Populism and President Trump's approach to foreign policy: An analysis of tweets and rally speeches

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An analysis of tweets and rally speeches

Abstract

Much like his candidacy, Donald Trump’s presidency has been described as populist par excellence and as fundamentally breaking with the liberal internationalist tradition of American foreign policy. Despite a growing interest in populism and the role it has played in shaping Donald Trump’s appeal to the public at election time in 2016, we lack an understanding of how populist rhetoric after his electoral victory shaped his approach to foreign policy. This paper proposes a study of President Trump’s official campaign communication through rally speeches and Twitter during the two months prior to the mid-term election in November 2018 as well as tweets published in the official personal account @realDonaldTrump from September-November 2018. The analysis finds that resurgent Jacksonian populism promoted by the Tea Party shapes President Trump’s approach to foreign policy. Fundamentally anti-elitist, Trump’s populism opposes migration, multilateralism, and is deeply sceptical of the United States’ capacity to support a liberal global order that he perceives as detrimental to the economic interest of the American people. In addition, the analysis finds inconsistencies between his campaign discourse of non-intervention in military conflicts abroad and his foreign policy action.

Keywords: populism, Donald Trump, foreign policy, rhetoric, Jacksonianism
Introduction

In the evening of the 2\textsuperscript{nd} of October 2018, President Donald Trump stood in front of a raucous crowd of more than 8,000 people gathered in the Landers Center of Southaven Mississippi, for another ‘Make America Great Again’ rally intended to endorse Republican candidate to the US Senate, Cindy Hyde-Smith. He opened his speech with an acclamation of what he considers one his government’s most relevant accomplishments yet – a new trade deal with Canada and Mexico – that is expected to boost further domestic employment rates. According to him, since the start of his presidency important international accomplishments in the fight against what he calls ‘the globalists’ have had a direct positive impact on economic growth in the US and, significantly, generated a newly earned place of greater recognition and respect for America in the world:

‘America is winning again, and America is being respected again, maybe respected like never before, because we are finally putting America first. But exactly five weeks from today, all of this extraordinary progress is at stake. It is at stake. I'm not on the ballot, but in a certain way, I'm on the ballot, so please go out and vote’ (Donald Trump, 2018).

As the introduction to this Special Issue states, President Trump has moved away from traditional American commitments to liberal internationalism, such as multilateral rules and institutions, the maintenance of old trade and military alliances, and the promotion of liberal democracy (Lacatus and Meibauer, 2021). While he has not abandoned the position of the United States as the ‘police of the world’, the first two years of his presidency show him breaking with his Democratic predecessors by choosing to forgo the export of democracy and abstain from many multilateral trade agreements (Posen, 2018). Some commentators have signalled that the Trump administration might have the power to shake the core of institutions
that have motivated traditional foreign-policymaking in the US – trade agreements, alliances, international law, multilateralism, environmental protection, protection from torture, and human rights (Ikenberry, 2017).

Concluding that he is ‘the populist par excellence’ (Oliver and Rahn, 2016), recent scholarship has shown that for the Trump administration the ideas of far-right populism have contributed to shaping both domestic policy agenda-setting (Ikenberry, 2017; Hawkins and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2018; Plattner, 2019) and foreign policy-making (Boucher and Thies, 2019; Chryssogelos, 2017, 2018; Lowndes, 2017). The restoration of a long-gone respect for the US as a power worthy of admiration and fear by fellow states in the global order has been the main rhetorical claim motivating the foreign policy position of President Trump since the days of his presidential candidacy in 2016. As a presidential candidate, Trump proposed an image of the United States as an international power taken for granted by other states and in need of strengthening its national security (Lacatus, 2019). He denounced a global elite that has stripped the United States of wealth and rigged the economy against the working class (Chokshi, 2016; Fisher, 2017). In his presidential election campaign of 2015-2016, Trump made use of a virulent anti-immigrant rhetoric (Lowndes, 2017) and promised to free the United States from the burden of serving as the guarantor of the international liberal order (Chryssogelos, 2018). He pledged to impose stricter controls on immigration and seek to sign ‘good trade deals’ that favour the United States (Chryssogelos, 2017), rescuing America from the threat that international liberal elites pose to national sovereignty and domestic economic prosperity (Boucher and Thies, 2019). To what extent has this populist electoral rhetoric on foreign policy continued during the first two years of the Trump presidency?

A recent study focuses on President Trump’s ability to mobilise public support for steel and aluminium tariffs in March 2018 through his use of the social network of followers on the social media platform Twitter (Boucher and Thies, 2019). The study finds that President Trump
succeeded in creating a strong social network of support for his trade agenda by routinely employing an anti-elite discursive strategy when it comes to trade, advancing an image of the virtuous people (i.e. workers and farmers) as victims of elites and foreign countries. Although these recent scholarly works have offered very important insights into some of the principal ways in which populism is shaping foreign policy, we still have much to learn about the influence that populism can have on foreign policymaking in the age of Donald Trump.

This study seeks to advance our understanding of the impact of populism on foreign policy by examining President Trump’s use of populist rhetoric to mobilise public support for his foreign policy during the first two years after his 2016 victory. Crucially, ‘Trumpism’ is all about rhetoric. It is at the level of international relations discourse that Trumpism has led to a significant normative corrosion of international liberalism. In the realm of foreign policy, President Trump’s sole tangible impact has been in the area of trade agreements. But he has generally failed advance a coherent foreign policy agenda. More specifically, this study explores the main themes advanced by President Trump to mobilise support amongst his supporters for his foreign policy agenda. This is particularly important given that foreign policy might be the domain where President Trump is likely to inflict the most damage, especially after Republicans lost control of the Senate. As several contributors to this special issue show (Hall, 2021; Holland and Fermor, 2021), investigating the rhetorical frames that candidate Trump and, since 2016, President Trump, have employed in official communication is key to understanding his foreign policy position. While we might expect presidential candidate Trump to win an electoral race on an illiberal populist agenda that builds on an image of him as the true representative of the American people and a political outsider amongst candidates, it is indeed surprising that he will continue to engage in the same type of rhetoric once he is elected and joins the political elites.
This study offers an analysis of President Trump’s rhetoric making use of original textual data generated from rally speeches held during the two months prior to the midterm election in November 2018 as well as tweets published in the official personal account @realDonaldTrump from September-November 2018. The study adopts an ideational (or discourse) approach to populism, understood as ‘a thin-centred ideology’ constituted on a foundational view of society as made up of two antagonistic groups – ‘the pure people’ versus ‘the corrupt elite’ (Mudde, 2004: 543). This study will draw on two related bodies of scholarship – the broader ideational populist literature and the recent work on foreign policy and Jacksonian populism – to propose a number of necessary conditions to ascertain the influence that populism has on foreign policy in the first two years of Donald Trump’s America.

It is important to note that this article’s analysis does not examine Trump’s response to the Covid-19 pandemic, focusing only on the first two years of the Trump administration. However, many of the insights about his rhetoric remain very pertinent in his public rhetoric at the start of the pandemic as well.

The analysis of tweets and rally speeches builds on recent research on populism and foreign policy, with the goal to understand how President Trump’s rhetoric makes use of populist themes and ultimately represents and advances the political ideals of a resurgent Jacksonian discourse and a revived contemporary Tea Party politics. The qualitative content analysis of tweets and rally speeches finds that populism motivates President Trump’s approach to foreign policy, marked by a move away from the core principles of the post-war US global project – internationalism, commitment to open trade, and engagement with multilateral rules and institutions for the advancement of the liberal order. Driven by a strong scepticism regarding the United States’ capacity to support a liberal order, Trump presents the domestic and global liberal elites as being responsible for ‘bad trade deals’ and the use of
American financial and military resources to advance other states’ causes to the detriment of the best interest of ‘the American people’.

The analysis also finds an area of inconsistency in President Trump’s populist foreign policy. In public communication through Twitter and rally speeches, he continues to advocate non-intervention in military conflict and the withdrawal of troops, in line with the ideological position of Jacksonian populism and Ron Paul’s wing of the Tea Party. However, his populist rhetoric about foreign policy is increasingly inconsistent with the Trump administration’s foreign policy action. In line with the position advanced by Sarah Palin and her supporters, Trump appears to favour a stronger military and a continued presence of the US as a great power and ‘world police, which grants the United States renewed respect from international allies’. The continuity of discourse on foreign policy problems signals to his voter base that he has never stopped campaigning in light of the presidential election in 2020. It is also a rhetorical strategy to solve one of the greatest challenges of American presidents – securing domestic support for his presidency when his foreign policy action involve generally unpopular military interventions. In effect, this inconsistency allows him to garner the support of both factions of the Tea Party – Palinist and Paulinist – by advocating limited international intervention while actioning powerful military intervention in situations deemed a direct threat to national security.

The paper proceeds with a discussion of populism’s role in shaping foreign policy and continues with a discussion of what constitutes populism in the American context and the ways in which it can influence foreign policy. The following section offers a discussion of the data collected from Twitter and rally speeches and proposes an analysis of predominant themes related to foreign policy in these texts. The article ends with concluding remarks about the broader implications of this study’s findings.
Populism and foreign policy

Scholars across the social sciences have engaged in debate regarding the nature of populism and whether it is a form of political mobilization (Jansen, 2011; Levitsky and Roberts, 2011; Weyland, 2001), a thin ideology (Mudde, 2007), or a type of discursive frame (Bonikowski and Gidron, 2016; Hawkins, 2009; Jagers and Walgrave, 2007; Poblete, 2015; Rooduijn and Pauwels, 2011). Despite important differences separating these traditions, scholars agree on some fundamental features of populist movements and leaders. At its core, populism is a type of political rhetoric predicated on the moral vilification of elites, who are seen as self-serving and undemocratic. Ultimately, populism proclaims the existence of a crisis caused by elites, seeking to challenge the dominant order and giving voice to the collective will (Moffitt, 2015; Oliver and Rahn, 2016; Pappas, 2012; Rooduijn, 2014). Regardless of their ideological preferences, populists promise to replace the existing corruption with a political order that puts the “people” back at its centre and resonates with their longings and aspirations. Populists consider any claims to economic, political, or cultural privilege unfounded and a direct threat to the common wisdom of the “people” (See Bonikowski and Gidron 2016; Hawkins 2009; Kazin 1995; Lee 2006; Panizza 2005; Stanley 2008; Rooduijn 2014; Taggart 2000). The “people” are pure and share an identify through belonging to one nation, or “heartland” (Taggart, 2000), from which minorities and immigrants are often excluded (Bonikowski, 2017; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2013). In the Trump campaign, these storylines and personas tightly linked with popular culture and an anti-establishment ethos (Moon, 2019). Seen as the silent majority whose interests are overlooked in favour of arrogant economic elites, corrupt politicians and minorities (Canovan, 1999), the “people” are promised a return to an imagined golden age of racial and ethnic purity, unlimited prosperity and protection from self-interested politicians (Lacatus, 2019).
This study adopts an ideational (or discourse) approach to populism, which proposes that populism is a ‘thin-centred ideology’ grounded in anti-elitism, a sense of promoting the interest of the virtuous people, and constraining a dangerous ‘other’ who is a true threat to the sovereignty of the people (Albertazzi and McDonnell, 2008; Ernst et al., 2017; Mounk, 2014; Schulz et al., 2018). To ascertain whether populism exists in a particular domestic context, Mueller (2016) proposes a set of necessary conditions – anti-elitism that reaches beyond simple opposition to incumbent parties; anti-pluralism that provides a credible justification of the ‘us-them’ distinction within a particular society; and the adequate socioeconomic situation with large gaps between groups. Despite discursive similarities across the political spectrum, ideology does influence the claims that populist politicians seek to advance. Right-wing populists’ view of the people often is infused with nationalism and nativism. On the right side of the ideological spectrum, populist discourse is producerist and denounces “out-of-control” spending by government that would benefit ‘freeloaders’ (Zernike, 2010; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017; Lacatus, 2019), such as immigrants or members of minority communities (Michael, 2014). Providing a racialized interpretation of the people, right-wing populism is intrinsically exclusionary of cultural, religious, linguistic, and racial minorities (Plattner, 2010; Judis, 2016; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017).

Our understanding of the impact that populism has on foreign policy is more limited compared to our grasp of the consequences populist politics has at the domestic level. Most scholarship to date has focused on populist parties in Western Europe (e.g. Chryssogelos, 2010, 2011, 2017; Liang, 2007; Verbeek and Zaslove, 2017) finding that they tend to dislike the United States, globalisation and military interventions outside of Europe, with far-right populists strongly opposed to immigration, Islam and the European Union, but supporting Russia. Another key characteristic of European populists has been their foreign policy inconsistency, as shown by the Front National’s pro-NATO and anti-Soviet preferences during
the Cold War, while cultivating sympathies with like-minded Russian politicians (Shields, 2007). Similarly, FPÖ’s support for Austria’s membership in NATO in the 1980s changed two decades later into a strong opposition toward the United States and an increased support for Russia (Meyer, 2007). A study of the anti-imperialist foreign policy rhetoric of the former Venezuelan president, Hugo Chavez, finds that trade and other economic issues linked to globalisation are a constant theme of populist discourse on foreign policy (Verbeek and Zaslove, 2017). In a study of India’s ‘populist foreign policy’, Plagemann and Destradi (2019) find that populism as discourse carries the most explanatory value in the procedural aspects of foreign policy-making and in its communication.

**Populism and foreign policy in the American context**

In the United States, debate about the role of populism in foreign policy has intensified as a result of the rise of the Tea Party and the election of Donald Trump (Chryssogelos, 2017). Historically, early populist movements of the 1890s were agrarian in nature and often associated with economic protectionism (Krugman, 1993) and political isolationism (Kezin, 2016), while at the same time remaining very interested in projecting ideas about popular sovereignty at home in their foreign policy (Amstutz, 2014). Motivated by a deep-seated ‘resentment of the well-bred, the well-connected, and the well-paid’ during Colonial times, this form of American populism is called ‘Jacksonianism’ (after Andrew Jackson, the president who in the 1830s used populist arguments to garner public support for a remake of the party system in the United States) and encourages distrust in the motives and methods of government fuelling revolt against the political order (Mead, 2011). Jacksonian populism has not advanced a sole political platform throughout history, but rather has endorsed different causes over the years. At certain points in history, anti-establishment populism has been a force for good
generating support for political and social change for the better, as was the case with the support for universal white male suffrage in Jackson’s times and the demand for better free land leading to the Homestead Act in the nineteenth century or the later efforts to introduce basic legal protections for workers. At other moments in history, anti-establishment populism led to the genocidal removal of Native Americans from their traditional hunting grounds and the heavily subsidised ‘farm bubble’ that paved the way to the Great Depression (Mead, 2011).

The contemporary rise in support of the Tea Party movement is best understood as a current form of Jacksonian revolt against misguided and corrupt elites. Inside the Tea Party, two main voices dominate – on the one hand, the inward-looking, neo-isolationist approach advanced by Ron Paul and his supporters and on the other hand, the faction endorsing Sarah Palin and her stronger preference for the United States to win wars rather than withdraw completely from international conflict (Mead, 2011). Against this background of domestic preferences, arguably the most significant challenge American administrations face is to strike the right balance between developing foreign policy strategies that are feasible and effective in the international arena while meeting Jacksonian requirements at home.

Importantly, the rise of Donald Trump is essentially motivated by his use of Jacksonian rhetoric and, as the analysis below will show, also by his broader advancement of some key ideas of the Tea Party platform. The presidential campaign of Donald Trump was marked by violence in his rhetoric at his rallies (Skocpol and Williamson, 2016), and this violence was a function of the aggressive language used to describe his opponents, the mainstream media, and international actors he perceives as hostile. This rhetorical stance continued in the first years of his presidency. Endorsing some of the main ideas proposed by the Tea Party, Donald Trump’s public discourse advances a strongly negative view of Barack Obama and his policies as well as strong opposition to ‘big government’ and a reluctance to pay taxes to help people
viewed as ‘freeloaders’ – including immigrants, lower income earners, and the young (Skocpol and Williamson, 2016).

To explore the alignment of President Trump’s rhetorical stance on foreign policy, this paper builds on the recent work on foreign policy and (Jacksonian) populist discourse proposing a number of necessary conditions to ascertain the influence that populism has on foreign policy in Donald Trump’s America (Table 1).

Table 1: Main features of contemporary Jacksonian populism
(compiled by author based on Mead, 2011)

| Anti-elitism                                      |
|--------------------------------------------------|
| Deep scepticism in the US’s ability to create a liberal order |
| Strong nationalist ideas                          |
| Firm belief in American exceptionalism           |
| Preference toward aggressive militaristic responses to crises around the world |
| A complete withdrawal of the US from international interventions (if a Ron Paul Tea Party sympathiser) |

At its core, Jacksonian populism is anti-elitist. More often than not the elites are members of government and the political establishment. The Tea Party has revived Jacksonianism with a particular aversion for those perceived to belong to a liberal, well-educated, and intellectual elite (Mead, 2011). This antipathy extends also to the international sphere and the institutions that uphold liberal internationalist values, such as the promotion of liberal democracy around the world, any efforts to cooperate through multilateral organisations as well as entering and upholding international treaties. Endorsing a Hobbesian view of the international system, they view the world as a place where states always pursue their own selfish interests and have limited interest in co-operation. In this context, they endorse American exceptionalist views and harbour deep scepticism about the ability of the United States to create and uphold a liberal order (Mead, 2011). At the same time, Jacksonian populists tend to prefer aggressive militaristic responses to crises around the world, particularly against
Islamic jihadism, while advocating for trade protectionism and the dismissal of costly alliances and security guarantees. In their eyes, the United States is not meant to be the police of a liberal global order, but war is a necessary response when states violate their international obligations or attack the United States.

Data and method

To analyse the prevalence of these populist themes in Donald Trump’s foreign policy, this study focuses on communication through Twitter and rally speeches, as the main mediums used by President Trump to engage with his electorate in a seemingly more spontaneous and unmediated manner than the White House official communication apparatus including a dedicated POTUS Twitter account as well as press releases intended for the mainstream media and press conferences. The analysis focuses on official speeches available as transcripts¹ as well as tweets published on Trump’s official personal account @realDonaldTrump available at www.twitter.com during September-November 2018 (Tables 2 and 3). The rationale for the focus on Trump’s personal Twitter account and his rally speeches around the time of the mid-term elections in November 2018 is twofold. First, we know that populist politicians tend to favour the use of un-mediated means of communication with the public over mainstream media outlets considered corrupt and interested in the dissemination of ‘fake news’ (Mead, 2011; Plagemann and Destradi, 2019). To that end, Twitter and rally speeches can be perceived as making communication more accessible and, at least rhetorically, less elitist (Plagemann and Destradi, 2019). Second, the inclusion of two types of textual data in the qualitative content analysis is methodologically motivated, allowing us to increase the confidence in our thematic

¹ Transcripts were collected from the following website: https://factba.se/transcript/donald-trump-speech-maga-rally-cleveland-oh-november-5-2018, Accessed 15 February 2019.
analysis of populist discourse (in addition to the inter-coder reliability measures reported in the online Appendix).

The timeframe for the collected data is motivated by the intensified campaign activity prior to the mid-term elections. President Trump continued to hold occasional rallies even after his inauguration, usually about once or two each month, but in the two months prior to the midterm elections, the number of rallies grew significantly as the president offered support to Republican candidates across the Midwest and in some southern states (Table 2). In early November, Donald Trump participated in three or four rallies per day, using them as a platform for the political support of Republican candidates and also to set the stage for his own campaign in the presidential elections of 2020.

Twitter is a social-networking platform that allows users to post microblogs or brief entries (“tweets”) that are no longer than 140 characters and usually contain “…short content such as phrases, quick comments, images, or links to videos” (Stieglitz and Dang-Xuan, 2013, p. 219). Since its launch in 2006, numerous politicians have increasingly used social networking for campaigning purposes (e.g. Obama’s use of Twitter during both of his presidential campaigns). The appendix provides details about the method and the coding process, including information about validity, intercoder reliability, the coding scheme, and the frequency of codes.

In important ways, social media represent an ideal outlet for populist ideas. In general, populists tend to value unmediated communication with the people, and at least in principle, social media allow for engagement perceived as more direct (Engesser et al., 2017; Manucci, 2017). Moreover, social media offer a framework for communication in a fragmented manner, making possible the delivery of a simplified message flying below the radar that is ‘ambiguous and malleable’ for the readers to integrate their own ideological elements in line with their own political attitudes (Engesser et al., 2017; Schroeder, 2017). Prior to his inauguration, Trump’s
Twitter account contained tweets from the start of his Twitter activity, historical tweets on his account are now only available for two-three months at a time, after which they are deleted. At the time data of collected, on the 8th of November 2018, Trump’s account had 55.6 million followers. The study is based on original tweets, excluding re-tweets or announcements of events without a commentary (Table 2). On Twitter, the information that Trump shares is broader in scope, as it covers daily activities for himself and often the First Lady, most important news, references and responses to ‘fake news’, announcements about domestic and international events, as well as mid-term campaign promotion.

In this respect, rallies serve a similar purpose, allowing for direct communication and political mobilisation as well as the continued ‘performance’ of populism (Oliver and Rahn, 2016) that creates the sensation that the psychological distance between the politician and the audience is reduced. During the autumn of 2018, rally speeches include references to the administration’s ‘major accomplishments’, but they are generally focused on advancing the electoral campaigns of various Republican candidates around the country and promoting a platform for continuous campaigning for the presidential 2020 elections.

Table 2: Descriptive breakdown of the sources for textual data

| Source and time frame | Rally speeches | Twitter |
|-----------------------|----------------|---------|
| Sept 2018 – Nov 2018 (plus 1 rally speech from Feb 2019) | 99 | 3,105 (paragraphs) |
| 5 Sept – 7 Nov 2018 | 72 | 510 (tweets) |

| Total units | 33 (rally speeches) | 580 (tweets) |

Table 3: Coded rally speeches

| Location | Date |
|----------|------|
| Johnson City, Tennessee | 1/10/2018 |
| Southaven, Missouri | 2/10/2018 |
| Rochester, Minnesota | 4/10/2018 |
| Topeka, Kansas | 6/10/2018 |
| Council Bluffs, Iowa | 9/10/2018 |
| Macon, Georgia | 4/11/2018 |
| Cape Girardeau, Missouri | 5/11/2018 |
| Location             | Date       |
|----------------------|------------|
| Cleveland, Ohio      | 5/11/2018  |
| Fort Wayne, Indiana  | 5/11/2018  |
| Biloxi, Mississippi  | 26/11/2018 |
| Tupelo, Mississippi  | 26/11/2018 |
| El Paso, Texas       | 11/02/2019 |

**Populism and President Trump’s foreign policy**

In his communication with the electorate, Donald Trump employs a Jacksonian rhetoric in line with the position of the Tea Party. One would expect that, as president, Trump’s public discourse would be less populist and more ‘presidential’, falling in line with the rhetoric of the recognisable political mainstream. Trump’s public engagement with his electorate and the wider public at his 2018 rallies and on Twitter echoes the emphatic tone of the official campaign communication in 2016. Although he continues to make use of populist ideas to show his disdain for domestic and international liberal elites, his communication with the electorate through social media and public rallies two years into his presidency shows signs of a growing inconsistency between the populist campaign-style rhetoric in his communication and the Trump administration’s actions in the realm of military intervention and his views on liberal internationalism.

One of the greatest challenges of American presidents has been to gain domestic support for foreign policy initiatives (Mead, 2011). To this end, President Trump continues to present himself as a better alternative to existing politicians and to use populist rhetoric in 2018 as he did during his presidential campaign of 2016, to garner support for his actions more generally. Writ large, virulent critiques of previous administrations and Democrat politicians intersperse by acclamations of Republican politicians who have supported the Trump’s administration’s policy initiatives so far and openly laudatory remarks about the activity of the
president since his inauguration. Both speeches and tweets communicate to the electorate a clear message, as printed on many rally signs: ‘Promises made; promises kept.’ President Trump is a man of his word, who made promises in his electoral campaign of 2016 and has made every effort possible to keep them despite opposition by Democrats in Washington (Figure 1). In his eyes, his policies are not only very good, in fact, they surpass the policies of previous administrations and often, are simply the best America has ever seen. Importantly, his policies are the only ones motivated solely by the best interest of the American people. In all rally speeches, Trump states that economic performance is currently at an all-time high level – ‘We have the best economy in the history of our country, the best’ (Trump, 2018). According to Trump, current unemployment records are also the lowest in history, particularly in specific social groups, like women, African-Americans, Hispanic-Americans and Asian-Americans. For instance, at a rally in Johnson City (TN) on 1st of October 2018, Trump (2016) proudly declared that: ‘women’s unemployment recently reached its lowest level in 65 years.’

Figure 1

In line with far-right populist discourse, President Trump continues to critique liberal elites and to advance an exceptionalist and nativist view of America’s position in the world in his tweets and rally speeches from 2018. Trump’s official rhetoric centres on the need to immediately remedy three main areas of foreign policy concern – renegotiating existing trade agreements with principal trade partners, strengthening American’s military position in the world, and curbing illegal migration. Questioning the significance of old American commitments to create and maintain a liberal order, President Trump expresses deep scepticism and even disdain for multilateral organisations like the United Nations and NATO as well as traditional allies of the United States in their efforts to spread liberal democracy after the fall
of Berlin Wall, like the European Union. In this line, President Trump believes that America’s international priorities over the years have favoured foreign interests over its own domestic interests. In other words, most transnational security agreements like NATO out the United States in the position to offer support other states while receiving little in return. Trade agreements like NAFTA and the TTIP were simply ‘bad deals’ that consistently favoured the economic success of other states by moving jobs away from the disenfranchised industrial areas of the American Midwest. The administration expects that the military security that the US provides other countries bilaterally, through NATO or the EU, should come at a higher financial cost: ‘The countries we are defending must pay for the cost of this defence, and if not, the US must be prepared to let these countries defend themselves’ (Trump, 2016). This places Trump’s rhetorical position in line with Jacksonian populism in as much as he advocates for a militaristic view of international security, while proposing a fundamental re-definition of international agreements and contemplating a possible future withdrawal from international treaties.

Strong nationalist ideas of promoting the good of ‘the people’ disenfranchised due to bad international trade deals, poor immigration control, and the continued threat of illegal immigration combine with a firm belief in American international exceptionalism. In his speeches, the ‘American people’ is synonymous with disenfranchised workers from the Midwest and the South, who have suffered from lower incomes and loss of employment due to globalisation, job flights, and bad trade agreements signed by previous administrations. To correct mistakes from the past, Trump has imposed new tariffs on European and Chinese goods and has entered a new continental trade agreement, the UMSCA, with Canada and Mexico. He cites higher employment rates to demonstrate the success of his efforts to protect the rights of workers in agriculture, manufacturing, as well as the steel and aluminium industries. To secure employment and benefits for American citizens, Trump considers border security and strict
immigration controls essential. Illegal migrants are malevolent, criminals, and a direct threat to the employment and public services paid for by American workers. Domestically, Trump presents illegal immigration as a threat to the physical security of the American people, as migrants crossing the border from Mexico are often violent criminals. Once settled in the US, they are likely to be taking jobs away from American citizens and are thus a greater threat to Americans’ job security and personal wealth. As a foreign policy concern mentioned in rally speeches, Trump often addresses the Mexican government and also other Central American administrations calling them to intervene with force to put an end to what he calls ‘the caravans’ of illegal immigrants consisting mostly of refugees from El Salvador and Honduras that travel through Mexico in hopes to reach the US. Trump does not stop short of threatening to commit military force in response of illegal attempts to cross the southern border of the US.

**Figure 2**

In the 2016 election campaign, presidential hopeful Trump had no policymaking record to point to and was building a public image as a Washington outsider, so his rhetoric was the sole indicator of his political position and future position on foreign policy. More than two years after his inauguration, President Trump no longer presents himself as an outsider in Washington or in relation to the Republican or Democratic parties, but the inconsistency between his continued use of populist rhetoric on the campaign trail and his foreign policy actions regarding the use of military action is more evident. In the 2016 campaign, Trump issues strong statements against military intervention, speaking for the need to renegotiate the US’s bi-lateral military agreements. His assertions appeared to indicate an isolationist streak and a possible move in the direction of a grand strategy of restraint, reminiscent of the Tea Party ideas endorsed by Ron Paul’s supporters. President Trump mentions repeatedly in his
tweets and rallies that one does not need to intervene militarily in international conflict to be considered powerful by other states. Key to maintaining a global position of power is the existence of a strong military. However, his administration’s foreign policymaking is inconsistent with this line of presidential rhetoric.

Figure 3

In Trump’s view, a significant part of the international respect that the US is regaining under Trump’s presidency is due to the president’s efforts to strengthen the American military forces. Despite his talk of avoiding foreign entanglements during his campaigns, in practice, Trump’s administration has maintained its commitments to geopolitical competition with the world’s greatest military powers and to the formal alliances it inherited. It has maintained a strong presence in Eastern Europe as part of the European Reassurance Initiative and has continued to provide Ukraine with military equipment (Posen, 2018). In addition, Trump has announced plans to invest even more money in the Department of Defence, contributing to a budget that is already far greater than the budgets of any of US’s military competitors. In his 2018 speeches and tweets, Trump takes particular pride in the success of its agreement with North Korea, presenting himself as hopeful of further positive developments in the efforts to freeze and ultimately stop the Asian country’s nuclear programme. By 2018, Trump’s references to the fight against terrorism, which were high on his electoral campaign agenda in 2016, diminished significantly. He mentions his administration’s achievement of withdrawing military forces from Syria and Afghanistan, but forgets to mention the intensification of American involvement in April 2017, for instance, when the US Navy launched 59 missiles in response to evidence that the Syrian government had used chemical weapons (BBC, 2017), followed by a joint attack by US, Great Britain and France in April 2018 (Copper et al., 2018).
In Trump’s public discourse, the economic interest of ‘the American people’ shape domestic priorities and dictate foreign policy priorities. This is largely advancing Jacksonian ideas in a contemporary setting. Bad trade deals, disadvantageous involvement in multilateral agreements and international organisations, and the lack of migration controls have led to the decline in employment in the Midwestern and the Southern parts of the United States. What set Trump apart from all other candidates to presidency in 2016 was his aggressive dismissal of liberalism and, with direct foreign policy implications, also of liberal internationalism. In his eyes, the democratic norms and multilateral institutions that support the liberal international order are fundamentally flawed due to the economic and financial imbalance they generate. By the end of 2018, Trump’s approach to foreign policy crystallised further, even if his public rhetoric of limited American intervention abroad remains consistent.

Trump views a world order that relies on a greater financial commitment and stronger military support from the US as essentially unfair and exploitative. Trump presents such a change in international position as directly relevant to his voter base, guaranteeing increased economic prosperity and greater pride in their nation’s ability to garner international respect. Trump does not appear interested in rights promotion or the normative dimension of democracy promotion tied to foreign aid and international development efforts. In fact, he derides international financial assistance as a form of exploitation to which the US has fallen victim due to poor foreign policy agendas of previous liberal administrations. In his public communication, his international political affinities lie primarily with far-right political figures, such as the new Brazilian president, Jair Bolsonaro and the Turkish president, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. Ultimately, President Trump’s approach to foreign policy is motivated by populism in the Jacksonian tradition with strong nationalist undertones, advancing exceptionalism and a deep scepticism toward the United States’ capacity to advance a global liberal order.
Conclusion

One of the most remarkable, indeed shocking, aspects of the Trump presidency is his rhetoric. His manner of communicating with the public about his activities, policies, and the everyday is unprecedented in the White House. Trump’s regular use of social media, with its immediacy of contact, also makes communication feel spontaneous and authentic. Trump’s public discourse engages with themes pertaining to populism – he speaks against the elites while professing to represent the best interest of the American people. A staple of the electoral campaign of 2016 (Hawkins and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2018; Lacatus, 2019), this type of populist rhetoric continued after Trump’s inauguration and has since spilled over into the practice of foreign policymaking. Although we have a good understanding of how populism shaped the Donald Trump’s campaign prior to his victory in November 2016, we still have much to learn about the ways in which populism shapes foreign policymaking during his presidency.

This article has sought to advance our understanding of the intersection between populism and foreign policy in the age of Donald Trump. The textual analysis of tweets and rally speeches issued during September-November 2018 found that President Trump continued to use populist rhetoric to engage his electorate prior to the midterm elections. In his rally speeches and official tweets, he speaks bombastically of unprecedented economic growth and a significant decrease in unemployment across disenfranchised communities in the Midwest and the South of the US. The main factors impacting positively these domestic economic developments are a stricter control of illegal immigration and better negotiated trade deals. Illegal migrants are portrayed as violent and criminal, supported by equally criminal representatives from the Democratic Party, and a real threat to the safety, integrity, and prosperity of Americans. Compared to previous American leaders, Trump sees himself as the
most effective president in history and points to economic, military and foreign policy as evidence of his success.

The analysis of President Trump’s communication on Twitter and in rally speeches finds that a revived Jacksonian populism infuses his ‘America First’ approach to foreign policy. He is harbouring disdain for liberal elites and their ideals for international cooperation, multilateralism, and a global liberal order. Moreover, President Trump appears no longer interested in fostering old economic alliances, which he views as ‘bad deals’, and seeks to renegotiate new trade deals that he finds much more favourable to increase the wealth and wellbeing of the American people. Importantly, Trump’s rhetoric shows a deep scepticism for the United States’ capacity to continue maintaining a liberal order. Rather, in his eyes, a disgruntled America has found itself entangled in a great number of unprofitable international alliances from which it needs to reclaim its sovereignty. In this context, Trump’s use of populist rhetoric allows him to explain the main goals of his foreign policy through direct ties with domestic priorities he identifies as being of utmost import to the American people – job creation, economic growth, and border security. Ultimately, Trump claims to have begun the important process of restoring the long-lost international respect for the US as a global economic and political power.

Moreover, the analysis finds an inconsistency between President Trump’s populist rhetoric regarding the United States’ foreign policy strategy regarding military interventions and his foreign policy action. In his Twittersphere and in rally speeches, President Trump continues his rhetoric of complete withdrawal from international interventions, while arguing for the importance of continuing to build a strong military force. The Jacksonian approach to military intervention in his public communication stands in contrast to his foreign policy action which included, at the time of analysis, further deployment of military troops in Eastern Europe and Syria. Ultimately, this inconsistency between foreign policy rhetoric and foreign policy
action signals to his electorate the intention to continue his electoral agenda from 2016 into the presidential campaign of the 2020 election. Importantly, it also indicates Trump’s willingness to satisfy the two main factions of the Tea Party – supporters of a Palin-style approach to limited international intervention (generally limited but strongly offensive when necessary) and also the supporters of Ron Paul’s style agenda of complete withdrawal from international intervention.

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