exports start to skyrocket. It's really since then that there's been this incredible surge in US oil and gas production. Coal production has even risen by 15 percent since Paris in the US.

Obama basically made something like a Faustian bargain, which involved a commitment to climate action alongside actions to support the expansion of the US fossil-fuel industry. So in that sense, if you look at the graphs of what's happened to fossil fuel production in the US, one sees very much continuity from 2015. No doubt an acceleration, but a continuity rather than a halt and then return.

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One other point – to just clarify what I was saying about differences between Trump 1 and Trump 2. It's clear to me that Trump's actions, in terms of how they play out internationally, elicit a range of reactions. Some of those can be ones of mimicry, and some of those reactions can be ones of resistance and spurring opposition and the opposite.

I think under Trump 1, one saw quite a lot of actions partly spurred by Trump, which took the form of resistance. By contrast, at the moment, what we're seeing internationally is forms of mimicry, for various reasons. The reasons vary slightly. So in the case of Canada and Canada's renewed drive to expand fossil-fuel production, they're worried by the threat of Trump and tariffs and what that might do to the Canadian economy. They are wanting to turn to LNG production because Canadian oil production all goes to the US at the moment, and they want to open up new LNG markets in Asia, to protect them against Trump and a possibly much less benevolent US. So they're turning to fossil fuels for those reasons.

Whereas in Europe, the concern is much more to do with NATO and Ukraine, and a real fear that the US might withdraw from NATO, and wanting to take actions not to offend Trump and thus to support military expansion and increased military expenditure. So I think a range of reactions, but predominantly mimicry at the moment rather than resistance.

Judith: Thanks, Jan.

Are there any discourses or mobilizations, forms of organization that we're seeing that could provide lessons in navigating this moment? Are there counterdiscourses or – I use the term "mobilization." But we see in the United States a withdrawal from international agreements, we're seeing institutional agencies that contend with climate change, their capacity to work, to organize just taken away from them.

I previously mentioned a micro-organization, but it could be, you know, we're in a moment with a lot of provocation, where we're seeing acceleration, we're seeing capricious legislation. Are there counterdiscourses or organizations, the forms of organization that we can take inspiration from or that give us a sense of how to navigate our moment?

Georgiana: I could say something briefly on that, if I may. Going back to the sense of acceleration under Donald Trump, I have the sense that people are more focussed on the right now, that they feel under assault through different policies, through Trump's tax and tariff policies and his erratic behaviour domestically and internationally. There's a sense of temporariness somehow, that we are focussing on the next step or focussing on what we're going to do tomorrow. There isn't a lot of energy left for much else.

There's a kind of protest fatigue, I feel, that applies to the United States. Comparing Trump 1 and Trump 2, there's certainly a difference in how people react to his executive excesses and his rhetoric. We see that in other countries too, there's a sense of just stunned disbelief that this is happening and people are taking it in. The Democratic resistance is another example of it. There's a sense of lethargy in it, of confusion around who to rally around, who the next leadership figure is going to be. So people don't see very much into the future at the moment because of this foggy atmosphere created by the Trump administration.

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The lethargy and the paralysis is, I think, also supported by an affective environment around Trump's policies, both regarding the climate but also against social cohesion and solidarity in general. There's a collateral feeling of anxiety that is produced by his policies. Because they are so shocking, because everything happens so quickly and he's constantly commenting on everything through Truth Social, there's just a sense of overwhelm at the moment that is impeding what you're talking about, Judith, these micro systems of resistance.

Another thing that I want to go back to is what Jan was saying: I find it important to dwell on the idea of war and on the current war situation that we're finding ourselves in, which happened quite suddenly. Trump has always prided himself on not being a war President, but he has recently bombed Iran and has supported Israel's policies in Gaza. This is all very controversial, but there's also a sense of "ambient war" about everything that he is doing. And I think that also applies to his climate policies. So there's a difference between Trump 1 and Trump 2 in the sense that he's opening up all of these domestic conflict zones, right? He's putting boots on the ground in Los Angeles, which is something that is going far beyond his response to the Black Lives Matter demonstrations in response to the killing of George Floyd in 2020. And he is talking about environmentalists as terrorists and threats to the nation. So this criminalization of resistance movements is part of his modus operandi at the moment.

I think, in terms of not acting on the climate situation, the climate crisis is also a form of war, really. It's a declaration of aggression against young people, against the future generation. We are perhaps well advised to use war terminology in this context, because we're using it for so many other things, like cyberterrorism and so on. If we want to take the idea of climate justice as a human right, then what he is doing is a form of intergenerational violence that should be called by that name.

So I think there are ways to fight back against his policies that are also linguistic. We need to find ways to describe his policies that can rally feelings and convey their effects. I mean, he's not a war President? He *is* a war President. Look at what he's been doing in America. Look at his detention and deportation programmes. Look at Alligator Alcatraz. He's opening up domestic fronts that make it easy for him to isolate himself from war rhetoric, because he says, "I am not intervening in other countries. I'm not doing regime change anywhere in the world," but he's doing a lot of regime changes at home.

Elsa: You say, Georgiana, that there is protest fatigue, but we've seen the attacks on Tesla dealerships earlier this year which can be certainly construed as forms of protest. We've seen the No Kings marches and protests that have brought out into the streets people who, for some of them, had never participated in a protest. Maybe different groups are coming out this time compared to before. And we've seen, for instance, in Los Angeles, a huge amount of local resistance against the ICE kidnappings, and that, in a way, is a form of resistance, even if it's not as grandiose or as media-ready as the usual protests are. But there's a real attempt at solidarity, at trying to protect those people that are most vulnerable to these kidnappings.

When it comes to the climate, I know that Bill McKibben is preparing a Sun Day celebration of solar and wind in September – so we'll see whether that action comes

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to anything. But the reality is that, right now, as I think you mentioned when we first started talking, Judith, people are just literally fighting for their lives and for their health care. So, yeah, there is so much that can be done when so many things are being attacked at once.

Georgiana: There's also the legal war going on, right? Sorry, just one sentence on the new Supreme Court decision in favour of the Trump administration regarding universal injunctions [*Trump* v. *Casa Inc.* (2025)]. So resistance is made particularly difficult because there's a limited recourse to the legal system. People can defend themselves against deportations only through a class action suit, which is very difficult and very taxing. And the Supreme Court decision is allowing Trump's executive orders to essentially stay in place until people find the money and the energy and everything else they need to sue.

It's also a class problem, of course. Most people who are affected by a lot of these policies, particularly deportation, are not able to protect themselves because they lack the means to do so. And if this continues, I think the legal system is another one that might become less effective for climate actions too.

Sorry, Jan, you were going to say something.

Jan: Yeah, I was just going to say that I think it's also important to bear in mind – and maybe this follows directly from what you say – that there are lots of different types and ways of doing resistance. I don't think we should just think of resistance in terms of explicit protest or opposition. Often what I previously called mimicry has a resistant element to it. Mimicry or what seems like compliance isn't necessarily agreement. It doesn't necessarily mean one's been co-opted.

Internationally, on the climate front, as well as in relation to other things, lots of international actors are scared of offending Trump, wanting to make grandiose statements that let them off the hook. Statements by leaders of European countries that they're going to increase their defence spending to 5 percent of GDP without any basis to it, are clearly intended just to mimic what Trump wants.

Georgiana: With the exception of Spain. I just want to throw that in there.

Jan: But they mimic what Trump wants in a way that they can dispose of it potentially later. So that's one side of it and I think we need to think of mimicry in that sense as well.

But then I think there's an everyday dimension to resistance as well, at a micro level, which is hugely important. I've learned more about this than anywhere else from the Palestinian context, where I did much of my early work; my PhD and post-PhD work were on Israel–Palestine. In Palestinian discourse, the idea of *sumud*, which is an Arabic word meaning "steadfastness" – that's what it's normally translated as. It's something like a Palestinian national ideology, really, and it's basically about carrying on within the context of occupation and dispossession. As a concept, *sumud* is somewhere between resistance and resilience, and has a very everyday character to it.

And I think in the context where you don't know what power is going to do – and I think this very much applies to the US at the moment – that type of activity is hugely important and paves the way for more ... and when you're not sure

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what the possibilities are and the timing of outright protest-type resistance is hugely important.

Georgiana: So by that logic, America is becoming occupied territory, I suppose.

Jan: Well, maybe, yeah, in a way.

Georgiana: I like the parallel. I think it's very, very interesting.

Judith: Yeah, and that we saw resistance to the war machine and to the funding of it through our young people, through students, through people in the United States, college students occupying their campus.

Elsa: I really like what you said, Jan, and thinking of this question of temporality and resilience, resistance. This reminds me again, bringing in my disciplinary expertise, which is not political science at all or anything like this, but bringing in the humanities, and in particular, the little I know from Indigenous studies and from Black studies, African American studies, this idea that for all of us white people, middle-class people, looking at the unfolding climate disaster, we're experiencing our first end of the world, but for many people, there's been many ends of the world before.

Indigenous people have basically had the equivalent of the climate crisis unleashed on them with colonization as their entire ecological relationship to the world was destroyed and attacked, and they lost their territory, etc. Black Americans could probably say the same, how they were taken away from their original place and enslaved.

I know it might seem a bit out there depending on your disciplinary perspective, but it's important to keep it in mind. This is not the first end of the world for a lot of people, the climate crisis; we'll go through it and we'll need that resilience and we'll need that circular, nonlinear thinking. That's what Indigenous studies does so well – question Western temporalities and in particular the linear temporality of an unfolding climate crisis after which there is nothing, which is extremely anxiety-inducing. We'll need those perspectives to help us as we live through the next few years of Trump 2.

Judith: Yes, it seems we are seeking forms of self-determination and modes and discourses of future-building that aren't easily categorized as resistance. They aren't predictable and they're being formed in moments of crisis. Some of the points raised have been creative and very helpful to the conversation.

Jan: Just following up on that and linking it with what I said before: I think contexts of war and crisis are very productive of forms of resilience and experimentation and can have a huge effect. So just linking this with what I said about Palestine and with the question of Gaza: Gaza until 2023 was at the worldwide forefront of development of a low-carbon economy. Gaza had one of the highest rates of solar-panel use in the world: rooftop solar panels, within a context where the electricity supply was both dependent on Israel and very unreliable, were developed as a low-tech way of adapting, with solar panels being smuggled through the tunnels into Gaza. I mean, absolutely incredible. I think that's quite powerful and instructive.

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While I'm speaking, there's an additional point I would like to make, about the US and China within the context of low-carbon transition. Because clearly, what one has had in recent years is the beginnings of a global economic revolution towards low-carbon technologies: photovoltaics, wind, batteries, electric vehicles, and so on, and their supply chains. Globally, China is very strongly in the lead in production of these technologies and in control of their supply chains, with the US well behind, and Europe also behind. What happened under Biden with the Inflation Reduction Act was a belated attempt to do a catch-up by giving various tax credits and other support to key low-carbon sectors.

I think with Trump and his attacks on and rollback of this support for low-carbon industries, the US has basically given up. And this is happening at a critical juncture in the global economic revolution. To link with the earlier temporality question, this won't have a short-term impact; it's going to have long-term reverberations. And it's very difficult to envisage even a different administration, in three or four years' time, coming in and being able to change course. It means that the US has given up, and China, at least for the medium term, has won the low-carbon race. And I think this has huge geopolitical as well as climate implications, which to my mind are very, very worrying and concerning.

Georgiana: It's also rewriting or obscuring a lot of American invention and science history in green technologies and environmental science, because it was America that invented the first solar cell and it was Americans that first realized what was going on in terms of global warming and climate science.

I have a final point to make about resistance. In Germany, we're seeing a growing peace movement. Partly in response to rearmament under NATO pressure and what's going on in Ukraine with Putin advancing his so-called imperialist agenda. There's a lot of controversy around those issues, but there is a growing consensus that we need to give peace a chance.

And it's interesting to see that the climate movement is also folding into the new peace movement – that peace is another way to say no to pollution, to say no to industrial violence, to say no to atomic weapons and ecological destruction. It's also a consequence of Trump's nuclear threats against Iran and the increasing militarization in Europe, so perhaps that's something that will also affect the agency coalescing around the related issues of climate protection and peace.

So I think that's one thing to keep in mind, as we continue to look for forms of resistance that are traditionally able to mobilize the masses. I mean, it's been a while since the last freedom movement, as it were, and the idea fell into disrepute for a long time, but I think there's something there.

Judith: This has been a fascinating discussion that spotlights transnational American perspectives and mobilizations on different scales. We've covered some ground, moving from internal US political cultures to more speculative approaches to geopolitics. I've especially appreciated the international perspectives shared by each of our panelists: Georgiana Banita, Elsa Devienne, and Jan Selby. We're at the end of our time here. Thanks all for sharing your time.

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