

Politicizing Status Loss Among Trump Supporters in 2020



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Status loss—real or perceived—is seen as a key characteristic of how Donald Trump supporters make sense of the world. Drawing on five months of ethnographic and interview-based research, I argue that the motivations of Trump supporters are not only about status loss and anxiety, but also about the perceived injustice of it relative to competing notions of status worthiness that political opponents offer. I explore the process by which status-based claims are developed, deployed, and interpreted by campaign actors, volunteers, and voters. The political action of Trump supporters was spurred by emotionally laden rejections of status beliefs that did not center working-class values of hard work, manual occupations, and small-town family-centric culture. I show how the politicization of collective identities among the Trump supporters interviewed was enabled through a multilevel process that included the work of “identity entrepreneurs” in shaping the form and direction of the politicization process.

Keywords: Trump, collective identity, status, anxiety, populism

Something seemed to be troubling Mike.¹

We had spent four hours on a hot August day knocking on doors in an older working-class neighborhood, keeping up a steady banter about the election as we went from door to door. Today we were canvassing the mostly white residents about their political views, registration status, and voting plans for the upcoming election. Although we were volunteers for the Donald Trump 2020 reelection campaign, my knock list included a good number

of registered Democrats that someone in the office had decided were worth talking with. For the most part, the list was correct and we held several conversations with avid Trump supporters, some of whom were registered Democrats. I was also surprised by the relatively high number of people who not only answered their doors but were willing to talk with us at some length.

This was Mike’s first day, but I had been canvassing neighborhoods across northeast Penn-

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1. Names and identifiers have been changed to preserve anonymity.

sylvania for more than a month, and our conversations with voters touched on themes that had become familiar to me. Problems with immigration and a lack of good jobs in the area were layered with economic concerns about the state's "overreaction" to COVID-19. People I spoke with saw the shutdown policy as one that punished hard-working "regular people" but rewarded the owners of big box chains, corporations, and the lazy who were happy to take unemployment payments and stay home. Also, the summer of protest actions in the wake of George Floyd's murder loomed large for many, who expressed concerns about the "riots" in Portland and a hope that Trump would "take the leash off" of the police and National Guard. Many, including Trump-supporting Democrats, lamented the lack of real opportunity in the local economy and hoped that Trump would continue to keep bringing manufacturing jobs back from abroad.

Mike had gone surprisingly silent after we spoke with two voters who were planning to vote for Biden. Although we introduced ourselves as Trump volunteers, both were exceptionally warm. The first voter, an older woman with an oxygen tank, wanted to give us cold bottled water due to the heat of the day. The second offered a line that I heard with some frequency from Biden supporters, "I don't agree with you, but I'm glad that you're out here making democracy work."

After this second conversation, Mike walked with his head down as we made our way toward the next house on our list. I knew that he was nervous about knocking doors because he did not want to get into an argument with someone who disagreed with him, and I assumed this was on his mind. Eventually he let out a sigh and shook his head. "I gotta say I have a sick feeling in my stomach every time I hear someone says, 'I'm voting for Biden.' But I don't judge. . . . I'm not judging, you know what I mean? But I don't get it, I just don't understand it." I nodded along, adding that at least they were nice.

I let Mike take the lead at the next door, and it quickly became clear why Biden voters made him sick to his stomach, and it wasn't just about jobs. At this stop, Mike built a strong rapport with Judy and Chris over their mutual be-

lief in a host of theories drawn from the likes of InfoWars and QAnon. At root was the belief that Democratic Party elites like the Clintons were all deeply corrupt and many of them pedophiles, using their political power to protect their "sick" lifestyles of satanic rituals, teenage abduction, and "Epstein Island" parties. Biden, for his part, was a racist whose corruption was easy to see from the way that his son Hunter Biden was able to receive multimillion dollar payouts from Ukraine and China. The COVID-19 pandemic, though not entirely a hoax, would disappear a few days after the election in states like Pennsylvania that were controlled by Democratic governors. The unemployment and economic pain caused by the lockdown was primarily a political ploy to hurt Americans and make Trump look bad.

From their perspective, the Democratic Party was best understood as an active force against what is good and righteous in America. Chris put it this way: "If the Democrats would have just left [Trump] alone and let him do his job, do you know how much more he would have accomplished? Do you know how much greater this country would be right now? It's like he's trying to build the country up and the Democrats are trying to just rip it right down."

Judy agreed: "Well, you tell me, why is everything on the Democrat side a crisis and an existential threat? I'm sick of their rhetoric. . . . the minute the Right calls something out, it's suddenly a 'conspiracy theory.' We're going to start calling the Left out on their leftist conspiracy theories! We are not racist. That word's been overused to the point that it's taken away the meaning of the word. We're not racist toward anybody." For Judy and Chris, it was clear that the Democratic Party was intentionally dividing the country while laying the groundwork for stealing the election through the mail-in vote (which Judy characterized as "bullshit").

These opinions of the Democrats lent emotional fire to mainstream concerns about the economy. Trump had presided over the best economy in recent memory and his leadership was necessary for the country to rebound after the pandemic. And if Biden were to win? "We're dead. We're done." Their hope was that Trump would win reelection and usher in a new age of prosperity that would celebrate the lives of his

supporters and sweep out the filth and corruption. Judy made her point to the television behind her where Biden could be seen talking on the news, “Go take your pedophilia, your adrenochrome, and get the hell out of our country.”² If that’s your perspective of the Democratic Party, no wonder one would have an upset stomach.

INTRODUCTION

How do anxieties over status loss translate into support for the right-wing populism of the Trump era? Drawing on ethnographic and interview research of the 2020 presidential election, I argue that the motivations of Trump supporters are not only about surface-level concerns regarding immigration and the economy. In my fieldwork, I found people deeply connected to a pitched battle over the future of the country. Although this battle included disagreements around policy, ideology, and partisanship, the conflict might be best captured as a disagreement over what Cecelia Ridgeway refers to as shared status beliefs (2019). For Ridgeway, status is a “a comparative social ranking of people, groups, or objects in terms of the social esteem, honor, and respect accorded to them” (1). When status is typically distributed to those who can deliver on shared goals, conflicts arise over the shared beliefs about what sorts of efforts and what types of people are more or less worthy of receiving status. The outcome is that societies rank groups based on social differences, and groups presumed to be “better” for society are perceived as more worthy of status.

The ongoing demographic, economic, and political changes in the contemporary United States feeds directly into concerns about status. Who does society think is competent? Who ultimately deserves respect? What happens to those no longer deemed capable and worthy of social esteem under neoliberalism? How people make sense of these changes will influence how they make political choices—will they withdraw from the public space or politicize? When politicization does occur, how will it engage with status quo understandings of capital-

ism and democracy? For many of the Trump supporters I encountered in northeastern Pennsylvania, status concerns were not simply about the loss of economic opportunity, but also about the perceived injustice of status loss relative to competing notions of status worthiness that political opponents offered. Attention to this conflict helps explain how status concerns led to political mobilization rather than to withdrawal and the dominance of right-wing over left-wing populism in its content.

In this article, I use a multilevel process of collective identity politicization framework developed by Marjoka van Doorn, Jacomijnne Prins, and Saskia Welshen (2013) to explain the role of status in the political motivations of Trump supporters. In this framework, meso-level political actors leverage macro-social imbalances of power and status in society to develop frames designed to coalesce and politicize collective identities on the micro level of individual meaning making and interpersonal interactions.

I begin with a brief overview of how this process unfolded in the 2020 election. Drawing on broad social cleavages of race, class, and partisanship, the “identity entrepreneurs” of party elites and staffers transformed this raw material into compelling frames that sought to shape how individuals made sense of themselves within the world and acted within it. Candidates and organizers offered narratives that cast hard-working Americans as unjustly hurt by corrupt, elite politicians from both parties who not only saw no value in the working people of the United States but also actively sought to destroy them and their country. These frames constructed a populist notion of the righteous “American people” who are called to fight against the domination and oppression of those in power. The frames thus combine the status concerns of the working class with a sense of righteous injustice about their loss of status alongside a normative vision of how the country’s problems could be solved by recentering conservative working-class status beliefs. On an interpersonal level, individual Trump supporters become politicized when

2. Adrenochrome is the oxidized variant of adrenaline that some QAnon supporters believe is harvested from tortured children to be used as a psychedelic drug by global elites (Hitt 2020; Friedberg 2020).

they become aware of and involved with “their shared group membership, their common enemy or opponent, and especially the wider societal struggle that is affected by and affects” the contest of the election (Simon and Klandermans 2001, 324). The political action of Trump supporters was spurred through emotionally laden rejections of status beliefs that did not center working-class values of hard work, manual occupations, and small-town family-centric culture. For many, the Democratic Party coalition represented a set of status beliefs that celebrated “bullshit” service and professional work, overvalued “liberal” college education, and exalted out-groups such as “illegal immigrants,” “Silicon Valley CEOs,” and the “lazy unemployed” over “hard-working Americans.” Further, beliefs about cultural elitism, electoral fraud, and conspiracism framed the Democratic Party as one defined by corruption, authoritarianism, and moral decay. Taken together, most Trump supporters saw these status beliefs not only as incorrect and unfair, but also as dominant and oppressive, legitimating resistance to these beliefs as righteous opposition to an oppressive status regime.

This analysis draws on five months of participant observation as a Trump Reelection Campaign volunteer in northeastern Pennsylvania along with roughly seventy interviews conducted during the campaign and through the end of November 2020.³ I set out with an open-ended interest to understand how Trump supporters made sense of the world and acted within it. In particular, I sought to understand the links between economic and political inequality, right-wing populism, and working-class identity in this part of the Rust Belt.

Most of the people I encountered in the field fit into the broad middle of America’s opaque class hierarchy, what Joan Williams argues is the “working class” of our country (2019). Many in northeastern Pennsylvania had real concerns about the continued decay of economic opportunity in the Rust Belt. As other researchers note, in the leadup to the 2016 election many in this category (and especially whites) felt alienated, “left behind,” and decentered by changes to the culture and economy of the

United States (Cramer 2016; Gest 2016; Hochschild 2016). The result was a shared sense of anxiety over a loss of status, one that Diana Mutz argues was a key corollary to support for Trump in 2016 (Mutz 2018). The people I spent time with during the 2020 presidential campaign echoed these concerns, routinely framing their support for Trump as a way to recenter “American values” of individual freedom and merit-based achievement against the Democratic Party’s project of cultural elitism and race-based esteem.

Building on this earlier research, I explore the process by which status conflicts evolve—how the discourse is developed, who deploys it in the election, and how campaign volunteers and supporters interpret and enact it. My interest in the dynamic process of how these status conflicts became salient is because neither shared identities nor hardship, whether perceived or empirical, are usually enough to spark political action (van Stekelenburg, Roggeband, and Klandermans 2013) and can even lead to withdrawal from the political system (Gest 2016; McDermott 2006). To spark mobilization, group identities must be politicized. Grievances must be rendered as actionable demands, the divisions between supporters and opponents must be made stark, and emotions must be harnessed to drive political action. Additionally, this process of politicization does not possess an inherent ideological direction—an aggrieved member of the working class could move in either conservative or progressive directions depending on the content and style of the process. As this language implies, the work of *identity entrepreneurs*—political elites and organizers—is crucial in exploring both the form and direction of the politicization process. Earlier research has measured and described the contours of resentment and status anxiety. I trace these developments as part of a dynamic political process.

POLITICAL IDENTITY AND THE LEFT BEHIND

Although the labels of the Industrial Midwest and Rust Belt are still used to describe the set of states from Michigan to Pennsylvania, the

3. A second set of follow-up interviews is under way and therefore not included in this discussion.

modern character of this region is more accurately characterized by social decline and deindustrialization. More than half (57 percent) of the counties in this region have a lower median household income today than they did in 1980, an economic slide that has occurred alongside decreased life expectancy and a breakdown in social conditions for the working class (Monnat and Brown 2017). These “landscapes of despair,” as Shannon Monnat and David Brown refer to them (2017), have endured the worst of a changing economy, where trends of wage polarization are amplified by a skewed spatial distribution of opportunity that favors suburbs and large cities over rural and small-town communities. Such shifts have social consequences, especially in a context where work is not simply an issue of wages but also of personal identity and dignity.

Recent scholarship shows the powerful role of social identity in driving political views and behavior—political action not as a function of ideology or policy preferences but as “a reflection of judgements about where ‘people like me’ belong” (Achen and Bartles 2017, 266). In this vein, several authors explain the rise of Trumpian politics by showing the explanatory power of racial resentment, group expectations, and status anxiety in the broad construction of group identity and support for Trump (Gidron and Hall 2017; Luttig, Federico, and Lavine 2017; Schaffner, MacWilliams, and Nteta 2018; Mutz 2018). An especially powerful argument involved the activation of white identity among voters (Sides, Tesler, and Vavreck 2018). Some put these findings alongside a renewal of right-wing populist attitudes among voters who see society as a Manichean struggle of “the people” against corrupt elites (Inglehart and Norris 2016; Oliver and Rahn 2016; Hawkins et al. 2018). These findings relate to recent scholarship that centers the role of identity among political actors, namely, Katherine Cramer’s notion of rural resentment (2016), Justin Gest’s theory of white working-class marginality and antisystem politics (2016), and Arlie Hochschild’s thesis of “the left behind” (2016). This work helps explain how Trump’s 2016 electoral campaign and subsequent administration helped amplify a right-wing populist discourse that relies on status claims, cultural issues, and

economic nationalism in its appeal to voters. President Trump’s reelection campaign followed a similar rhetorical strategy, adding new concerns of racial strife and economic depression linked to Black Lives Matter protests and a global pandemic. Americans respond positively to these frames when they resonate with their social identities and their interpretations of how the world works and their place within it.

To the extent that political institutions that previously shielded lower-income citizens from rising economic inequality have been retrenched over time, it is perhaps no surprise that anti-elite populist frames find purchase in such circumstances (Gest 2016; Silva 2019). But the coupling of populism to right-wing politics is not a given, as histories of poverty and oppression among communities of color, immigrants, native peoples, and whites of earlier generations show. And yet Trumpian populism has found fertile soil in some majority white communities with these characteristics (Bradlee 2018). The puzzle is why, and by what processes, have these politics taken shape in such communities.

CASE SELECTION AND RESEARCH DESIGN

President Trump won the electoral college with surprising support throughout the Rust Belt, which backed Obama’s presidency in 2008 and 2012. The 2016 Trump coalition was, from a national perspective, grounded by voters who were whiter, more affluent, and less educated than Clinton voters. At the same time, Trump’s path to victory was through those Rust Belt counties suffering from a variety of distresses since the 1908s, counties that Shannon Monnat and David Brown refer to as “landscapes of despair”: “In particular, economic distress (rates of SSI [Supplemental Security Income] receipt, poverty, unemployment/not in labor force, uninsured), health distress (rates of disability, obesity, poor/fair self-rated health, smoking, and drug, alcohol, and suicide mortality), and social distress (rates of separation/divorce, single parent families, vacant housing units, persistent population loss) were strong predictors of Trump over-performance [at the county level in the Rust Belt]. These relationships held even

when controlling for metropolitan status” (2017, 229).

Luzerne County in northeastern Pennsylvania, population 317,646 (80.4 percent non-Hispanic white, 12.8 percent Hispanic-Latino, 6.3 percent black–African American), is emblematic of the trends of economic and social distress and was one of the handful of counties studied in this project (U.S. Census Bureau 2018). Given the characteristics I describe here, this county is a “paradigmatic case” for exploring the political lives of white political actors in the context of modern economic inequality and an uneven spatial distribution of opportunity (Flyvbjerg 2001, 80). Obama won the county, which is historically Democratic, by 8.4 percent in 2008 and 4.8 percent in 2012. Yet Trump won by 19 percent, the largest landslide in county history. Such a recent and dramatic shift in voting behavior suggests changes in how citizens are interpreting their economic and political straight, making the county an extreme case of shifting voter preferences (Flyvbjerg 2001, 78).

Further, these changes are especially telling given the economic and demographic history of the region. The former Democratic majority in northeastern Pennsylvania stems from a history of union manufacturing, coal mining, and white ethnic groups—mainly Italian, Polish, Russian, and Irish (Bradlee 2018). The salience of these identities has changed alongside the economy, and ethnic white identities have also shifted as the population is mainly fourth- and fifth-generation immigrants. Thus, many voters in the area are not rural conservatives but are rather the ambiguous white working class that both formed the former base of the Democratic Party and were the focus of much hand-wringing on the Left after the 2016 election.

Finally, the county embodies the political implications of landscapes of despair and its correlation with support for Trump (Monnat and Brown 2017). Economic despair is a lived experience in this area: median household income has not increased since 1980, a quarter of adults were unemployed before the pandemic, and many young adults leave the community for better economic prospects (U.S. Census Bureau 2018). Claiming the highest mortality rate for middle-age whites in the state outside of

Philadelphia and Pittsburgh, the county is emblematic of the “deaths of despair” thesis that links rising white mortality rates to economic and social hopelessness (Case and Deaton 2017). The majority white community in the county suffers from significant drug abuse problems. Indeed, overdose deaths have doubled each year since 2015 and suicide rates have doubled in the past ten years and remain more than 30 percent higher than the national average. Alcohol abuse is also an issue, the area sporting the twin distinctions of some of the highest per-capita liquor licenses and alcoholics anonymous groups in the country.

To explore the relationship between the Trump campaign, the social identities of supporters, and populism, I designed an ethnographic and interview study of the 2020 electoral cycle. I used an insider perspective to explore how actors negotiate power relationships and identity within meaningful political experiences (Schatz 2009; Pachirat 2009). The core of the research was participant observation as a campaign volunteer focused on the “ground game” of organizing, canvassing, and mobilizing. I supplemented this with interviews conducted during and after the fieldwork. Unlike earlier research on this topic, I focused not only on the general public, but also on the relationships between the public and the identity entrepreneurs of candidates, organizers, and political elites as they deployed “identity strategies with the goal of changing individuals, culture, institutions, and the state” (van Stekelenburg, Roggeband, and Klandermans 2013, xvii). Thus I sought to capture the dynamism of campaign work and how it impacted the identity politics of voters.

Specifically, as a political ethnographer, I volunteered for the Trump Reelection Campaign during the 2020 campaign cycle from June through November in northeastern Pennsylvania. This was not a covert project—staff members and regular volunteers knew that my presence was part of a research project. In the field, I participated in canvassing (or door-knocking), phone-banking, and event support as key sites of inquiry. In addition to formal events and tasks, I also focused on off-stage conversations that happened between meetings, phone-calls, and events, as actors re-

flected on and strategized around the efficacy of their framing work. By living full-time in the community, I also attended nonelectoral events for a deeper understanding of the political culture of the area, such as All Lives Matter and Back The Blue events. In some settings—such as those with large numbers of attendees, fluid conversations, or while canvassing—I did not explain my role as a researcher and, following my institution-approved research design, did not collect identifiers.

Given the nature of the research, my identity was an important component of my participation and interpretation in the field. As a white male in my late thirties, I drew on my working-class background and years of experience in the skilled trades to connect with a population that had similar life experiences. Although I tried to steer conversations toward the experiences of the people I engaged with, I was open about my political views—critical of elite control in both parties, supportive of policies that help the working class, and fascinated by both Trump and the future of the Republican Party. I offered criticisms of both candidates when asked. My research benefited from an early start in July, in that by the time the election heated up I was often the volunteer with the most experience and who knew the most people—for example, in the vignette just described I had been tasked with training Mike how to canvass. Most people understood me as an active volunteer.⁴ Those with whom I had repeated interactions would often come to me with questions about American politics or the constitution, given my status as a professor.⁵ For the most part, people were not interested in my role as a researcher, though I would occasionally be told, “you have to put this in your book.”

The details of the method were simple and

emphasized engaging people in conversations. As a canvasser I was tasked with knocking doors on select houses to inquire about things such as voter registry, candidate preferences, and plans for voting. The required tasks as a canvasser were minimal—using a smart phone app to input answers to a handful of basic survey questions—but the interactions would routinely lead to longer conversations about the election and the state of the country. Other research moments, such as events and parties, were less structured yet followed a similar agenda of engaging people in open-ended political conversation. Given that most of these moments were political in nature, and that by late August I was a known entity to most regular volunteers and staffers, this was a straightforward task. These conversations would range in many directions but would usually include some discussion on both COVID-19 and Black Lives Matter. Additionally, I would ask people their opinions about Trump with a variant of “why do you think people are so excited about the president?” I did little of what campaign staff might call “persuasion canvassing” designed to change people’s votes. For one, the campaign infrastructure never included this approach. At the same time, most of the people I engaged with had made their mind up already, and I spoke with few undecided or persuadable people.

Overall, this positionality allowed me to observe and participate in the dynamic processes of identity strategy development, deployment, and interpretation that occurred among actors. Thus I both observed and experienced these processes firsthand—when campaign actors enacted identity strategies, I was a target of those strategies while participating in their deployment among voters. In some cases, my re-

4. One volunteer I spoke with characterized my work this way: “In fact, when I volunteered for working the Trump thing, about three people mentioned your name, you were really active, and you knew what was going on. And that you were very good at conveying what the election was all about. And they needed somebody to work the table. And I said, ‘Well, I’ll tell you what . . . I want to work with [Biko] because I don’t want to learn the wrong way.’”

5. Typically, these conversations would go in fruitful directions, but not always. For example, one particularly active married couple asked me about the different ways that Trump and Biden presidencies would affect the economy. When I explained how the president’s ability to directly affect the economy was more limited than we might think, they took this as a rejection of Trump’s direct ability to reduce unemployment (and Biden’s desire and agency to increase it), and refused to talk to me from that point on.

lationship allowed me to observe how these strategies were developed in real time.

Crucially, the COVID-19 pandemic did not negatively affect my ability to conduct fieldwork. In response to Pennsylvania public health policy, the campaign either ignored policy, moved events out of doors, or strategically labeled gatherings as peaceful protests (a reference to the large crowds at Black Lives Matter protests across the country). Indeed, the discourse of COVID-19 among the campaign and voters was an avenue that Trump supporters use to distinguish themselves from others who feared what they perceived as an overblown and politically manipulated crisis.

Finally, a note about the population with whom I interacted. The Republican Party is a coalition of interest groups with a wide spectrum of political beliefs across individuals and geographic areas. The Trump supporters I interacted with included militia members, single-issue voters, libertarians, business people, and out-of-touch voters who expressed ignorance about the election but were motivated to vote for their party or candidate. Indeed, a handful of supporters I met were both infatuated with the president while simultaneously proud that they were not registered to vote and had no intention of doing so.

Although my experience canvassing potential voters offers some insights into all these groups, most of my interactions and the focus of this research were with dedicated Trump supporters who participated in ways beyond voting. Knocking on doors, managing the local campaign offices, helping at events, or distributing lawn signs, this group is probably best framed as Trump's base of support. Their policy issues or ideological goals of course varied, but they were unified by a belief in Trump's personal and political narratives, a belief in his success as president, and scathing critiques of the Democratic Party. Although my method does not allow for precise demographic measures of the people I worked with, my impressions were that they generally fit into the broad working class as Joan Williams defines it, those 53 percent of Americans who are neither rich nor poor: "As of 2015, these families had incomes ranging from \$41,005 to \$131,962. Their median in-

come was \$75,144. At the high end are married families of, for example, a radiation therapist (median pay \$70,010) and a police officer (median pay \$60,270)" (2019, 33).

My experience with these supporters mirrored Williams's argument about the working class encompassing economic and cultural themes. Trump supporters who wanted more economic opportunity were not interested in minimum-wage jobs with a higher rate. Instead, they wanted high-status occupations that would replace the former coal and manufacturing jobs that many nostalgically framed as hard but dignified. Culturally, they wanted to preserve the positives of what many called the "real America" of close-knit communities, religious attendance, traditional gender norms, and the American Dream of dignified work opportunities that led to economic prosperity across generations. Some narratives of Trump supporters frame them as hostile and confrontational, but my experiences with people across northeastern Pennsylvania were almost exclusively friendly, warm, and engaging.

THE MULTILEVEL PROCESS OF POLITICIZATION

In my time volunteering with the campaign, the sense of status loss was pervasive. Given a context of perceived status loss, we might expect some to succumb to disempowering self-criticism or withdraw from the political arena (McDermott 2006; Gest 2016). Hardship alone, real or otherwise, does not automatically translate to political mobilization. Further, the ideological character of political claims does not automatically follow from the nature of hardship: economic distress does not automatically turn one into either a die-hard socialist or right-wing populist. Yet I found a group of engaged political actors with defined grievances mobilized by a campaign that helped shape these grievances and give them political direction. How did status loss (or at least the anxiety about losing status) translate into support for Trumpian right-wing populism? In the next section, I draw on fieldwork and interviews to explain the connections.

The explanation begins with a narrative of status loss across economic, cultural, and political themes. Although the empirical research

questions whether Trump voters have truly lost their social dominance, perceptions of status loss were abundant in northeastern Pennsylvania. To this we can add a theme of righteous injustice, where people felt not only that their group has lost status in society, but also that this outcome was a violation of deeply held values of fairness. Political elites amplified and framed these concerns into a political campaign with a call to action—voting for Trump. The combination of emotion and conspiracy theories both cast opponents as people with a starkly different set of values and provided instrumental value for adherents to make sense of their loss of status while maintaining agency and self-confidence. Conspiracism plays into this as an input of meaning making that stitches the parts together by drawing clear moral boundaries between Trump supporters and “evil” Democrats, anti-Trump Republicans, and cultural elites of all types.

To illuminate this process, I turn to scholarship on social movement mobilization that examines how individuals come to see themselves as part of a collective identity, and how that identity is in turn politicized to achieve some social end. In particular, I use the framework that Marjoka van Doorn, Jacomijne Prins, and Saskia Welshen developed to explain the multilevel process of collective identity politicization among Trump supporters (2013). As described in the following section, this process involves meso-level political elites drawing on macro-level social categories to develop collective action frames for potential supporters. Interpersonal interactions on the micro level accept, reject, strengthen, or weaken these frames to the extent they take on the collective identities they offer and take action in ways that fit into the framework.

Macro Cleavages: Economic Anxieties, Cultural Performances, and Political Alienation

We begin on the macro level, where social cleavages provide the starting point for the development of politicized grievances. This is the endoxa, or “the background conceptions of the way the world is” that actors hold (Woodly 2015, 8). The sense of economic, cultural, and political loss just described can be thought of as this

“raw material” that groups and individuals will use to make sense of the world.

As Diana Mutz shows in her work on the 2016 election, the notion of economic anxiety as the root of Trump’s support may be a chimerica, with individual financial well-being having little impact on vote choice (2018). Instead, Mutz argues that anxiety about racial diversity and the global ascendance of China were stronger drivers for Trump supporters. John Sides, Michael Tesler, and Lynn Vavreck add to this argument, showing how individual economic circumstances were only weakly related to vote choice in 2012 and 2016 (2018). They show that the economic anxiety of Trump supporters is instead tightly bound to race and identity. This “racialized economics” is driven by status concerns, “the belief that undeserving groups are getting ahead while your group is left behind” (2018, 368).

Among the Trump supporters I encountered, economic opportunity was seen as the primary issue their communities faced. These concerns were sometimes, but not always, explained in personal experiences but always linked to the broader community. Thus, following Sides, Tesler, and Vavreck, individual economic concerns were outweighed by group and community-level anxieties about the economy. They saw the economic decay in their community and the lack of opportunities for most people (especially younger generations) and feared that this process would continue until there was nothing left. For example, although most noted that jobs were available, they were not particularly good jobs. Few offered better than \$10 or \$11 dollars an hour and finding work that offered benefits was a challenge. As one middle-class person with a steady government job described it, “There are plenty of shit jobs here, but no careers.”

This understanding about careers gets to the status concerns that interact with notions of economic anxiety. Economics are not simply about individual jobs and income, but also about status-related occupational choices that shape the character of multigenerational communities. Temporary work and low-skilled service jobs were plentiful but seen as a dead-end. The idea of increasing the minimum wage and social benefits such that a low-skilled

worker could have a reasonable income and government-provided health care missed the point of people who wanted meaningful careers in industries they saw as dignified and prestigious. Even the warehouse work that promised higher wages and some degree of stability were seen as poor choices relative to the coal mining and manufacturing jobs of earlier generations. For those who had employment in more prestigious occupations—such as fracking or beverage packing—their jobs were a clear source of pride. Fracking workers, in particular, were held in high esteem as part of the nation’s energy independence and national security apparatus. But demand far outweighed supply for these types of jobs.

Related to these occupational concerns was the belief that younger generations had to leave the community to find success. Although people wanted what was best for their children, most lamented the situation and wish they could stay: “I went to [a high school] where the mantra was, if you have any sort of potential, you pack your bags and you get out of town. That’s sort of across [northeastern Pennsylvania]. The message is if you have any sort of potential you go, and it doesn’t matter where you go. As long as you’re not here, you were defined as a success. I think in the eyes of most people, there’s a stigma to people who stick around.”

The lack of “real” economic opportunities was, for many, related to a broader sense of the loss of community. This was a lived experience and the background for many people I spoke with, regardless of their political affiliation.

Throughout my fieldwork, Trump supporters had a sense that their cultural norms were at odds with what they saw in mainstream media and entertainment. This covered a wide variety of cultural practices, from everyday consumer items such as coffee and fast-food preferences to overtly political practices such as singing the national anthem at social events and conservative norms of gender practices. At the same time, the performance of rural working class was ubiquitous, and pickup trucks, Carhartt clothing, and country music dominated social events. I experienced few instances of what might be thought of as Country Club, Wall Street, or otherwise wealthy elite conservatism during my fieldwork.

Layered onto this was a notion that they were seen by Democrats and progressive elites as “rednecks,” “white trash,” or “ignorant.” For Trump supporters, this was always associated with false accusations of racism—the belief that cultural values that connected hard work to deservedness had been twisted by their accusers to denigrate a way of life that all felt was endemic to an American identity of individual achievement and economic mobility. Taken together, these cultural tensions led many Trump supporters to feel under attack, viewing their opponents as antifreedom, totalitarian, and in favor of autocratic “thought police” policies.

Political alienation was common in how Trump supporters described their engagement before 2016. In terms of partisanship, most Trump supporters identified as Republican although a substantial minority were former Democrats or Obama voters. But for many the allegiance was less to the party in general than to Trump specifically. Sharp criticisms of non-Trump Republicans were universal, and both Bush presidencies were often linked with Obama as partly to blame for the lack of economic opportunity in the area. Although many had voted in previous elections, the excitement about Trump was universally novel for supporters. Some dedicated volunteers had not even voted in 2016 given a historical distrust of both parties.

Christopher Achen and Larry Bartles best capture the root of this partisan alienation. If partisanship is linked to social identity, “a reflection of judgements about where ‘people like me’ belong,” than many Trump supporters I spoke with felt weak ties to both parties (2017, 266). Former Democrats felt that the Obama years had revealed a party more interested in Silicon Valley billionaires, immigrants, and cosmopolitan city dwellers than “hard-working Americans.” The Republican Party was seen as a different version of this, given Bush’s approach to immigration and a sense that the party was more cued to elites than regular people. People may have voted for Bush, Obama, or Romney, but many did not feel that either party was a place for people like them.

In northeastern Pennsylvania, perceptions of status loss were abundant: A national culture

that no longer saw value in working-class practices except as a punch line and simultaneously reduced the dignity of manual trades in traditional occupations. An economy that had left the Rust Belt behind, reducing the material value of traditional work in favor of the service and knowledge economy. Political parties that for generations had made promises to bring back jobs and return to an older, more dignified way of life, but failed to make good on their promises. Throughout it all, a sense of deprivation was linked with unmet expectations of status and compounded by perceptions of elite favoritism of undeserving groups. Among the Trump supporters I spent time with, the notion was strong that “people like me” were the backbone of the country but simply didn’t matter before Trump came on the scene. And yet these experiences and perceptions alone are not enough to spark politicization.

Meso Frames of Injustice and Political Agency

Political leaders and organizers—or identity entrepreneurs in the social movement literature—use these macro-social themes at the meso-level, where they “to try to manipulate the significance of social cleavages. They try to steer the attention of certain opposing collective identities and not to others” (van Doorn, Prins, and Welshen 2013, 65). Elite messaging, pro-Trump media, party operatives, and Trump himself leveraged macrolevel concerns about status loss to develop coherent narratives about how people should interpret the state of the world and their lives. We might think of this process as one of developing collective action frames that “render events or occurrences meaningful and thereby function to organize experience and guide action” (Benford and Snow 2000, 614). In this section, I consider the framing work of identity entrepreneurs in the campaign as they developed and deployed narratives designed to shape how individuals made sense of the political world.

To begin with, the overall message did not cast Trump supporters as members of a dominant or powerful social group at odds with an insurgent opponent. Instead, they were cast as being on the losing side of a long battle against economic and cultural changes that were coun-

ter to their values and that affected their lives, the lives of their children, and their communities in material and symbolic ways. The framing of this group as not dominant was crucial for building an empowered collective identity. It explained group loss through the imposition of hardship by outside forces and made experiences of marginality something imposed rather than a product of failure or deficiency.

The identity entrepreneurs of the campaign offered a collective identity to Trump supporters that took this idea of unfairly imposed grievances and wove it into social cleavages of group identity, class, and partisanship. Narratives around race and ethnicity were complicated, and practically everyone I interacted with went to great lengths to express how they were not racist. At the same time, the imbalance of power between races was clear to most people—a cultural, economic, and political preference among elites for immigrants and people of color at the expense of both “regular Americans” and their valued notions of hard work and equal opportunity. A local candidate wove cleavages about race and ethnicity within a partisan tone that produced clear boundary work between Us and Them.

[My Democratic opponent] sent \$1,200 stimulus checks to illegal immigrants. Do you all support that? Oh, what kind of guy is that? What is he thinking? But you know, but he matches the modern Democratic Party. Yes, Kamala Harris, and AOC [Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez] and Ilhan Omar, they think *we’re* the problem. They think that *we’re*, you know, racist, we hate people. We love everybody! We want everybody to have an equal opportunity and an equal shot. And under President Trump, we had the best economy ever in northeastern Pennsylvania . . . He will finally stand up to China for all the things they have done to us over the years, to finally make China pay for the coronavirus lies, and for the stolen manufacturing jobs that have left our people out of work. But it’s on us. They will never stop. The liberals will never ever, ever stop. We have to stop them. . . . And I promise you, I will never forget who I am. I will never forget where I came from. And I will never forget you, the people I represent.

One volunteer expressed their view of this frame as follows: “People were fed up with being called racist or being called a redneck. Like they just wanted to sign out of the identity politics that people played, and sort of blaming of white people. And then Trump walks in. I don’t think he was a racist or anything like that. But I think he was certainly the type of guy that’s like, ‘I’m not for the Mexicans. I’m not for Muslims. I’m for *you*, Americans who are losing their jobs, because that’s what we need to focus on right now.’”

A common theme was to reject racial animus by both explicating how the Democrats were the true racists and offering personal stories to validate their openness to racial views. One canvasser puts both together.

The Democratic Party, they were, you know, pro slave. And then the Republicans are the ones that, you know, ended slavery. And it was the Democrats who formed the KKK [Ku Klux Klan] and the Republicans fought back, you know, so black people could defend themselves . . . and when [Biden] does speak, and can actually, you know, put together a sentence (laughs), a lot of racism comes out. You know, ‘if you don’t vote for me, then you ain’t black.’ Right? You know, he talked about being in a swimming pool and having roaches run over his hands when he referred to black children. Like, my ex-girlfriend is black, but we’re still really good friends. And her two daughters both are black, you know, I look at them as my own. So I don’t play that race crap at all.

Unlike racist Democratic candidates who engaged in overt discrimination, Trump was understood as someone who would support anyone, regardless of race, who was willing to work hard and follow the rules. Trump supporters in northeastern Pennsylvania also offered strong endorsements of immigration, provided that immigrants went through the perceived proper legal channels. Latino immigrants were seen as particularly deserving—hard working, church going, and family oriented. Undocumented immigrants were generally cast in key roles of community breakdown, from the loss of jobs to below-minimum-wage workers to

criminal activity associated with the drug trade. Taken together, Trump supporters adhered to what Lawrence Bobo refers to as “laissez-faire racism,” where racial inequity is explained via meritocratic arguments of the failure of black Americans to succeed in the race-neutral capitalist marketplace (1999).

The second social cleavage is one of class, which casts coastal elites, Hollywood, sports figures, and billionaires as villains who drive the processes of status loss. Whereas Trump fights for “people like you,” these figures are seen as the powerholders driving the economic and cultural changes that have led to status loss in the first place. The same Republican candidate in the previous quote drove this home in a speech to a small group of supporters:

Here’s what we know about [my opponent]. He isn’t one of us. He doesn’t live like us. Anyone here have a private jet? Anyone here have a yacht? Anybody here have four vacation homes? Well, I don’t either. I don’t have any of those things. I have one thing. I have a work ethic. I work my ass off. I grew up working construction. My grandfather was a coal miner from Italy. A lot of folks in the audience, your grandparents came over here and try to make a better life. That’s what we’re about in northeastern Pennsylvania. We love our God. We love our guns. We love our religion. And we love our president.

A national campaign figure offered a similar narrative about the elitism of the Democratic Party: “And [The Green New Deal] sounds so good but none of these hypocritical Democrats who promoted it actually live by it. AOC [Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez] flies around on a plane, but she tells you not to fly around on a plane. Nancy Pelosi tells you, you can’t go to your beauty parlor, but she can go to her beauty parlor. And that’s the whole core of liberalism. It’s a bunch of hypocrisy. They want you to live by a different standard and wreck our economy, wreck what makes our country great.”

Class issues overlap with general notions of moral difference, which is framed as Trump Republicans against corrupt and immoral elites in both parties. Party organizers provide several narratives to this end, including the notion

that Democrats look down on Trump supporters. A local politician provided the following frame during a campaign event: “We also know what the other side thinks of us. I mean, they’ve made it very clear. We remember when Barak Obama said how the people of Pennsylvania that they cling to their guns and their religion. You’re damn right we do! And we’re proud of it! And you remember when Hillary Clinton called us the deplorables? Well today Joe Biden called us chumps. He called us chumps.”

Along with offering these narratives of out-of-touch and judgmental Democratic elites, organizers and campaign actors would also frame Democrats as not simply partisan opponents but as immoral enemies of the country. A national figure from the party discussed the Democratic response to COVID-19 to a small crowd in the following way:

It’s a show! It’s not science, it’s political bullshit! It’s worse than that, it’s intended to scare people, its intended to scare people, is intended to keep us . . . [pushes hands down aggressively, someone yells “suppressed” and the speaker nods and points at him]. Do you think our schools have to be closed? You know, the teacher’s union says they’ll open up on November 7. Do you think that the Democrat governors in a lot of these states are holding the economy down on purpose? They don’t give a damn if they’re hurtin’ people! In my state, they don’t care how many people go bankrupt! People are starving, and they don’t give a damn. Whatever it takes to beat Trump! We’ll starve people, we’ll hold back medicines from them. Who the hell knows what they’ll do next?

A related narrative cast the historic Democratic Party as one that was worthy of respect—a strategic framing given that many voters in the area were older and former Democratic voters. This allowed speakers to develop a contrast between a previous, acceptable version of Democratic politics and the party as it is today. Two national figures each developed this frame differently:

The best thing we can do for our Republic is to have an overwhelming defeat of the Demo-

cratic Party right now. They will then go back into reform their party, get rid of the bums, to get rid of the crooks. And they’ll go back to a solid American agenda.

Maybe more liberal than ours . . . but not a socialist agenda. Not a foreign agenda. Not one that allows you to burn the flag, not one that allows you to kneel down when the national anthem is being played, not one that dishonors America, it used to be “blame America” now they hate America! . . . What a bunch of phonies! It’s all to hate America! To make us hate our country, make our children hate our country.

You’d agree this isn’t the party of JFK [John F. Kennedy]. This isn’t the party of Bill Clinton. I mean, this is a totally unrecognizable party. Every single day they want to censor you. . . . They want to take away your first amendment rights. They want to get rid of religion in this country. You see what they’re doing to organize hate in this country. It’s disgusting. And Pennsylvania is a faith-based state and people are sick and tired of it. You know, they take out the words under God from the Pledge of Allegiance. I talk about this every single day. They’re happy to keep [liquor] stores open, but they want to keep churches closed. So they want to get rid of freedom of speech. They want to get rid of faith in this country.

A former Democrat I spent the day with at a parade enacted this frame when recounting her frustration with a friend of hers: “[My friend] thinks the Democratic Party is still like when JFK [John F. Kennedy] was there. And at one time they were for the working and the middle class. I think the Republican Party under Trump is turning into the middle-class party. I gotta be honest with you. I really do, I think the Democrats are for the super elite, and I think they’re for [low-income black and immigrant voters], to keep them poor. Not to help them, but to keep them down so they can control them and then get the votes.”

These cleavages are designed to politicize the collective identities of working-class Trump supporters. Different political elites certainly try to deploy different frames to this group, in-

cluding leftists who want to lay the blame on capitalism and the wealthy, and more libertarian-minded conservatives who would encourage people to change with the economic times (more on this second group shortly). Under the Trump narrative, though, the collective identity is one of unfairly imposed grievances by outsiders.

Micro-Conspiracism and Emotion in Interpersonal Framing

We finally turn to the microlevel of the politicization of collective identity, where meaning making processes take place “in interpersonal interactions that strengthen or weaken the ties between group members,” often relying on the frames provided by political elites (van Doorn, Prins, and Welshen 2013, 65). I participated in endless conversations that tilled this ground because campaign volunteers and participants routinely engaged in political conversation on the topics discussed. Key to this is the emotional component, namely, the anger and righteousness frames deployed by party identity entrepreneurs. In this framework, the shared status beliefs of Trump supporters are the correct ones, where status should be allocated through racialized norms of hard work, family loyalty, and local community. The diverse cosmopolitanism of urban elites and the service economy may have temporarily usurped national society, but these status beliefs are simply wrong and immoral.

The emotional content here solves two important issues for politicization. The first is that anger, especially when grounded in perceptions of unfair treatment, is more capable of sparking mobilization than other emotions such as fear or shame (van Zomeren 2013). Given the potential of status loss to lead to political withdrawal and disempowerment, the framework offered by the Trump narrative both defines status anxieties as legitimate grievances and attributes the responsibility of those grievances to opponents. Second, this felt sense of righteous injustice protects this group from criticisms of failure within their own meritocratic ideology of the American Dream. As Daniel HoSang and Joseph Lowndes show, this line of criticism against the white working class can be found in the writing of contemporary

conservative authors including Charles Murray, Kevin Williamson, and J. D. Vance (2019, 47–71). Within this conservative narrative, the economic and cultural losses of the white working class are explained via “dependency, behavioral pathos, family breakdown, and cultural disfunction” while ignoring structural explanations of inequality (HoSang and Lowndes 2019, 65). But if the loss of status and dignity are the fault of Democrats, RINOs (Republicans in Name Only), elites, immigrants, and people of color who are the true norm violators of hard work and deservedness, then Trump supporters can retain their belief in meritocracy. They haven’t failed so much as they have been cheated.

Within this framework, supporters often explained the appeal of Trump by his focus on jobs and employment early in conversations. As one volunteer summarized it, Trump’s platform came down to issues of jobs, with explicit concerns about immigration, race, gender, and social issues as distant seconds (except when specifically concerned with jobs). This volunteer felt that supporters “heard” the job offers, whereas Democrats “heard” overblown concerns about racism and discounted his economic promises.

But economic issues were always bound up in emotional status arguments that enacted the anti-elite narratives provided by party elites. In describing the Trump victory in 2016, many framed it as a broad feeling of the area and the people in it being left behind by society in general and by Democrats and RINOs specifically. As one interviewee put it, the feeling was that eight years of Obama had improved the lives of “everybody who wasn’t Us,” with explanations that Us included “regular” or “hard-working Americans” who were “sick of being forgotten.” The “everybody else” who had benefited under previous administrations included not only social groups such as “illegal immigrants” and “urban people,” but also coastal elites, Wall Street bankers, Hollywood actors, wealthy Bush and Romney Republicans, and Silicon Valley executives. The racial and ethnic coding of “who counts” as a “regular American” was routinely combined with strong populist critiques of elites in this way. Clinton’s loss in 2016 was in part linked to her perceived position of con-

tinuing the Obama administration's social and economic policies.

One theme tended to dominate microlevel interactions—conspiracism. Discussions of conspiracy theories performed important identity work for participants in building Us versus Them boundaries, developing comparative awareness of the group's unjust position in society, and in negotiation over the meaning of the group's position (Taylor and Whittier 1999; van Doorn, Prins, and Welshen 2013). Here a group of former Democrats (including elected ward leaders) vent about "draining the swamp," drawing on both passion and conspiracism in their discussion:

MIKE: [Trump] is draining the swamp. He's exposing all these—

JANE: Yes!

MIKE: —all these people go in there, not millionaires. And then they're suddenly all millionaires. And they make a lousy couple \$1,000 a year—

JULIE: Because they suck us down the drain!

MIKE: —where's that money coming from? That is all our money! They're stealin'. And [Trump] is exposing them, eventually he is going to get as many as he could. That's what I like about him! Get rid of the crooks because they've been in there for forty some years or more. And we can't get them out of there!

JULIE: And it doesn't matter what side they are, whether it is a Democrat or Republican. I really don't care if it's both of them. Get rid of them all! And start over.

DAVID: It's on both sides!

JANE: But why aren't they getting arrested?

DAVID: If [Trump] gets in, you can guarantee, is some of these people are going to jail!

[LOUD EXCLAMATIONS, PEOPLE YELLING OVER EACH OTHER]

BIKO KOENIG: Anyone in particular that you're thinking about, when you're thinking that people should be arrested?

LIZ: Biden and his son. They should be arrested for treason, because I think they sold our country down the drain to China.

JULIE: And let's get Pelosi out of there! They're all getting paid from China. Let's face the facts. China, I really—

JANE: We know movie stars that have picked up and moved, that we know why they moved. Because they know some of this might start unraveling.

BIKO KOENIG: I haven't heard this about movie stars.

JANE: Oh, yeah!

LIZ: Oh, big time.

DAVID: The conspiracy is about a lot of them being involved with Epstein, even Tom Hanks! He moved on. He bought a house in Greece so he wouldn't get caught.

JANE: A lot of this is, they might start unraveling.

JULIE: Oh, absolutely!

JANE: And a lot of stuff coming out. And they're involved with a lot of them. And Pelosi is right on top."

The content of conspiracism varied greatly to include stories of elite pedophilic Satan-worshippers, governors using COVID-19 regulations to impose communism, the organized theft of elections, and belief in a global ruling class that sought to impose its will on America and its people. The threads that unified these themes were their use as clear evidence of widespread corruption among political opponents, and that these opponents (and hence their corruption) could be identified through their resistance to and disapproval of Trump.

As circulated by supporters, this general position performed important boundary work in separating allies from opponents. It also strengthened the claims of righteous injustice: if your political opponents are not only wrong but also deeply corrupt and morally depraved, then your own marginalized position is clearly unjust. Thus, the decentering of Trump supporters is not simply the outcome of politics as usual or a fair economy but instead one of a society-wide battle to save democracy and the country. In articulating the position of Trump supporters in the broader society in this way, it also provides moral ammunition for the rejection of liberal and cosmopolitan status beliefs.

The process of negotiating the meaning of Trump supporters and opponents feeds directly into the logic of right-wing populism that casts the righteous "people" in opposition to the corrupt elite. In the ideational model of pop-

ulism, this binary is strengthened through black and white moral claims of right and wrong (Hawkins and Kaltwasser 2019). Taken together, the multilevel process of politicization among Trump supporters offers instrumental value for Trumpian leaders to garner power and for supporters to understand their lost status as caused by villainous opponents.

Unlike much social movement activity, the call to action for Trump supporters was relatively easy and low cost. At a minimum, it involved casting a vote but offered a plethora of options to volunteer, donate, or just participate in the spectacle of the election at rallies and events. With the electoral success of 2016, many Trump supporters felt optimistic about his chances for reelection at the same time that they retained their anger over the state of their lives. The framework provided by the Trump campaign thus embodies what Martijn van Zomeren describes as emotion-focused approach coping: “the more strongly individuals appraise external blame for their unfair situation, the more strongly they experience group-based anger and a strong motivation to act collectively” (2013, 85). Given the beliefs of group efficacy layered onto this emotional state, it is no surprise that mesolevel actors found success with their frameworks among Trump voters.

CONCLUSION

Vetra Taylor notes that “it is useful to think of social movements as discursive communities, held together not only by common action and bonds of solidarity but also by identities, symbols, shared identity discourse, and practices of everyday life that attribute participants’ experiences to particular forms of social injustice” (2013, 43). American electoral politics was once understood to not deeply penetrate notions of personal identity for most voters. Recent scholarship suggests otherwise, and that polarization can be somewhat explained by the strong bonds between partisanship and identity. As I have described, Trumpian politics has remade the political landscape in part by reshaping and politicizing identities in a dynamic and multilevel process. Drawing on macrolevel social cleavages, mesolevel political actors design and deploy frames that encourage working-class actors to understand their so-

cial, political, and economic losses in ways that place Trump opponents as responsible for these problems and Trumpian politics as the only solution. On the micro level, interpersonal emotional dynamics support and amplify these frames as people experience self-righteous anger and circulate narratives that vilify opponents in stark terms. Through this process, status loss is framed as neither the outcome of meritocratic capitalism nor the result of natural changes to society. Instead, it is a battle between competing sets of status beliefs, where opponents are reviled for their moral transgressions as they intentionally, and unfairly, strip away the status of hard-working Americans.

A key concern coming out of the status scholarship is the relationship of status processes to persistent inequality. As Ridgeway puts it, “status beliefs stabilize structures of inequality between social difference groups by legitimating them on the basis of merit” (2019, 143). For low-status people, it provides them with a means of “justifying and rendering sensible the structure of inequality in which they find themselves” (Ridgeway 2019, 145). As we have seen, many Trump voters reject the justifications for their own status loss but couch them in frames that seek to reestablish a set of merit-based status beliefs grounded in individual achievement and laissez-faire racism. Such a move would continue to produce group-based inequality, perhaps with different arrangements of winners and losers.

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