**A Threat to Democracy:**

**Trump, Orbán, and the Rise of Nationalism**

Political Science and History

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**Abstract**

The insurrection at the United States Capitol on January 6th, 2021 demonstrated to Americans and the world the instability of democracy. Those who carried out this attack rallied for the overturn of Joe Biden’s election win while brandishing a variety of nationalist symbols pertaining to former President Donald Trump. This inflection point shows the dangers of a rise in nationalist ideology, forcing the question: how did the U.S. reach this juncture after centuries of peaceful, democratic transfer of power? To what extent has Trump influenced a rise in nationalism and what impact does this have on democracy? This research explores these questions by analyzing the connections between Trump and past nationalist movements, specifically Hitler, along with present nationalist movements, namely the Orbán administration of Hungary. Through these comparisons, this research aims to identify the effects of a rise in nationalism on democracy.

Introduction

January 6th, 2021 proved to be a grave day in the history of the United States as thousands of individuals from various white nationalist organizations besieged the Capitol building, wreaking havoc upon not only the architecture, but the foundation of democracy. As a result of the violence on this day, nine individuals died and many more were injured.[[1]](#footnote-1) All were united by a falsehood pushed by former President Trump: Joe Biden did not fairly win the 2020 election and it must be overturned. He alerted his base early, claiming, “...[he would] lose [the] election…if the election [was] rigged."[[2]](#footnote-2) He continued to call to action, tweeting after the confirmation of Joe Biden’s electoral win: “This Fake Election can no longer stand. Get moving Republicans.”[[3]](#footnote-3) He praised those at the Capitol before the insurrection: “Washington is… inundated with people who don’t want to see an election victory stolen by emboldened Radical Left Democrats…We hear you (and love you) from the Oval Office.”[[4]](#footnote-4)

While the Capitol rioters did not succeed in their goal, this moment demonstrated the previously unimaginable. Democracy in the United States is not definite and is subject to failure. This notion is particularly hard for the U.S. to grasp on account of American exceptionalism, the pervasive idea that the U.S. is the world’s democratic power with distinct values rooted in tradition and liberty.[[5]](#footnote-5) This idea can be traced back to several political administrations, most notably the Bush administration, which emphasized the uniqueness of U.S. democratic values and the need to spread them internationally.[[6]](#footnote-6) Bush’s doctrine supports the idea that the U.S. is a permanent fixture of democracy, incapable of collapse altogether, let alone at the hands of its own citizens. These notions of identity reflect a strong nationalist ideology. While nationalism is often portrayed as a good thing- a form of patriotism- it may be representative of something more sinister, e.g. Hitler justified atrocities as preservation of German national identity.[[7]](#footnote-7) In the field of Political Science, nationalism is defined in many ways, though many view nationalism as a “...the cultural idea of the nation as one's primary identity, and a moral idea of justification of action to protect the rights of the nation against the other.”[[8]](#footnote-8)

The events of January 6th exemplify this definition. Individuals, led by the election lie, felt compelled to defend their nation and its identity. Those who stormed the Capitol that day brandished an array of white nationalist symbols, taking the form of flags, shirts, and chants alongside the image of Trump. For instance, several individuals carried *Kek Nation* flags, a green copy of the Nazi Wartime flag (see figure one). This flag is representative of a fictional government, created by Reddit users, who attribute Trump as their nation’s ultimate leader, standing for white purity.[[9]](#footnote-9) Another man kneeled before a cross, a Trump flag draped across his back (see figure two), equating Trump to God, a savior of the U.S.[[10]](#footnote-10) Additionally, several protestors displayed anti-Semitic symbols, a man’s sweatshirt reading, “Camp Auschwitz: Work brings freedom.”[[11]](#footnote-11)

After 45 peaceful transfers of power from one administration to the next, the U.S. finally hit an inflection point, namely, Donald Trump. How did the U.S. reach this point where individuals were willing to risk their lives for a political figure? The answer may lie not only with the present- Trump’s rhetoric and appeal to fringe groups- but with the past. This influences my research question: to what extent has Trump influenced a rise in nationalism and what impact does this have on democracy?

Background, Related Work, and Motivation

The events that transpired leading up to January 6th bear resemblance to those that occurred during the rise of Hitler.[[12]](#footnote-12) From the beginning, Trump stoked fear in his base, putting forth a nationalist front that was well-received by extremist groups. This is best exemplified through his many Tweets which read as fact to his followers (see figures three and four).[[13]](#footnote-13)The underlying themes of these Tweets- economic, foreign, and personal threats- also appear in Hitler’s speeches (see figure five).One may see the potential similarities in rhetoric between the two, and while Trump never committed such atrocities near the level of the Holocaust, his incitement of violence should prove alarming to the citizens of the U.S.: “Paranoia, bullying and intimidation are a hallmark of authoritarian regimes.”[[14]](#footnote-14) While it seems easy to diminish January 6th due to its failure, one should not discount the threat this day posed to democracy and what it could mean for the future of the U.S. Hungary proves to be an alarming, recent example of this possibility with a collapse of democracy at the hands of fascist leader, Viktor Orbán.[[15]](#footnote-15)

Unlike Trump, Orbán succeeded in gaining full control over Hungary. The past is not merely the past and an overturn of democracy is possible in this modern age. U.S. citizens are witnessing the consequences of nationalist ideology in real-time with the enactment of harsh legislation, e.g. the overturn of Roe v. Wade, Florida’s ‘Don’t Say Gay Bill’, and the banning of books and accurate history lessons in schools. Similar acts were committed under Hitler, with the burning of books that opposed Nazism, including texts discussing non-traditional views of race, gender, and sexuality.[[16]](#footnote-16) This also occurred in Hungary in which Orbán’s administration passed a book ban law to prevent “homosexual content” from being sold within 200 meters of schools and churches. Additionally, books containing “behavior inconsistent with traditional gender roles,”[[17]](#footnote-17) were ordered to be wrapped with warning labels.[[18]](#footnote-18) These alarming acts demonstrate nationalism, aiming to preserve each nation as a white, traditional, heterosexual, Christian, and male-dominant space.[[19]](#footnote-19)

While a steady body of research continues to grow surrounding ‘Trumpism’, no research has examined the detrimental legacy of Trump in a concrete manner. For the duration of his presidency, political scholars and historians analyzed Trump from a place of moderate concern, deeming him incapable of action. Many historians posit that while nationalist and fascist undertones appear in Trump’s rhetoric, he is merely an “entertainment fascist”, lacking true threat.[[20]](#footnote-20) Scholars could not anticipate the chaos of the election and its aftermath on January 6th, and thus, current literature fails to account for the magnitude of such events. In light of this, research on ‘Trumpism’ must proceed with urgency and a greater focus on the impact of Trump on the rise of nationalist groups and the decline in democratic values.

Methods

To explore this question, I plan to conduct a review of primary sources concerning Trump and themes of nationalism including his Tweets, speeches, and social media, in reference to past nationalist figures’ propaganda. Furthermore, I will look at the response of the followers of these figures and their shared characteristics by examining primary sources such as discourse on internet servers, apparel, flags, signs, pamphlets, etc. I will not only utilize the perspective of past nationalist media, but also the contemporary example of Hungary to exemplify the modern implications of nationalism (see figure six). Moreover, I will scrutinize the comparisons between Hitler, Trump, and Viktor Orbán, and how their specific use of media and rhetoric relates to nationalism and anti-democratic movements.

Expected Results

By reviewing published literature and incorporating primary source material, I seek to expand this crucial area of research as it takes effect in the present. Through this, I hope to demonstrate the gravity of Trump’s legacy and its potential effect on American democracy so that the U.S. may acknowledge its flaws and potential for failure before the window of opportunity to fix such issues closes permanently. I intend to raise awareness in political leaders and voters, and amplify the urgency of addressing nationalism through formally publishing my research paper. I aim for my research to serve as a call to action to monitor nationalism and its effects on democracy so that it may be kept in check.

Conclusion

As discussed, the pervasive legacy of Trump nationalism continues to pose a threat to American democracy. While many turn a blind eye to the events that transpired on January 6th, the nationalist front grows stronger, taking hold of the American political landscape as seen through recent legislation. Without shedding light on the rise of nationalism and the dangers of political figures like Trump and Orbán, democratic values may continue to decline until it is too late. By investigating the connections between Trump and the past and present, one may come to realize the true impact of the legacy of this administration. As the majority of literature regarding ‘Trumpism’ was published before the 2020 election, it is necessary to research such issues in consideration of recent events. As articulated by American journalist Dorothy Thompson in 1935, “No people ever recognize their dictator in advance…He never stands for election on the platform of dictatorship. He always represents himself as the instrument [of] the Incorporated National Will”.[[21]](#footnote-21) Thus, I aim to use this research as a call to action against nationalism to prevent further harm of democracy.

Budget

As this is individual research, funding will consist of hourly pay at minimum wage ($15.00), approximately ten hours a week for ten weeks, totaling $1,500.00. Most resources needed for this research are accessible through LMU library’s collections, though research will be most efficient through the use of qualitative research analysis software, e.g. Maxqda, Caplene, etc. This tool would allow me to examine large amounts of textual and visual material at once via AI. For this, I estimate the software will cost $300.00. I do not anticipate a need for travel or associated costs, nor do I expect to ascertain other technology. For dissemination, I will require funds for making my research accessible to the public if accepted by a journal. I estimate, according to average APCs (Article Processing Charges), that this will cost $200.00. In total, I approximate this research will cost $2,000.00.

Timeline

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| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Timeline  (10 Weeks) | Weeks 1-2  (20 hours) | Weeks 3-4  (20 hours) | Weeks 5-10  (60 hours) |
|  | * Compile textual primary and secondary resources * Utilize software to examine comparisons between textual sources | * Compile visual primary resources * Utilize software to examine comparisons between all visualsources | * Synthesize materials to scrutinize connections in rhetoric between Hitler, Trump, and Orbán * Synthesize materials to scrutinize connections in visual symbols between Hitler, Trump, and Orbán’s followers * Examine democratic trends between nations through secondary sources * Compile paper: present trends from software output |

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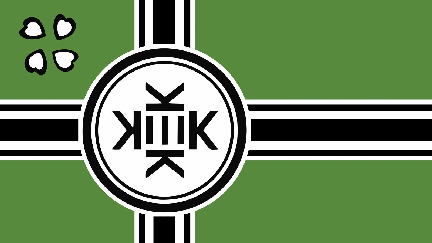
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Appendix

*Figure One*



Loeser, Pete. *Kek Nation Flag*. 2017. Photograph.

*Figure Two*



McNamee, Win*. Supporters of U.S. President Donald Trump Pray Outside the U.S. Capitol January 06, 2021 in Washington, DC.* Photograph. Getty Images. Getty Images News, January 6, 2021. *https://www.gettyimages.com/photos/win-mcnamee.*

*Figure Three*

***November 2nd, 2020:*** *“A vote for Sleepy Joe Biden is a vote to give control of government over to Globalists, Communists, Socialists, and Wealthy Liberal Hypocrites who want to silence, censor, cancel, and punish you.”[[22]](#footnote-22)*

*Figure Four*

***June 1st, 2017:*** *“The Paris Agreement handicaps the United States’ economy in order to win praise from the very foreign capitals and global activists that have long sought to gain wealth at our country’s expense. They don’t put America first. I do, and I always will.”*

*Figure Five*

***February 24th, 1941:*** *“It is intolerable for us to be the puppets of other nations and to have them prescribe for us, for example, what economic policy we are to pursue. We are carrying out the economic policy which is most advantageous to the German people.”[[23]](#footnote-23)*

*Figure Six*

**July 25th, 2022:** *“This is why we have always fought: we are willing to mix with one*

*another, but we do not want to become peoples of mixed-race. Today the situation is that*

*Islamic civilization…is constantly moving towards Europe.”[[24]](#footnote-24)*

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