



Journal of Social and Political Sciences

Merkouraki, M., & Tzioti, K. (2024). Mapping the Trump-Harris First Presidential Debate: Narratives of Trumpism Propagation Rattle Voters' Ontological Security. *Journal of Social and Political Sciences*, 7(4), 31-39.

ISSN 2615-3718

DOI: 10.31014/aior.1991.07.04.522

The online version of this article can be found at:

<https://www.asianinstituteofresearch.org/>

Published by:
The Asian Institute of Research

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Mapping the Trump-Harris First Presidential Debate: Narratives of Trumpism Propagation Rattle Voters' Ontological Security

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Abstract

Following the first-ever face-to-face Trump-Harris presidential debate in Philadelphia, broadcast by ABC News from the National Constitution Center and attracting an audience exceeding 67 million viewers, this analysis delves into the backdrop of the emergence of Trumpian rhetoric, the crystallized existential concerns and insecurities of American voters. In particular, the design of this research, based on a quantitative and qualitative content analysis of Donald Trump's political discourse, revealed that his language communication is characterized by a series of crisis narratives and a distinct "Us vs. Them" mentality, suggesting a nuanced perspective on the relationship between political narratives, threat, and fear. This article also delineates different modes of ontological security theory and demonstrates how Trump perpetuates and radicalizes a populist-nationalist electoral environment. In contrast, Kamala Harris's narrative approach seeks to foster unity and mutual respect and bring to the spotlight the real issues that torment the US. Accordingly, by focusing on how Donald Trump discursively promotes a strong conflictual ideological identity, a crucial question arises: How do his narratives influence the fearfulness and perceptions of American voters? The initial findings reveal that voters who make a significant effort to uphold established political narratives often feel a high level of insecurity, which Trumpism imperatives skillfully manipulate. Particularly, it appears that "Trump-speak" (Homolar & Scholz, 2019) effectively stoked broad hostility towards Kamala Harris by depicting her as both vulnerable and perilous. Simultaneously, the story-discussion between Donald Trump and Kamala Harris unfolds in the paradoxical context of an evolving hero-Trumpian narrative, which tends to incite an ontological "insurrection" among Trump's supporters.

Keywords: Ontological Security, Trumpism, American Voters, Crisis Narratives, Populism

1. Introduction

Over the last decade, the American political landscape has undergone rigorous challenges. One of the main reasons is the rise of Trumpism and its rejection of traditional US democratic ideals and paths. The Trump-Harris

presidential debate constitutes a compact representation of the contradictory ideologies of both candidates and provides a steppingstone through which one can assess the dynamics of the tools used to sway the public votes. In other words, this debate highlighted the stark contrasts among the candidates and illuminated the most dividing topics for the American people, who are juggling between the pursuit of a liberal mindset and the lack of trust in institutions. A key observation in Donald Trump's dialectic construction during the debate is his adept use of an emotionally charged, schismatic crisis narratives through strong information manipulation (Rosenblum, 2008; Abromeit, 2016).

From a socio-linguistic perspective, "Trump-speak" (Homolar & Scholz, 2019) reveals that his claims of legitimacy as a leader primarily originate from "crisis discourse." He presents his audience with a negative context and instills a sense of invincibility. The Trumpism "mischievous" narratives in tandem induce ontological insecurity among the American people and convert their fear into the assurance that the narrator's policy initiatives are the pathway to "normality." It appears that the Trump campaign employs rhetorical strategies to distort voters' social consciousness identities, aiming to provide social reassurance in the political arena. As American citizens struggle to discover or preserve their self-identities in the face of this polarized political environment, the narratives constructed during the debate come into play to further deepen the uncertainty and fear that these individuals are experiencing (Urbati, 2019; Moynihan & Roberts, 2020).

Looking back at the past pre-election period between Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton, it appears that Donald Trump consistently makes destructive communication choices. Both then and now, Trump's campaign speeches primarily associate the current state of America's distress with the "others," the second category of humans, the foreigners vs. the domestics. Much of the former president's apocalyptic rhetoric portrays "aliens" as either "formidable" leaders of countries contributing to America's economic decline or as malicious enemies of the country, posing a threat to American employment and physical security. Undoubtedly, Donald Trump aims to secure an unexpectedly large portion of the popular vote based on the perception that voters, particularly white, working-class men, hold (Cinnirella, 1998). A significant proportion of Donald Trump's followers demonstrated hostility towards immigrants and Muslims. The ex-president's depiction of immigrants classified foreigners into various, fear-provoking categories—a hallmark of populist messages (Wodak, 2015). Alongside his continual repetition of divisive speech, harsh language, and confrontational images, Donald Trump depicted immigrants in the United States as "criminals," "killers," and "terrorists" who take pleasure in "chopping off heads." Trump's campaign's radicalized speeches depicted migrants as the primary culprits behind America's economic decline, deterioration of personal safety, and fragmentation of social cohesion, thereby intensifying his audience's anxieties around diversity. In fact, the Dangers to Democracy report indicates that Trump's communication stereotypes influence the sentiments of voters. A growing number of Americans—18 million people—support the use of political violence as the 2024 presidential campaign heats up (The Guardian, 2023).

Next to that, during his pre-electoral campaign, he strategically employed sexist language against his female opponents. Donald Trump's brutal and derogatory rhetorical assaults on female candidates throughout the campaign, along with his efforts to incite masculine anxieties, exemplify his propensity to exploit gender conventions for political gain. The above suggests that the former President organized his campaign messages along a firm line between "Us and Them" (Arfi, 1998). These verbal and puzzling games between two opposing narrative poles have a decisive effect on voters' feelings of security, potentially fueling a vicious cycle of addictive behavior rooted in a sense of loss of home and faith in institutions. Consequently, Trump's crisis narratives serve as core parameters of escalating voters' need for cognitive closure, surpassing their psychological discomfort as they grapple with ambiguity and a desire for predictability (Rosenblum, 2008).

2. Method and Data

This research article performs a qualitative content analysis of the predominant Trumpism crisis narratives as they stem from the transcript of the September 10th, 2024 Trump-Harris debate ([READ: Harris-Trump presidential debate transcript - ABC News \(go.com\)](#); The Guardian, 2024), employing in parallel a quantitative examination

of the most frequently used negative terms and phrases. Qualitative analysis helps us to focus on measuring and providing scientific evidence by examining data derived from recorded communication, written, oral, or visual (Wagenmakers et al., 2023; Merkouraki, 2024). The qualitative method also serves as a tool for understanding and interpreting the data and finding the real meaning of words. The aim of this research is to better understand the crucial topics of insecurity, as well as the threat of others associated with partisan discourse. Ultimately, this research underscores the vital role that narratives play in shaping politics in an era marked by profound division and uncertainty.

In this regard, we explicitly explore selected themes by coding the debate utilizing the three conventional indicators of ontological security: (a) the loss of "home", (b) the loss of faith in institutions, and (c) the threat of others. Through a meticulous thematic categorization procedure, we discovered the subsequent themes:

Table 1: The 10 Main Themes of the Trump-Harris Debate.

The 10 Main Themes of the Trump-Harris Debate	
1.	Economy: Taxes, plans, and policies
2.	Abortion rights
3.	Immigration and border security—deportation
4.	Weaponization of the Justice Department
5.	Policy position changes
6.	January 6 th marked the peaceful transfer of power—the results of the 2020 election
7.	The Israel-Hamas War and hostages, War in Ukraine, Afghanistan
8.	Race and politics
9.	Healthcare
10.	Climate change

In summary, the scope of our work resulted in the profound identification of some selected topics mentioned above: (a) Economy—Taxes, plans, and policies; (b) Immigration and border security—Deportation; (c) January 6th and the peaceful transfer of power—2020 election results; and (d) Race and politics. The selection of these motifs is not accidental, as they facilitate the investigation of internal aspects of ontological security.

The following research question encapsulates the previously mentioned points that we plan to further analyze:

RQ1: In what manner did the crisis narratives of Trumpism impact the ontological security of American voters?

3. Literature Review

3.1 Crisis Narratives bolstering Ontological Security

Narratives are intentional stories that attract "attention to one aspect of an event" while obscuring another (Franzosi, 1998). People use them as tools to shape politics, policies, and identities. A well-constructed narrative has the capacity to invoke values and transmit the emancipation of cognitive politics, thus creating a shared identity, common objective, and sense of belonging (Patterson & Monroe, 1998). Politicians frequently deploy narratives to frame issues in a way that aligns with their agendas. The intended effect is to deliver an interpretation of an event in a way that emphasizes the actor's assets and elevates him in the eyes of the public. Such narratives frequently center on concepts such as the nation, freedom, and the rule of law (Somers, 1994).

R.D. Laing and Anthony Giddens laid the groundwork for a comprehensive definition of ontological security from a psychoanalytic and sociological perspective (Rich, 2021). Liang argued that ontological security means "feeling real, alive, whole, and, in a temporal sense, a continuous person" (Liang, 1990, p. 39; Gustafsson, 2020). Giddens,

on the other hand, states that "feelings of ontological security are a characteristic of large segments of human activity in all cultures" (Giddens, 1991, p. 36) and that a person feels ontologically secure when he has an uninterrupted routine (Gustafsson, 2020). Some of the characteristics of ontological security are "continuity," "sense of control and belonging," and "certainty about the future" (Bell et al., 2019; Skey, 2010). According to Rich (2021), the "community" a person lives in shapes their sense of ontological security and identity.

Fear, anxiety, and uncertainty about the future create insecurity (Kinnvall, 2004). The loss of stability and predictability of an individual's routine can be factors that lead to insecurity (Skey, 2010). Identity also holds an important role since it provides a narrative for the person and their place in the community. More specifically, national identities seem to gain ground in times of crisis or transformation when one is seeking to re-establish their sense of security. All aspects of crisis narratives closely link to ontological insecurity. Crisis narratives are vital cues for politicians who want to create a deep, organic dichotomy in public opinion by promoting dramaturgy in political communication. Martin (2024) observes that those seeking to assert (or retain) power and resources, particularly in an urgent or exceptional manner, often use constructed crisis narratives as a means of concealment. Notably, narratives of crisis improve, in one word, our understanding of how consensus forms in the aftermath of a disaster and becomes the barometer of creating an unstable sociocultural identity.

Nowadays, a fundamental challenge in democratic politics is the collective action problem, which often shapes political identity due to prevailing crisis narratives. When democratic regimes are in a state of flux, it is frequently difficult to inspire citizens to transcend their underlying emotional responses and engage. How can the core of ontological unease be dismantled? That is the central issue here. The conventional responses are to reward them, monitor them attentively, or provide them with moral justification. Another response is the use of force. Coercion compels individuals to participate in democratic actions. A threat will suffice. Fear diminishes rationality and stimulates primal instincts, replacing the cognitive evaluation of objectives with non-cognitive urges for survival and social affiliation. Force is unique in that it targets a specific target for dread, including the state, which is the only entity with the authority to use force under the guise of the rule of law. Narratives of fear and menace disrupt decision-making processes, engender unease, and maximize the dilemmas of ontological (in)security among voters. The main trends contributing to ontological insecurity are:

3.1.1. The loss of "home"

The essence of home can vary for every individual. Browning (2018) posits that home can serve as a place of origin, a place of unconditional acceptance, and, in a broader sense, a place or space that instills a sense of security. "Home" can also refer to a nation, a community, or something local (Kinnvall, 2004; Skey, 2010; Castells, 2000). When an individual experiences an unexpected transformation that causes them to lose their sense of home, leading to ontological insecurity, it is only natural for them to seek to re-establish their sense of security and belonging (Kinnvall, 2004). Since "home" is typically associated with the nation, we can conclude that nationalism is intrinsically linked to the concept of "home."

3.1.2. The loss of faith in institutions

Ontological security and the identity of individuals are factors that actively shape democratic politics and policies (Rich, 2021). Sentiment that the political system represents the elites can lead to a loss of faith in institutions, creating a divide and insecurity (Browning, 2018). This is where identity is relevant, since people, when feeling insecure, adopt radical or even extremist views, which jeopardize the operation of institutions and democratic ideals (Rich, 2021).

3.1.3. The threat of others

Once again, the identity of the individuals holds an important role in how they perceive the notions of self and others. Skey (2010) posits that a person's sense of self can be associated with the nation's identity. He also notes that the presence of other cultures and values can threaten most homogenous nations, underscoring the need for their protection. In addition, individuals typically choose to remain within and surround themselves with their own

group and community, also known as their ingroup. Individuals tend to establish groups even when it is not necessary to feel included and secure, which leads back to the theory of social identity (Kinnvall, 2004).

3.2 Understanding the "storytelling" of Trumpism

Trumpism, a term stemming from Donald Trump's advent in American politics, denotes a unique blend of extreme individualistic rhetoric, robust nationalism, economic protectionism, pragmatic industrialism, nativism, and unorthodox political strategies that outlined not only his previous campaign and following government, as well as his current electoral campaign (Moynihan & Roberts, 2020; Canovan, 2002; D'Erano, 2013). Unequivocally, Trumpism transcends the actions of an individual leader; it is a movement that has profoundly influenced American politics, altering the dynamics of party politics, public debate, and the electorate.

More than reflecting the views of a single man, Trumpism exploits some voters' dissatisfaction by presenting a clear alternative to the existing order. However, his anti-establishment political discourse not only impacts American voters but also profoundly influences the future of democratic government and liberal order (Mollar & Geesin, 2019). We can attribute this phenomenon to Donald Trump's use of egalitarian storytelling, which fosters nonlinear demagoguery among his supporters. Through this narrative technique, former President Trump aims to establish an iconic dominance and forge a distinct voter identity by creating a war-like relationship between "Us and Them", which often results in the dehumanization of others through derogatory words and disparaging microaggressions (Abromeit, 2016; Berstein, 2017).

Commonly, Donald Trump's unconventional and carping political language style hatches a subversive disregard for political norms and his direct and often inflammatory rhetoric. For instance, the way he weaponizes social media, particularly X (formerly Twitter), as a primary communication tool serves as proof. He often dismisses traditional media outlets as "fake news," opting instead to communicate directly with his supporters through rallies, interviews, and tweets (Juma'h & Alnsour, 2018, Merkouraki, 2024).

Considering the present pre-election battle between Donald Trump and Kamala Harris, it is worth mentioning that Trump's confrontational political style, frequently attacking opponents, both within his party and across the political spectrum, denotes his goal to overwhelmingly influence public opinion. His combative approach resonates with many voters who appreciate his bluntness and rejection of "political correctness" (Urbinati, 2019). Meanwhile, it also deepened partisan divisions and contributed to an increasingly polarized political environment in the US by influencing the level of ideological "discursive" consciousness of the American people. As an outcome, the message's recipient experiences genuine perplexity that threatens the foundational trust mechanism, established through routine, thereby standardizing social life and enhancing self-knowledge. Therefore, it is not a coincidence that Trumpism represents a collection of simplified versions of intricate linguistic phenomena, coined under the triumphalist slogan "Make America Great Again" (Rosenblum, 2008).

In general, populist leaders, such as Trump, insist on the existential threats that plague the country, which is on the verge of utter collapse. He competes with other political actors over the representation of the people, using electoral periods to prove that "the people" they represent are the "right people" and deserve to rule for their own benefit. Crisis narratives carefully construct these notions to exemplify the stakes and evoke intense emotions like rage and fear. As mentioned above, his political pursuits can be framed by the imperative to "restore America's greatness," a narrative implying the loss of national identity and an imminent threat that necessitates intervention while concurrently positioning himself as the remedy (Homolar & Steel, 2019).

4. Results and Discussion

RQ1: In what manner did the crisis narratives of Trumpism impact the ontological security of American voters?

Upon observing Donald Trump's statements during the first presidential debate with Kamala Harris, it is evident that the words he uses and often repeats intentionally evoke conflicting and morally inflamed impulses. By

carrying out this venture, he hampers participation in electoral processes under the mantle of a narrative about the "hero." This, in turn, has led to the emergence of numerous antagonistic camps among voters who strongly disagree with one another. This situation prompts numerous inquiries about ontological (insecurity) issues. Similarly, Trumpism, a traditional tool of his, links American voters' compartmentalizing insecurities to narratives that prolong the emergence of conspiracy theories, exploiting "identity fusion" and signaling a "crisis of legitimacy" (Homolar & Steel, 2019).

While analyzing the debate, the most frequently used terms with negative connotations that had an impact on all three indicators of ontological security, which were presented previously, are: (a) crime/criminals (27 times), (b) bad/worse/worst (22 times), (c) destroy (14 times), (d) threat (7 times), and (e) execute/execution (3 times). These words play a pivotal role in shaping the narratives surrounding Trumpism. To be precise, they encourage the spread of successive discursive crises; they function as a form of "common knowledge" for American public opinion, potentially distorting the truth.

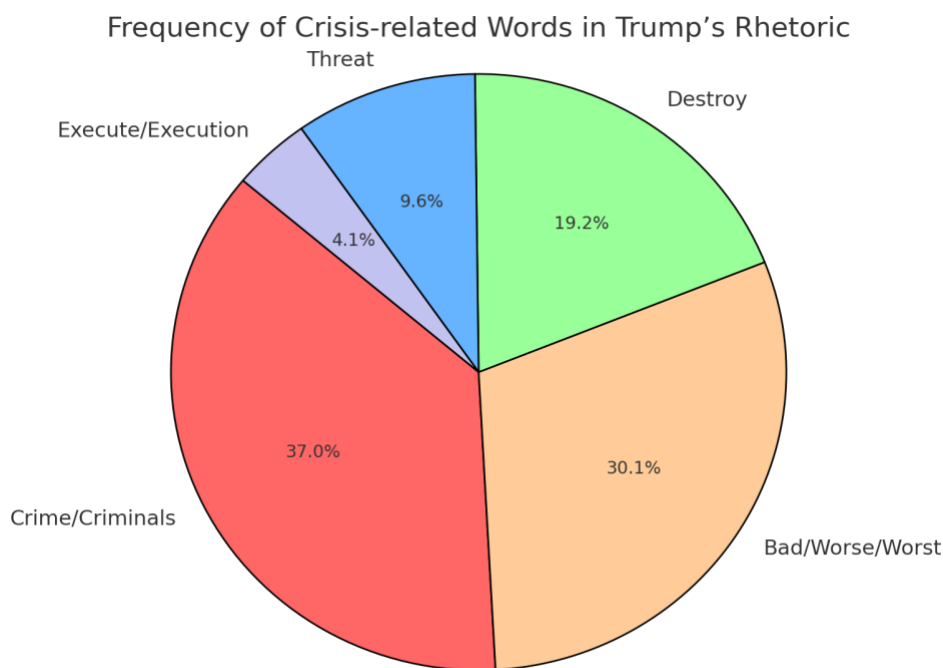


Figure 1: This visual illustrates the percentage prominence of various negative crisis-related terms in Trump's political language.

Furthermore, such psychologically laden utterances can have a considerable impact on voters' mentality, heightening the feeling of threat and uncertainty. Essentially, Donald Trump uses repetition as a rhetorical technique to convey a sense of urgency and impending threat. He seeks to construct a vibrant image by combining elements of reality alongside his narrative. As an illustration, during the debate, he mentioned that we "have millions of people pouring into our country from prisons and jails, from mental institutions, and from insane asylums." Despite the dramatic statement, immigration flows in the US have indeed surged. However, there is no concrete proof that these individuals have completed their sentences in correctional centers or mental facilities. A critical examination of the debate confirms that Trump conjured a picture of "Crisis America," relying upon a language of division. While further reflecting on his pre-election campaign speeches, it appears that he crafted vivid depictions of who belongs and who does not—of the strong and the weak, the winner and the loser. Donald Trump consistently portrayed "the others" as both responsible for America's current crisis and as diametrically opposed to him and his supporters (Somers, 1994; Peterson & Runyan, 2010).

The loss of home is a prominent theme in Trumpian narratives. Given this context, it is reasonable to assume that the nation serves as "home." Immigration and foreign influence are the two main components in constructing these narratives. The concepts of "the self" and "other" also play a significant role in this. During the debate, Trump

often stresses the threat that immigrants pose. He attempts to portray them as criminals, gang members, violent, and a security concern to the nation. He continually cites how they are "pouring into" the country and have "torn apart" the nation. In addition, he perceives them as a potential threat to the nation's economy. Herein, Donald Trump attempts to spread an urgent and self-ruling "terror-based" narrative (Martin, 2024). He wants to convey the message that the nation is under attack, and he is the most suitable person to clean up. Another dominant narrative during the debate was that "China and all the other countries have been ripping us off for years." Trump's crisis narratives suggests that foreign powers, particularly China, have exploited the country for many years, and only he has been able to confront them and demand compliance and compensation for past agreements. He positions himself as a dynamic leader who is unaffected by other global actors and possesses the ability to prevail. This demonstrates an inchoate communication that exacerbates the fear of not belonging (Arfi, 1998; Cinnirella, 1998).

During the recent presidential debate, Donald Trump also expressed his lack of faith in institutions. He criticized the electoral process, alleging that it was untrustworthy, and he declared that "we are a failing nation—a nation in decline, a nation that is dying," referring to the Biden administration and the preceding 3.5 years. Likewise, Donald Trump refuses to acknowledge his defeat in the 2020 elections and denies any accountability for the events of January 6th "I had nothing to do with that. I showed up for a speech," he underlined.

Another aspect of his lack of faith can be found in how he approaches the public via comprehensive political psychology, which results in an absolutist language. People want to reclaim their country. "Our country is being lost. [...] This event took place three and a half years ago. And what's going on here? You're going to end up in World War 3, just to go into another subject." This statement evokes a sense of menace, confirming the absolutist and populist-nationalist ideas he is promoting. Here, "Trump-speak" apparently wanted to squeeze some extra juice from the word "lost" and make his branding stand out (Abromeit, 2016; Homolar & Steel, 2019).

Overall, Trump is attempting to weave a narrative of a pure, wise, and powerful leader capable of overcoming threats both across and beyond the United States. He aims to portray himself as a modern-day hero, capable of overcoming all challenges and instilling a sense of security in the American people. Evan Vucci's photo from the attempted assassination of Donald Trump on July 13th, 2024, played a significant role in shaping that image (Reuters, 2024). The snapshot shows Trump bleeding, his fist up in the air, and an American flag waving overhead. In those moments, Donald Trump was shouting what came to be one of the main slogans for his 2024 campaign: "Fight, fight, fight." Trump's speech traditionally was absolutist, emphasizing non-negotiable boundaries and moral outrage at their violation. Previous research indicates that perceived threats might stimulate political involvement, whereas absolutist rhetoric amplifies the impression of positive character traits (Gustafsson et al., 2020).

According to foreign policy experts at this juncture, Donald Trump's repetitive crisis narratives polarize the electorate and amplify perceptions of warning, instability, and loss of control. Indeed, as they point out, Trumpian populist speech, sometimes referencing a nationalist "America First" agenda, appeals to many who feel wronged by the political elite. By positioning Trump as the advocate for this group, he cultivates a sense of ontological security—a consistent comprehension of one's role in the world—among his adherents. The perception of "other" members of the upper class, immigrants, or globalists as a threat to the American way of life underpins this sense of security (Castells, 2000; Urbinati, 2019).

Therefore, Donald Trump uses a communication technique that appeals to his audience's passions, often capitalizing on war anger. Throughout the years, we anticipate significant changes in party loyalties and voter behavior due to the lasting effects of Trump's communication strategies. People grow weary of Trump's unpredictable and unusual behavior. His divergence in political approaches could potentially trigger further political realignment, as individuals disillusioned by Trump's populism gravitate towards more traditional political figures, while those captivated by his disruptive tactics deepen their resentment towards the political system (Franzosi, 1998; McSweeney, 1999; Rosenblum, 2008; Browning, 2018).

On an utterly different note, Kamala Harris decided to frame her campaign and debate with a positive narrative. During the debate, she attempted to emphasize the similarities between the American people, stressing the issues of marginalized communities, and inspiring hope. A notable distinction between the two candidates' statements is that Kamala Harris does not repeat herself. Despite that, she also employs strategic wording to convey her message, such as "hope," "ambition," and "aspiration"; she only repeats them a limited number of times, approximately 3 to 5. One of her most frequently encountered terms is "support," which she uses 10 times in total. This is where she differs significantly from Donald Trump, leading to a conflict of narratives that shatters shared identities and widens societal divisions (D'Erano, 2013; Gustafsson et al., 2020).

5. Conclusions

Seen from another point of view, Trumpism, as a political movement, represents a narrative reaction to the ontological insecurity felt by several Americans amid economic, cultural, and political transformations. Trump's communication strategies leveraged a rhetoric of toughness, security, and identity, exploiting the concerns and anxieties of individuals who perceived their way of life as endangered (Patterson, 1998; Peterson et al., 2010). This process not only altered the political landscape but also exacerbated societal divisions as conflicting ideas of America's future clashed, resulting in ontological unease for the opposing factions of American voters. The long-term implications of Trump's political communication are likely to manifest in significant changes in political alignments and storytelling. The "efficacy" of Trumpism is in its capacity to address the profound psychological demands for certainty, belonging, and control in an increasingly unpredictable world. Comprehending this dynamic is essential for evaluating the emergence of Trumpism and the persistent difficulties it poses for democratic governance and societal unity. The sentiment of threat and loss begins to arise among the American people, who tend to understand their self-security as a balance between "being" and "surviving." In conclusion, we ought to remember that the quest for ontological security, akin to its physical characteristic, remains constant. Hence, uncertainty engenders the tragedy of global politics.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, M.M. and K.T.; Methodology, M.M. and K.T.; Software, K.T. and M.M.; Validation, M.M. and K.T.; Formal Analysis, M.M. and K.T.; Investigation, K.T. and M.M.; Resources, M.M. and K.T.; Data Curation, M.M. and K.T.; Writing - Original Draft Preparation, M.M. and K.T.; Writing - Review & Editing, M.M. and K.T.; Visualization, M.M. and K.T.; Supervision, M.M.; Project Administration, M.M. and K.T.; Funding Acquisition, M.M. and K.T. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Data Availability Statement: Data is available upon request.

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