

Imaginaries of trauma and victimhood: The role of the ‘China threat’ in Trump’s populism of the privileged

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Alexandra Homolar¹ 
and Juan Alberto Ruiz Casado² 

Abstract

This article speaks to an established interest of International Relations scholars in the construction of the ‘China threat’ in US political discourse. We advance recent works which have argued that the rise of China has contributed to the success of populism in the United States and Western liberal democracies more widely. Specifically, we transpose the concept of the ‘populism of the privileged’ to the international realm to understand how narratives of status loss nurture perceptions of collective trauma and victimhood. We argue that the concept helps explain why Trump’s anti-China populism is centred on the counterintuitive articulation of an American underdog identity at the domestic and international levels. It sheds light on why populist narratives of unjust suffering have grip even if supporters stem from comparatively privileged groups. Victimhood-centric narratives are always relational and, as we show, the imaginary of lost status is a powerful device in the populist toolbox.

Keywords

China, narratives, populism, privilege, relationality, Trump, victimhood

Introduction

What role does the representation of a country’s loss of status in global affairs play in populist discourse and how does it relate to the construction of enmity in domestic and international political discourse? To better understand the dynamic relationship between international positioning and populist mobilisation, this article explores the discursive aggregation of diverse groups of ‘elites’ into a singular source of harm to the ‘American people’. It pays particular attention to how representations of China and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), in conjunction with other national and international elites, as a

¹Department of Politics and International Studies, University of Warwick, Coventry, UK

²Department of Linguistics and Comparative Cultural Studies, Ca’ Foscari University of Venice, Venice, Italy

Corresponding author:

Alexandra Homolar, University of Warwick, Coventry CV4 7AL, UK.

Email: A.Homolar@warwick.ac.uk

threat to US national security and the wellbeing of the public construct the identity of an American ‘underdog’ community that has been stripped of their rightful place domestically and internationally.

The study of domestic politics and international affairs has seen a surge in attention to both populism and China as subjects of study. This includes works on the ‘China threat’ narrative (Gries, 1999; Pan, 2004; Roy, 1996; Zakaria, 2020) and more recently research on the connection between international politics and populism (Bonansinga, 2022; Destradi et al., 2022; Lacatus and Meibauer, 2022; Lacatus et al., 2023). Yet in the IR disciplinary field, there has been a noteworthy absence of in-depth engagement with the *China-as-enemy* narrative in assessments of Trump’s populism and how this shaped US foreign policy towards China (for notable exceptions, see Löfflmann, 2019, 2022; Marandici, 2023; Wojczewski, 2020b). Because of an ongoing tendency within IR to prioritise systemic factors over individual-level and domestic mechanisms in explaining changes and continuities in threat perceptions (Homolar, 2023: 18; Marandici, 2023: 514), there has been a lack of exploration into how Trump’s populist discourse fosters perceptions of enmity towards China by generating a sense of loss, betrayal, and victimhood.

To address this lacuna, we advance recent works that have argued that China’s economic success over the past two decades has contributed to the success of populism, specifically among individuals who fear the decline of the West or being left behind by globalisation (Cox, 2017; Norris and Inglehart, 2019). Building upon works discussing Donald Trump’s populist use of emotions such as fear, resentment, and humiliation to frame an antagonistic division between ‘the people’ and ‘the elite’ (Biegon, 2019; Hall, 2021; Homolar and Löfflmann, 2021; Homolar and Scholz, 2019; Skonieczny, 2018; Wojczewski, 2020a), we explore how anti-China populism contributes to constructing perceptions of collective trauma and victimhood to create a sense of unjust betrayal that helps to mobilise domestic political support. As we show, the imaginary of lost status is a powerful political device in the populist discursive toolbox even (or especially) when the cause of deprivation is located in foreign ‘Others’ that are constructed as part of a powerful elite harming the *people-as-underdog*.

The article proceeds as follows. The first section introduces ‘populism of the privileged’ (De Cleen and Ruiz Casado, 2023) as the article’s primary conceptual lens to draw attention to the centrality of relative social positioning in populist discourse that is otherwise largely obscured in the study of political mobilisation strategies. It also explains the relationship of ‘populism of the privileged’ with other theoretical concepts such as populism, nationalism, and national victimhood. The second section unpacks former President Donald Trump’s and his administration’s *China-as-enemy* narrative, with a specific emphasis on the main plotlines that revolve around the notion that the United States and its ‘people’ experience unjust suffering and abuse at the hands of China and various domestic and international ‘elites’ connected to it. The third section puts this in the context of the populist construction of trauma and victimhood, exploring how collective injury can be represented in populist discourse by relatively privileged and dominant groups.

We conclude by arguing that the concept of the ‘populism of the privileged’ helps us explain how Trump’s anti-China populism is centred on the counterintuitive articulation of an American underdog identity at the domestic and international levels. It also helps to shed light on why his narratives of unjust suffering have grip even if populist supporters stem from comparatively privileged groups both within US society and in a global frame. The lasting bipartisan support of the idea that China and the Chinese communist

government pose an existential threat to US security and prosperity can, to a significant extent, be attributed to the effectiveness of populist representations of collective trauma and victimhood in rallying heterogeneous groups behind the feeling that their shared privileges are at risk due to a collusion of domestic and international elites.

The populist construction of underdog identities

We approach populism through a minimalist conceptualisation that understands it as a specific discourse within political mobilisation processes, which is structured around a basic antagonism between ‘the people’ and ‘the elite’. The elite that centrally features in populist leadership legitimisation strategies is usually represented as a predatory class inhabiting a position of undeserved societal influence and dominance, which its members (ab)use to impose suffering, harm, and loss on the people. The community of the common people, in turn, is imbued with signifiers that indicate an opposing ordinary status. This includes ‘the plebs’, ‘the deficient being’, ‘the oppressed underdog’, ‘the underprivileged’ (Laclau, 2005a: 86–87); ‘the silent majority’ and ‘the oppressed people’ (Mudde, 2004: 546, 563); as well as highly gendered terminology (Homolar and Löffmann, 2022) such as ‘the little man’, ‘the common man’ or ‘the man in the street’ (De Cleen and Stavrakakis, 2017: 311).

While the presence of a ‘people’ versus the ‘elite’ antagonism is a necessary condition for characterising political language as populist, populism is a matter of degree. It is also ubiquitous to all political movements because ‘none will fail to interpellate to some extent the “people” against an enemy, through the construction of a social frontier’, so that in the end populism becomes a matter of being ‘more or less populist’ (Laclau, 2005b: 47). However, if we understand populism as a discursive articulation that attaches anti-establishment meanings to multifaceted subject positions and political projects, then it has no particular sociological substance or ideological content (Laclau, 2005a). This suggests that non-predefined and disparate groups can identify as either the common people whose social demands are unmet, the populist political agents that articulate those frustrated demands, or the enemy elite perceived as hindering their realisation (De Cleen and Ruiz Casado, 2023).

Much has been written over the past decade about how the contemporary populist challenge is an objective expression of unheard concerns voiced by a broad but under-represented spectrum of the population, especially in liberal democracies, which echoes earlier explanations in the party politics literature of the rise of the far right at the turn of the millennium. Prominent here are theses about a cultural and/or economic backlash against ‘business as usual’, by those portrayed as left behind through processes of globalisation and internationalisation, as the source of populist support in developed countries. The majority of empirical studies, however, have not found evidence for the assumption that voters of populist parties are primarily positioned lower than average when it comes to employment, income, social class, or education (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2018; Noland, 2020; Rooduijn, 2018).

While characterising the people-as-underdog as disadvantaged ‘strangers in their own land’ (Hochschild, 2016) is not necessarily an empirical reflection of a sociologically and politically un(der)privileged status (see Mutz, 2018; Ruiz Casado, 2024b), populist political agents’ identification with the powerless may also contrast with their position of relative privilege in society. Consider, for example, how Trump’s representation of a vertical antagonism has relied upon identifying a long and heterogeneous list of individuals,

groups, and entities as part of a nefarious establishment that is situated above the people. The former president discursively places himself among the unjustly suffering ordinary people, at the helm of an ongoing struggle against those elite enemies. Identifying with the grievances of his audience, he creates an affective bond with his supporters over worries that the country is disintegrating and radically changing, that the economy is deteriorating, and that foreign enemies are growing emboldened (Homolar and Scholz, 2019). This establishes Trump as one of the ‘common’ people who feel aggravated by the corrupt and unresponsive establishment. His position of extraordinary privilege and support for political positions that benefit already wealthy strata of American society through tax cuts or financial and environmental deregulation are rendered invisible in the process, even if they are ‘as much expressions of support for “the elite” as opposition to them’ (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2018: 1673).

Populism scholarship has begun to problematise the uncritical prevalence of the people-as-underdog versus a privileged elite in descriptions of populist phenomena, drawing attention to how the reproduction of this oversimplified dichotomy risks becoming reified and losing sight of the heterogeneous, contingent, and always negotiable character of the social. Research focused on ‘populism of the privileged’ has recently made the case that populism plays a key role in obscuring the underlying dimensions of socio-economic advantage often shared by populist political agents and their supporters (De Cleen and Ruiz Casado, 2023). If populism is about the discursive construction of particular groups as stripped of status and voice, then the concept of populism is not only decoupled from any predetermined ideological content but also from ‘the sociology of its leaders, supporters or beneficiaries’ (De Cleen and Ruiz Casado, 2023: 9).

We employ a narrative approach to argue that the populist construction of an underdog identity in contemporary US politics can be linked to a position of relative domestic and international social privilege and is made possible through the representation of the present as a condition of unjust social suffering for those enjoying such advantage. In this vein, populism becomes a victimhood-centric discourse that can ‘empower populist political agents to claim experiences of trauma and loss for their audiences, thus fuelling rather than quenching their sense of entitlement and status’ (Homolar and Löffmann, 2021: 2). The role of narratives in this process is to ‘frame, provide a lens to interpret, and constitute’ (Hutchison, 2016: 112) individual traumatic experiences and collective trauma centred on the harm China and the Chinese government, as an increasingly powerful Other, and its domestic and international establishment enablers have inflicted upon ‘ordinary Americans’.

Works on ‘victimhood nationalism’ (e.g. Lerner, 2020; Lim, 2010) have made an important contribution to understanding the representation and perception of collective injury. We suggest that populist discourses should be considered as key drivers in the construction of victimhood identities, especially when such collective injury is articulated by groups enjoying a position of domestic and international dominance. It is important to underscore here that populism and nationalism are two distinct discursive strategies that divide society into ‘us’ and ‘them’, albeit across different dimensions: populism constructs a vertical antagonism between a people envisaged at the bottom and an elite placed in a position of dominance, whereas nationalism establishes an ingroup/outgroup dichotomy without inherently invoking either notions of victimhood or anti-elitism (De Cleen and Stavrakakis, 2017). As Michel Freeden (1998: 751–752, original emphasis) explains, nationalism is based on ‘the prioritisation of a particular group – the nation – as a key constituting and identifying framework for human beings and their practices’, grounded

in ‘a *positive valorisation*’ of one’s own nation vis-à-vis others. Put differently, while populism consistently presents a dichotomy between the oppressed people and a malevolent elite victimising them from a position of power, nationalism does not per se construct the ingroup as an unfairly subjugated being. We argue that the intersection of populism with nationalism plays a pivotal role in framing ‘the people of the nation’ as an underdog national group, nurturing the emergence of what is identified as ‘national victimhood’. Disregarding the significance of populism in shaping those narratives of trauma and victimhood would overlook the intricate interconnection between these two logics.

The articulation of the rise of previously less successful states as a threat to comparatively privileged countries and societies feeds into a perception of crisis that is central to the populist logic. However, support for populist political agents and their agendas does not merely arise as the result of an objectifiable deteriorating situation or imminent disaster. Instead, populist rhetoric is fundamentally implicated in creating both the perception of crisis and related popular demands, including drawing on existing grievances (Homolar and Scholz, 2019; Lowndes, 2021; Moffitt, 2015; Roberts, 2022). ‘Populism of the privileged’ at the international level is fuelled by the perception that a significant fall from a previously superior position has taken place – even if neither the fall nor past greatness can be convincingly evidenced – or the fear that this fall will occur in an undefined future. Rules and actions intended to reduce structural inequalities internationally are represented as unjust for the ‘real’ people, just as has been well-documented in discourses over equal opportunities at the level of domestic politics. As we shall see in both cases, Trump’s populism of the privileged rests on narratives of collective trauma and victimhood that convey the notion of an unfair advantage gained by attempts to address historical inequalities. Expanding on recent works that have applied the concept of privilege to international relations (Fraser, 2008; Nair, 2022; Pease, 2010; Ruiz Casado, 2024a), in what follows, we illustrate that national greatness and loss of status can comfortably sit alongside each other in populism of the privileged.

Trump’s anti-China populism

The depiction of China as a challenge to the United States in a diversity of domains, covering military, economic, technological, or political hierarchy within the international order, has long featured as an anchor in defence planning processes and security policy decisions more broadly. But prior to Trump’s presidency, China was seldom depicted as the primary security threat, at least not explicitly, and constructions of the country as threatening have also shifted over time. According to Oliver Turner (2014: 178), for example, in the context of the arrival of increasing numbers of Chinese immigrants in the 19th century, China was represented as an ‘uncivilised’ danger to White American society. And while (Nationalist) China was widely seen as a major ally in the fight against the Axis powers during the Second World War, ‘Red China’ was framed as a major military threat to the United States during the early Cold War, particularly after Chinese and American troops fought each other in Korea in the 1950s and the Taiwan Strait crises of the 1960s (Marandici, 2023: 522; Turner, 2014: 176).

In the 1970s, the United States took a more collaborative approach to dealing with China to counter the Soviet Union (Jackson, 2023: 55). Once the Cold War ended, China continued to be primarily seen through the lens of cooperation and engagement, and – while not without controversy – became a partner welcomed to the US-led international order. At times, US politicians have even depicted China as a peer and occasionally

suggested that there were lessons to be learned from the country's society (Marandici, 2023: 526; Turner, 2014: 181). Nonetheless, during periods in which the US government's discourse and policies favoured cooperation over conflict, the 'China threat' still consistently lingered in the American political landscape. This includes candidates in US presidential elections since the 1970s, who have regularly criticised China and promised that, contrary to incumbents and fellow contenders, they would become tough on China when entering the White House, even if they reversed their positions on the Asian country once in office (Turner, 2014: 149). Presidents Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, and Barack Obama, for example, all oscillated between confrontational rhetoric on the campaign trail and adopting a more conciliatory stance towards Beijing once in office (Jackson, 2023: 101; Marandici, 2023: 523–524).

While the notion of a 'China threat' has a significant track-record in the US foreign and security policy community, the representation of the communist country as a grave threat to the American people gained new momentum in US public and political discourse in the context of Donald Trump's first bid for the White House. Like his predecessors, he floated anti-China discursive elements on the campaign trail. But he placed these firmly within a decidedly populist framing that prioritised the construction of a 'people' versus 'elite' antagonism to characterise US–China relations, including during his time in office. As we suggest, Trump's anti-China populism constitutes a significant departure from past presidential candidates and administrations – not only because of 'inflated' threat perceptions (Marandici, 2023: 527) but also because of an emotive populist narrative built around 'expressions of anger, defiance and aggression' (Turner and Kaarbo, 2021: 10) – and he did not pivot away from an antagonistic discourse once elected.

While much of Trump's populism revolves around the portrayal of *China-as-enemy*, it is the predominant construction of an underdog American identity, in which the people have become victims in their own lands through no fault of their own, that goes beyond past populist discourses in the articulation of US–China identities. As we illustrate in the subsequent sections, Trump's anti-China populist narrative has two main plotlines: one presents China as a powerful manipulator and thief, whereas the other focuses on the role of the domestic and international elites enabling China to defeat the United States. As we shall see, rather than characterising the communist country as a challenge to US national security interests per se, both revolve around the portrayal of the American people as being unjustly put into a position of loss that requires redress.

China, the powerful manipulator

The first plotline is the imaginary of the United States as being cheated out of its rightful globally superior position by China, which deprives the 'true' people of what they are entitled to at home and abroad. During his electoral campaigns in 2016 and 2020 as well as while in office, Trump identified a long and heterogeneous list of adversaries, such as his challengers to the presidency Hillary Clinton and Joe Biden as well as the Democratic Party more broadly, but also 'politicians', 'Washington', the 'liberal elite', the 'deep state', the media, experts and educators (Homolar and Löffmann, 2021: 6; Lowndes, 2021: 126–130). In addition to constructing domestic 'enemies of the people', the former president's populist practices – often intersecting with nationalist discourses – articulated the interests of a 'people' as being harmed by foreign 'power blocs' and powerful 'elites', with China regularly featuring as the main perpetrator. Hostility towards the communist country was visible from the start of Trump's first campaign for the White House. When

Trump declared his candidacy for the highest office in US government in 2015, he opened his announcement speech noting that ‘Our country is in serious trouble’ because it did not ‘have victories anymore’, while using China to illustrate that and portray himself as the solution: ‘When was the last time anybody saw us beating, let’s say, China in a trade deal? They kill us. I beat China all the time’ (Trump, 2015).

Over the years, Trump accused China of exploiting the openness of American society in a calculated and persistent campaign of ‘outrageous theft of intellectual property’, ‘illegal product dumping’, or ‘devastating currency manipulation’ (Trump, 2016a), and he repeatedly labelled China’s trade practices as ‘the greatest jobs theft in the history of the world’ (Trump, 2016b). Trump went as far as blaming China for relocating US industry out of the country, stating that ‘China raided our factories, offshored our jobs, gutted our industries’ (Trump, 2020f), which obscures that it is a deliberate choice of US companies to undertake such actions. These acts of cheating were described by the president as ‘killing us on trade’ (Trump, 2018d), and he asserted that ‘We can’t continue to allow China to rape our country’ (as cited in Diamond, 2016). Trump’s appointee as Director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), Christopher Wray, underscored that China indeed ‘seems willing to steal it’s [sic] way up the economic ladder’ (as cited in Mallin and Barr, 2019).

Trump implicitly signalled respect for the nationalist strongmen of other countries – even drawing parallels with his own leadership style – primarily constructing their ability to rip off the United States as located in both a failure of the US leadership and their strength. He consistently condemned foreign countries for what they do to *us* – for ‘killing us’, ‘beating us’, ‘laughing at us’, ‘taking our money’, ‘lending our money back to us’, and for ‘sending people to us’. At the same time, he displayed admiration for the same nationalist strongmen that he framed as key contributors to the United States’ predicament (Homolar and Scholz, 2019: 353). This included expressing a ‘love’ of China and pointing out specifically that ‘their leaders are much smarter than our leader [President Obama]’ (Trump, 2015). Indeed, following Xi’s consolidation of power and extension of his tenure, Trump was overheard commending him with remarks like ‘He’s now president for life. President for life. No, he’s great’ (cited in Liptak, 2018). Even when openly criticising Xi for unmet promises, such as addressing the fentanyl crisis, Trump did so in a congenial manner that diverged from his broader anti-China stance: ‘my friend President Xi said that he would stop the sale of Fentanyl to the United States – this never happened, and many Americans continue to die!’ (Trump, 2019c). Especially owing to his praise of Xi Jinping, Trump was at times seen as his administration’s ‘softest link’ in its new ‘whole-of-the-government approach’ towards a ‘very harsh perception of and policies toward China overall’ (Kubo, 2019: 66–67). Yet, while it may appear inconsistent and contradictory, the discursive wavering between anti-China rhetoric and admiration for the communist country’s leader reflects a broader tendency of populist leaders to express affinity for other authoritarian-leaning political figures.

Notwithstanding Trump’s amicable framing of China’s leader, by 2017, the Trump administration had officially labelled the country as a ‘strategic competitor’ and elaborated on the potential threats emanating from this ‘revisionist power’ in its first and only National Security Strategy (White House, 2017: 25). In a speech at the RAND corporation, US Secretary of Defense, Mark Esper (2020) later underscored that ‘great power competition with China’ was indeed a priority across the Department of Defense, including for the education and training of US military service members. But China’s military strength was constructed both as threatening and as unfairly achieved by taking

advantage of the United States. As Trump put it in 2019, 'China is a threat to the world in a sense, because they're building a military faster than anybody, and, frankly, they're using US money' (Trump, 2019a). The administration explicitly entwined national security with economic policies and international political conduct to address what was seen as an increasingly assertive Chinese government challenging US hegemony in Asia-Pacific and hell-bent on dominating the United States more broadly. For instance, Peter Navarro, appointed by Trump in December 2016 to the newly created position of director of the White House National Trade Council, warned that 'China wants to buckle our knee so that they can keep having their way with us' (cited in Egan, 2019).

The threat posed by China was represented not merely as endangering US national security in the abstract but as directly affecting ordinary American lives at home. During the Trump presidency, the US government made allegations of how China was a threat to the people across multiple issue areas, such as killing Americans with fentanyl (Trump, 2019b); unparalleled pollution sending 'real dirt into the air' (Trump, 2020b); unfairly subsidising its industries and thus damaging US workers, while spying, hacking, and stealing intellectual property from hardworking US companies (see Beinart, 2019; Kubo, 2019: 67–70); posing a technology threat through products sold in the United States, such as security cameras, or through companies such as *Huawei*, *WeChat*, or *TikTok* that spied on or manipulated the people (see Kubo, 2019: 70); as well as interference in US elections to damage both the president and the ordinary Americans who support him because Trump was 'the first President ever to challenge China on trade' (Trump, 2018a).

When in 2018 Trump publicly initiated a trade war with China, he justified it as a measure aiming 'to protect the interests of working men and women, farmers, ranchers, businesses, and our country itself' (Trump, 2018c). A few days later, at a UN General Assembly meeting, Trump justified the trade war by presenting the country as 'abused', mentioning 'China's market distortions' as well as the trade deficit and loss of jobs to China, while asserting that 'We will not allow our workers to be victimized, our companies to be cheated, and our wealth to be plundered and transferred' (Trump, 2018b). The China Strategy, released by the White House in 2020, went as far as claiming that China was challenging the 'bedrock American belief in the unalienable right of every person to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness' (White House, 2020b: 4). According to Trump's Vice President Mike Pence, 'Beijing is employing a whole-of-government approach, using political, economic, and military tools, as well as propaganda [. . .] to exert influence and interfere in the domestic policy and politics of this country' (Pence, 2018). Then-FBI Director Wray (2019) went beyond this idea to claim that China posed a 'whole-of-society threat'.

The anti-establishment populist rhetoric used to condemn domestic elites for harming the people was transposed onto the Chinese government, with the Trump administration explicitly targeting the CCP in the construction of an antagonism between an evil elite and the unjustly suffering people. For instance, on an FBI website called 'The China Threat', the agency defines the enemy as 'Not China the country nor its people, but the Chinese government, the CCP' (FBI, 2023).¹ Trump's National Security Advisor Robert C. O'Brien similarly explained in a press release titled *The Chinese Communist Party's Ideology and Global Ambitions* that 'we have deep respect and admiration for the Chinese people. The United States has a long history of friendship with the Chinese nation. But the Chinese Communist Party does not equal China or her people' (O'Brien, 2020). He claimed that the CCP was seeking 'total control' over the people's lives well beyond the

country's boundaries, including 'ourselves' (O'Brien, 2020). According to O'Brien (2020), the CCP aimed to know everything about ordinary Americans – 'just as it likes to know almost everything about every individual living in China' – and, subsequently, was actively engaged in 'efforts to manipulate our people and our governments, damage our economies, and undermine our sovereignty'.

In a publication by the Department of State (2020) titled *The Chinese Communist Party: Threatening Global Peace and Stability*, the CCP was officially characterised as a threat, with allegations including predatory economic practices, military aggression, subversion of global norms and values, utilisation of coercive tactics overseas, disregard for human rights, and environmental abuses. During his last day in office, criticising China's treatment of Muslim minorities in Xinjiang, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo claimed that if the CCP 'is allowed to commit genocide and crimes against humanity against its own people, imagine what it will be emboldened to do to the free world, in the not-so-distant future' (Pompeo, 2021).

The articulation of China as a principal threat to the American people – and the 'free world' by extension – greatly expanded during the COVID-19 pandemic, when the country became Trump's primary target of blame for the difficulties that the United States faced in dealing with the health emergency. Despite initially praising Chinese leader Xi Jinping and China in general for 'their efforts and transparency' as well as for their hard work 'to contain the Coronavirus' (Trump, 2020g), this perception underwent a sudden change when the pandemic hit the United States (see Löffmann, 2022). With the US pandemic response under Trump's leadership marred by setbacks, mistakes, and a large loss of lives, Trump utilised China as a scapegoat and reenvisioned the country's leadership as a corrupt and criminal 'elite'. He stated that '[t]he world is now suffering as a result of the malfeasance of the Chinese government' and suggested that 'China's cover-up of the Wuhan virus allowed the disease to spread all over the world, instigating a global pandemic' (Trump, 2020f). Trump also renamed the SARS-CoV-2 virus that caused the COVID-19 pandemic as the 'Chinese virus' or the 'Kung flu' (Trump, 2020a), and his administration sought the wider international adaptation of terminology that firmly entwined China with the virus. During a G7 meeting, for example, Pompeo insisted on including the term 'Wuhan virus' in the official documents in order to solidify the idea that '[t]he Chinese Communist Party poses a substantial threat to our health and way of life, as the Wuhan virus clearly has demonstrated' (cited in Finnegan, 2020).

China's domestic and international establishment enablers

The second main plotline of Trump's anti-China populist narrative is the imaginary of US foreign policy as a series of defeats, as something that has been done by elites with the intention to harm the common people, selling them out to foreign Others and depriving them of the popular sovereignty to decide their own fate and future. This story begins with the former president's discursive strategy to routinely lay blame for the perceived problems related to China at the feet of elites at home. As Trump noted, 'I never solely blamed China for this. They were able to get away with a theft like no one was able to get away with before because of past politicians and, frankly, past presidents' (Trump, 2020f). During the 2016 US presidential election campaign, he predominantly attacked the democratic nominee Hillary Clinton and her husband, former President Bill Clinton (1993–2001) for putting China above the interests of the American people. Trump's focus here was on suggesting that the Clintons intentionally weakened the economic position of the

United States by supporting China's entry into the World Trade Organization (WTO), to 'enrich their family at America's expense' (Trump, 2016c). Senator Marco Rubio (R-FL) argued in a similar vein that the rise of China and its drive to 'become the global leader in innovation and manufacturing' was not only 'an unacceptable outcome' for American workers, threatening their jobs and wages, but it was also a direct unintended consequence of the US government's decision in the early-21st century to expand trade with China (Rubio, 2019).

While Trump's China-centric anti-establishment discourse put into question 'the political dominance of the foreign policy establishment and its strategic dispensation' (Löfflmann, 2019: 130), it also featured members of domestic institutions and media organisations as enemy collaborators. In 2019, he asked the American public to think about 'who is our bigger enemy', the leader of the Chinese government Xi Jinping or the Chairman of the US Federal Reserve, after the latter discussed the risks of Trump's trade war, raising diplomatic tensions by publicly designating a head of state as 'enemy' (Trump, 2019d). The former president levelled similar critiques against fundamental components of US democracy such as press freedom, labelling journalists and news media as 'the enemy of the American people' (Trump, 2017c). In addition to accusing the press of embracing China's propaganda and siding with China in the reporting about the COVID-19 pandemic (see Samuels, 2020), he explicitly targeted Chinese-American journalists such as CBS News correspondent Weijia Jiang and railed against outlets for serving the interests of China, including US government-funded news networks such as Voice of America (Williamson, 2020).

The notion that China's growing power and international conduct pose a threat not only to US national security but also to the United States' 'economic and political way of life' (White House, 2020a) was visible in how Trump framed international organisations as forming part of an establishment that places China's interests over those of the United States. Echoing the expression of distrust towards international institutions commonly associated with populism, North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), the United Nations (UN), the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and the WTO lay at the centre of Trump's attacks (Pempel, 2019: 1006). In the case of the WTO, he claimed that the organisation served as an instrument in China's hands, unfairly elevating the communist country's interests over those of the United States, and had 'let China get away with murder' (Trump, 2020c). This was in response to WTO criticism, which noted that the United States was in breach of global trading rules after the Trump administration had imposed multi-billion-dollar levies on imports of China's goods in the context of the president's trade war with Beijing. Making a similar claim about its prioritisation of China's interests to the detriment of the United States, Trump withdrew the United States from the UN-facilitated Paris Agreement on climate change. Representing the United States as a victim of international injustice, the former president protested that 'China will be allowed to build hundreds of additional coal plants. So we can't build the plants, but they can, according to this agreement' (Trump, 2017a).

In the context of what was widely seen as a poor response to the COVID-19 pandemic by the United States under Trump's leadership, the former president targeted the World Health Organization (WHO) and moved to withdraw US membership and funding. He accused the WHO of being 'a puppet of China' and 'China-centric' (Trump, 2020e), and claimed the organisation was 'covering up China's culpability and mismanaging efforts to contain the virus' (Roberts, 2022: 6). Trump began to style himself as a 'wartime president' (Trump, 2020d) fighting a 'war with an invisible enemy, but that enemy is no match for the

spirit and resolve of the American people' (Trump, 2020h). His 2020 re-election campaign reinforced this idea, with an email to supporters noting that 'America is under attack – not just by an invisible virus, but by the Chinese' (Edsall, 2020). During the campaign, he consistently labelled the Democratic presidential nominee Joe Biden as 'Beijing Biden' while accusing him of being too weak on China (as cited in Bertrand, 2020).

The discussion of the two central plotlines in Trump's populist anti-China narrative demonstrates that China is not simply constructed as an adversary on the level playing field of international anarchy, in a contest over the leading role across various domains that threatens US superiority. Instead, Trump creates an imaginary in which China already enjoys an unfair advantage over the United States and has inflicted significant harm on the American people. It establishes the United States as in a position of unjust relative decline internationally – because domestic and international elites have allowed, or even fostered, the defeat of the United States at the expense of the underdog American people. As the following explains, the portrayal of US victimisation globally is converted into a story of collective trauma domestically.

Status loss as collective trauma

The construction of the 'China threat' in Trump's populist discourse denotes the ongoing struggle of an underdog 'American people' against the perceived exploitation by an unfair and hostile 'power bloc' consisting of diverse political agents, spearheaded by an abusive CCP and aided by domestic and foreign elites. While there is no origin trauma triggering such perceptions of injury and defeat – in the sense that the United States has not lost its politically, economically, or militarily privileged status in world politics in general or relative to China – it is a narrative of social suffering in which the wound is discursively constructed to collective rather than individual identity.

Consider how Trump accused members of the international establishment, including international organisations like the WTO or the WHO, of unfairly favouring China despite the comparatively privileged position that the United States holds internationally, which we discussed earlier. He claimed that a lack of 'fair and reciprocal treatment' in trade substantially harmed the United States, pointing in particular to China's status as a developing nation as affording it a range of benefits that the United States was not entitled to, which unjustly disadvantaged the 'American people' (Trump, 2020f). Trump's demand that all countries must play by the same rules is neither new nor unique to populist rhetoric, of course, and it is also reflective of a broader tendency in contemporary foreign policy discourses to nurture the idea of an impending collapse of the West because of counter-hegemonic contestations of the US-centric international hierarchies (Homolar and Turner, 2024). In Trump's narrative of victimhood, international institutions, rules, and codes of conduct are tilted in favour of those who have brought injury upon an abused 'people'. This reinforces the broader tendency of the Republican Party in the United States to engage in identity politics that persistently feed into 'a sense of victimhood among white men for electoral gain' (Holpuch, 2020).

The story that the United States is a blameless victim can effortlessly be accompanied by a sense of entitlement and privilege, even if it appears contradictory. This shines through in Trump's rhetoric, for example when he explains how the United States would come out on top despite China's treacherous actions (e.g. Trump, 2017b). In the populist discursive toolbox that pits the mistreated yet virtuous underdog against the malevolent elite, inferiority and superiority comfortably coexist. This is linked to a Manichean – and

orientalist – division of the world where the myth of Western meritocracy is sustained by narratives that portray ‘the Rest’ as lacking the effort and skill to improve, and which therefore ascribe any change in their position and circumstances for the better to misconduct and dishonesty (Black and Stone, 2005: 243; Pease, 2010: 45).

Populist underdog foreign policy narratives, often in combination with nationalist discourses, activate a grievance-centred identity in relation to victimisers located in the transnational space (Lim, 2010: 138). However, representations of collective trauma and victimhood are not necessarily reflections of readily observable injustice, victimhood, and loss even if they can be *felt* and *perceived* as actually occurring events (Alexander, 2004: 8). Rather, they are ‘arguments about what must have been and what should be’ (Alexander, 2012: 3–4). Trump’s anti-China populism is a case in point as it rests on the construction of a present that is bleak and marked by a significant decline in US status and influence internationally that reverberates domestically. His story about betrayal and loss takes place in a narrative setting in which the country and its ordinary people are left powerless against the imposition of unjust suffering by a power bloc acting in the interests of domestic and foreign elites. The people-as-underdog are no longer the master of their own fate because they have unfairly lost their position of privilege. This is despite continuing US dominance in the global distribution of economic and military power and the institutions that govern international conduct. This speaks to Mols and Jetten’s (2016: 275) observation that populist political agents are ‘crafty identity entrepreneurs’ who can turn the perception of comparative privilege into a perception of relative deprivation through discourse.

Whether a narrative of collective suffering and wounded identity has grip and gradually widens the audience that perceives they have been traumatised is not dependent on the extent to which dislocating social change has taken place. What matters instead is a *perception* of sudden, unexpected, fast-paced, and unwanted social change, which touches the core of the ingroup (Sztompka, 2000: 452, 458). The representation of trauma and victimhood in populist discourse is a highly affectual process that interlinks with remembering the past and co-constructing the present through the lens of disorienting social change. Such change is equated with the loss of stability, coherence, and autobiographical continuity in society and everyday life. When the taken-for-granted-ness of our socio-cultural environment is perceived as ruptured, dislocated, or displaced, people can experience insecurity and loss at the level of the individual and trauma and victimhood at the level of the collective (e.g. Giddens, 1991; Laing, 1960; on ontological security and populism see Steele and Homolar, 2019). The populist construction of injury and betrayal takes place in the context of representations of order as preceding the dislocating event, even if this order is retrospectively imposed and imagined.

In the process of constructing a harmed collective identity, populist political agents thus play a pivotal role in the narration of the common people’s ‘social pain as a fundamental threat to their sense of who they are, where they came from, and where they want to go’ (Alexander, 2004: 10). Populist leaders who project into the public realm claims of unjust social suffering caused by powerful national and international ‘elites’ and their audiences-turned-supporters both become the collective agents in the trauma meaning-making process, pitting the ingroup against domestic and foreign outgroups. While collective trauma is understood as something to which the ingroup has either not contributed or done so ‘only unwittingly’ (Sztompka, 2000: 452), individual and collective loss is projected away from the ‘Self’ towards ‘Others’ depicted as oppressors, thieves, or wrongdoers. Alexander (2012: 2) explains here that ‘The pivotal question becomes not who did this to me, but what group did this to us’.

As Trump's populist anti-China narrative illustrates, the quest of overcoming collective emotional distress due to trauma and victimhood turns into a struggle against forces located outside the underdog people, against those represented and understood as sources of insecurity and threat. His discursive strategy elevated the 'China threat' to the position of a prevalent political imaginary of insecurity built around status deprivation of the ordinary American people domestically and internationally, and it promoted a general will to counter the menace and restore forfeited privileges. Public opinion surveys indicate that the China-as-enemy narrative has taken a firm hold in US domestic politics: by the end of Trump's term as the 44th US president, the level of distrust towards China reached historical highs in the United States (Silver et al., 2020). What is more, the 'China threat' became one of few political issues in the United States that enjoyed significant bipartisan support and views of China have remained as negative during the Biden administration as they were during Trump's (Silver, 2022). Trump's anti-China stance was seen as pivotal in winning critical states in the 2016 election (Beinart, 2019), and the 2020 presidential election campaign became at one point a competition between Democrats and Republicans to see who was tougher on China, with Biden claiming that Trump 'rolled over for the Chinese' (Khalid, 2020). That contenders for the highest US office adopted and, in some cases, doubled down on the 'China threat' is a sign of the grip and resonance of Trump's populist narrative, which ended the long-standing pro-engagement consensus that had already begun to fall apart during Obama's second term.

While populist foreign policy behaviour is often associated with a disruption of 'business as usual', and despite a broader rejection of Trump's populist discursive strategy of division and polarisation, President Joe Biden proved reluctant to change the narrative that the United States was losing out in a global competition with China over primacy in the international arena. As Trump's successor told a bipartisan group of senators after talking with President Xi, '[i]f we don't get moving, they are going to eat our lunch' (Biden, 2021). And although Trump accused Biden of being 'pro-China', the new administration retained a firm(er) position towards China, expanding confrontational economic measures and intensifying US support for Taiwan. With Biden emphasising in his 2023 State of the Union address that 'winning the competition with China should unite all of us' (Biden, 2023), the notion that American society is at risk of being cheated out of its global pole position by the communist country has gained significant bipartisan support in the halls of US government.

Research on the psychological dimension of support for populism has shown that feelings of grief and anger, especially due to the perception of collective loss of social status or recognition as a group, play a greater role than any measurable socio-economic decline or loss of status at the individual level (Gidron and Hall, 2017; Homolar and Löfflmann, 2021: 6–7). Frustration and resentment are particularly stoked by perceptions of being actively deprived of life aspirations, because 'individuals develop expectations as to how society should treat them in relation to their economic position and social status' (Whiteley et al., 2020: 90). Populist narratives of collective trauma and victimhood can be articulated by, and resonate with, 'those who are far from powerless, and who clothe their power in the appearance of its opposite, thus simultaneously masking their exercise of it, and justifying their desire for it' (Barker, 2007: 102). The populist construction of unjust suffering in the past, present, and future is powerful even if it is not based in any measurable or objectifiable 'reality', especially as those in positions of privilege are not necessarily aware of the systems of privilege in place (Black and Stone, 2005: 243).

The way in which narratives linked to ‘populism of the privileged’ portray loss is a cognitive-emotive provocation of a collective experience of trauma and victimhood that is perpetrated against the ‘common people’ by evil and corrupt ‘elites’, even if this has never taken place and might never occur. Privilege mediates the conditions in which support for populism arises while simultaneously obscuring the underlying manifold dimensions of unearned advantages shared by those fostering and buying into the narrative of the people-as-underdog. This phenomenon holds significant relevance in situations where an Other that is striving for equality and liberation from a subordinate position is portrayed as a ‘threat’ through victimhood narratives promoted by those in a position of dominance. Ultimately, even if the ‘underdog people’ are in the (privileged) majority, they are constructed (and may feel) as mistreated minorities, serving the purpose of justifying and legitimising ‘emergency’ policy measures aimed at maintaining primacy in an unequal status quo that affords them a superior standing.

Conclusion

Populism research has traditionally been concerned with the domestic sphere, with emphasis on issues of voter mobilisation and the content of political communication. Expanding recent scholarship on Trump’s populism and how it influenced US foreign policy towards China, this article has shown that domestic concerns of populist rhetoric interlink with international affairs. The basic antagonism of the ‘people’ versus the ‘elite’ spills over into the global arena through narratives of collective trauma and victimhood that operate with an international reference frame. Such stories of unjust suffering represent the opposite of coming to terms with the past: they keep wounds open and (re)image history and current events by projecting grievances onto ‘elites’ both at home and beyond the nation space.

We demonstrated that the ‘populism of the privileged’ has significant explanatory value in understanding the construction of domestic and international enmity in populist discourse that centrally features a present characterised by disempowering change. The concept has predominantly been used to analyse the nexus between privilege and inequality with a focus on both the domestic level and between-country phenomena. Yet, it also allows us to see, for example, how Trump’s anti-China populist rhetoric is centred on the counterintuitive articulation of an American underdog identity at the domestic and international level and why his narratives of unjust suffering have grip, even if populist political agents and their supporters stem from comparatively privileged groups both within US society and in a global frame. Trump and his administration’s populism directed blame upwards against domestic and international elites, claiming that they had intentionally weakened and hurt the American people. As a pivotal dimension of these narratives, Trump’s anti-China populist discourse envisaged the ‘people’ as an abused underdog in relation to a powerful ‘enemy’, China, and other domestic and international elites aiding it. It forcefully advocated for a reversal of the current state of affairs in which ordinary people are purportedly humiliated, marginalised, and betrayed while the country has lost its high status within the international system. Victimhood-centred populist narratives are always relational. As we have shown, the rallying cry for the restoration of lost status (‘Make America Great Again’) is firmly entwined with the existence of a position of relative privilege and the desire to either maintain or enhance it.

The success of this discursive strategy based on a ‘populism of the privileged’ is indicated by the pervasiveness and longevity of the ‘China threat’ imaginary in the United

States, to the point that it has crystallised as conventional wisdom for a large share of US society. The bipartisan support of the idea that China and the Chinese communist government pose an existential threat to US security and prosperity can to a significant extent be attributed to the effectiveness of populist discursive construction of collective trauma and victimhood. This narrative effectively rallies heterogeneous groups behind the feeling that their shared privileges are at risk and the idea that the CCP in conjunction with other national and international elites have victimised the ‘American people’ and, therefore, China has to be contained.

In the context of the great power rivalry between the United States and China, populist discourses that portray the ingroup as victims of unjust outgroups, particularly in the shape of powerful and malevolent elites, often serve to obscure structures of inequality and systems of privilege that precisely motivate the actions of the ‘Other’ now perceived as a challenging threat. Examining collective trauma and victimhood in the populist construction of the American people as a victim *vis-à-vis* China as a power bloc, despite the former maintaining a position of superiority and enjoying privileges in various fields over the latter, allows us to better understand how US animosity towards China relates to concurrent perceptions of underprivilege and entitlement. At the same time, it enables critical reflection on foreign policy and security discourses and practices that are directed at perpetuating international inequality by labelling challengers of the status quo as threatening.

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ORCID iDs

Alexandra Homolar  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9537-8046>

Juan Alberto Ruiz Casado  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7809-8568>

Note

1. At a later date (20 November 2023), it had been modified and stated, ‘To be clear, the adversary is not the Chinese people or people of Chinese descent or heritage. The threat comes from the programs and policies pursued by an authoritarian government’ (FBI, 2023).

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