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Anti-populism and the Trump trauma in US foreign policy

RUBRICK BIEGON AND SORAYA HAMDAOUI*

Donald Trump's rise sparked intense debates on the prevalence of populism in the United States and its effects on the country's politics. His populism manifested itself not only in the uncommon contours of his administration's foreign policy, but in his rhetorical attacks on the establishment. Populist leaders like Trump are understood to emerge at times of socio-economic crisis, and patterns of crisis are identified by many scholars of populism independent of their approaches to the concept. For Ernesto Laclau, 'some degree of crisis' is a 'necessary precondition of populism'.¹ In Benjamin Moffitt's view, populism is performative of crisis, so much so that crisis becomes integral to how populists present themselves.² To better understand the effects of global populism, we must address not only how populists exploit or mediate crisis, but how established political forces respond to the crises they attribute to populism.³

A deeply emotive sense of crisis was expressed in Trump's mantras of 'America First' and 'Make America Great Again' (MAGA), especially as they were articulated against cosmopolitan elites who, in Trump's framing, had 'sold out' hard-working Americans.⁴ As he pledged to 'drain' the 'corrupt' establishment that had hastened American decline,⁵ Trump challenged American exceptionalism and weakened the ideological basis of liberal hegemony. The internationalism at the heart of the bipartisan consensus clashed with Trump's 'isolationism',⁶ which, for the foreign policy establishment (hereafter FPE), equated with populism.

Attacks on the FPE as 'enemies of the people' fuelled the populist mobilization of Trump's base.⁷ For his supporters, criticism from the establishment only

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¹ Ernesto Laclau, *On populist reason* (London: Verso, 2005), p. 177.

² Benjamin Moffitt, *The global rise of populism: performance, political style, and representation* (Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press, 2016).

³ The focus on crisis connects populism and anti-populism: Yannis Stavrakakis et al., 'Populism, anti-populism and crisis', *Contemporary Political Theory* 17: 1, 2018, pp. 4–27, <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41296-017-0142-y>.

⁴ Georg Löfflmann, 'America First and the populist impact on US foreign policy', *Survival* 61: 6, 2019, pp. 115–38 at p. 126, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00396338.2019.1688573>.

⁵ Rubrick Biegón, 'A populist grand strategy? Trump and the framing of American decline', *International Relations* 33: 4, 2019, pp. 517–39, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0047117819852399>.

⁶ Hal Brands, 'U.S. grand strategy in an age of nationalism: Fortress America and its alternatives', *The Washington Quarterly* 40: 1, 2017, pp. 73–94, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2017.1302740>.

⁷ Georg Löfflmann, "'Enemies of the people": Donald Trump and the security imaginary of America First', *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 24: 3, 2022, pp. 543–60, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13569319.2022.2111111>.

reinforced his connections to ‘the people’, presented as ‘real Americans’ battling ‘coastal elites’ and their ‘globalist’ agenda. The Trump administration’s inner circle was less transnational in composition than established elite networks,⁸ leading observers to conflate his populism with nationalism or sovereigntism.⁹ His caustic rhetoric was frequently targeted at the experts, intellectuals and officials of the FPE, undermining their hegemonic world-view and aggravating the wider sense of crisis during his tenure.

The FPE’s opposition to Trump(ism) was not primarily about cultural issues or his rhetoric, but rather his administration’s foreign policy goals and outputs. As discussed in the literature, Trump pointedly challenged the liberal international order (LIO).¹⁰ He pulled out of multilateral bodies and treaties, such as the World Health Organization (WHO), the Paris Agreement on Climate Change, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (the Iran nuclear deal), and the Trans-Pacific Partnership (which later evolved into the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement on Trans-Pacific Partnership). He unleashed a ‘trade war’ with China and renegotiated the North American Free Trade Agreement. He expressed admiration for autocratic leaders and questioned the utility of NATO, dispensing with conventional rhetorical support for democracy and human rights, a cornerstone of the bipartisan consensus.

Trump’s reorientation of foreign policy created a strong sense of anxiety and unease. How did the FPE respond? To what extent was this response conditioned by the emotions of (anti-)populism? In exploring these questions, this article makes two conceptual contributions. First, it extends the concept of anti-populism to the foreign policy realm, bringing it more firmly within the study of international affairs. This will allow researchers to think more acutely about the effects of global populism. Second, it highlights the emotional dimensions of anti-populism, addressing an analytical ‘blind spot’ within the burgeoning literature on the concept. This provides a new angle to study the complexities of the populism/anti-populism nexus, whether in relation to foreign policy or other aspects of politics more generally.

In addressing the existing gaps in the literature on (anti-)populist foreign policy, we argue that, through their framing strategies, the elites of the FPE attempted to ‘wash away’ Trumpian populism, which they experienced as an intense political trauma. We maintain that, for the FPE, anti-populism meant ‘working through’

org/10.1177/13691481211048499.

⁸ Naná de Graaff and Bastiaan van Apeldoorn, ‘The transnationalist US foreign-policy elite in exile? A comparative network analysis of the Trump administration’, *Global Networks* 21: 2, 2021, pp. 238–64 at p. 239, <https://doi.org/10.1111/glob.12265>.

⁹ As discussed in the introduction to this special section, populists in power tend to emphasize national sovereignty. Daniel F. Wajner, Sandra Destradi and Michael Zürn, ‘The effects of global populism: assessing the populist impact on international affairs’, *International Affairs* 100: 5, 2024, pp. 1819–33, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iaae217>. In the US context, Trump’s rhetorical focus on ‘giving power back to the people’ ran parallel with his ‘America First’ foreign policy, blurring the lines between populism, sovereigntism and nationalism.

¹⁰ G. John Ikenberry, ‘The end of liberal international order?’ *International Affairs* 94: 1, 2018, pp. 7–23, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iix241>; Doug Stokes, ‘Trump, American hegemony and the future of the liberal international order’, *International Affairs* 94: 1, 2018, pp. 133–50, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iix238>. Trump’s hostility to the LIO is consistent with the expectations set out by Wajner, Destradi and Zürn, ‘The effects of global populism’.

this trauma to reset the image of the United States as a responsible stakeholder: one (re)committed to internationalism and the LIO. The FPE's anti-populist discourse masks a variety of tensions, however, revealing an inability to fully resolve or move past the Trump episode. This shows that the 'healing process' initiated under Trump's successor as president, Joe Biden, was uneven. To an extent, efforts to normalize US foreign policy have been stymied by the very anxieties created by the Trump trauma. Given the centrality of elites to ongoing debates over (anti-)populism, the policy implications of our examination into the frames of this anti-populist discourse suggest that the policy community should be more attuned to the emotional dimensions of the antagonistic relationship between populism and anti-populism.

Understanding anti-populism

Anti-populism is the belief observed across the political spectrum that populists threaten institutions, undermine civil harmony and are hostile to pluralism. Embodied by civil society actors (social movements, NGOs, associations, etc.) as well as cultural, political and economic elites, anti-populism attempts 'to naturalize a negative, pejorative signification of populism', which can be 'utilized in the demonization of oppositional political and social identities'.¹¹ The complex relationship between populism and authoritarianism has received a good deal of scholarly attention.¹² For populism's political opponents, however, the phenomenon is systematically treated as a form of 'democratic malaise'.¹³ According to Moffitt, while populists see referendums and plebiscites as giving 'voice to the people', 'anti-populists see such mechanisms as rather crude and divisive', and prefer consensus to the potential dangers of 'mob rule'.¹⁴ Anti-populists position themselves as politically, intellectually and morally superior to their populist counterparts. In their understanding of populism, it intrinsically leads to clientelist and demagogic politics.¹⁵ By championing rationality and competence against the supposed amateurism of populists, anti-populists often employ a patronizing discourse—one that draws on an emotional disdain for the transgressions attributed to populist mobilization or performance. Thus, anti-populism dovetails with demophobia.¹⁶ This creates challenges for established actors nominally seeking to protect liberal democracies from the 'abnormalities' of populist upheaval.

¹¹ Nikos Nikisianis et al., 'Populism versus anti-populism in the Greek press: post-structuralist discourse theory meets corpus linguistics', in Tomas Marttila, ed., *Discourse, culture and organization: inquiries into relational structures of power* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), p. 268.

¹² Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart, *Cultural backlash: Trump, Brexit, and authoritarian populism* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2019); Wajner, Destradi and Zürn, 'The effects of global populism'.

¹³ Giorgos Katsambekis and Yannis Stavrakakis, 'Populism, anti-populism and European democracy: a view from the South', in *Populism, political ecology and the Balkans* (Athens: Green Institute Greece, 2014), pp. 117–25 at p. 118.

¹⁴ Benjamin Moffitt, 'The trouble with anti-populism: why the champions of civility keep losing', *Guardian*, 14 Feb. 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2020/feb/14/anti-populism-politics-why-champions-of-civility-keep-losing>. (Unless otherwise noted at point of citation, all URLs cited in this article were accessible on 17 July 2024.)

¹⁵ Thomas Frank, *The people, no: a brief history of anti-populism* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2020).

¹⁶ Grigoris Markou, 'Anti-populist discourse in Greece and Argentina in the 21st century', *Journal of Political Ideologies* 26: 2, 2021, pp. 201–19, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13569317.2020.1852669>.

Anti-populism has been studied from a variety of discursive and cultural perspectives, with considerable focus on antagonist communicative styles that transcend the left/right spectrum.¹⁷ In more stylistic approaches, anti-populists are understood as championing ‘correctness’, formal language and moderation against populist performances that can be intentionally rude or grotesque.¹⁸ Anti-populism interacts dialectically with populism in that it is defined by its opposite. Criticism of populist leaders and parties may not rise to the level of full anti-populism. Instead, anti-populism combines a dogmatic opposition to populists with a range of methods to sideline populist actors or ‘debunk’ their messaging. The literature on different cases reveals a tendency by anti-populists to marginalize figures or movements that appeal to ‘the people’ in a way that threatens established patterns of legitimation. Such opposition can take different forms—discursive and otherwise—in accordance with the contingencies of local or national dynamics.

In Greece, for example, anti-populism centres on the belief that populism is culturally backward and thus an obstacle to modernization and economic development.¹⁹ In this context, anti-populism is accompanied by ‘a quasi-apocalyptic discourse’ that sets populism as the cause of imminent collapse.²⁰ In France and Belgium, by contrast, populists have been kept at bay through the *cordon sanitaire* strategy. This consists of refusing to negotiate or cooperate with populists, so they become isolated and are rejected by the electorate.²¹ In Italy, which represents a rare case of bottom-up anti-populism, opposition to populism was carried through a social movement organized by citizens during the 2020 regional election campaign.²² In the cases of Venezuela, Thailand and Turkey, the desire to eradicate populism was more pressing, with various *coups d’état* being attempted to remove leaders from power.²³ Other methods are less direct and more subtle, as captured by the conceptual distinction between adversarial and accommodative forms of anti-populism.²⁴

¹⁷ Pierre Ostiguy and Kenneth M. Roberts, ‘Putting Trump in comparative perspective: populism and the politicization of the sociocultural low’, *Brown Journal of World Affairs* 23: 1, 2016, pp. 25–50, <https://bjwa.brown.edu/23-1/putting-trump-in-comparative-perspective-populism-and-the-politicization-of-the-sociocultural-low>; Yannis Stavrakakis and Giorgos Katsambekis, ‘The populism/anti-populism frontier and its mediation in crisis-ridden Greece: from discursive divide to emerging cleavage?’ *European Political Science*, vol. 18, 2019, pp. 37–52, <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41304-017-0138-3>.

¹⁸ Ricardo F. Mendonça and Renato Duarte Caetano, ‘Populism as parody: the visual self-presentation of Jair Bolsonaro on Instagram’, *The International Journal of Press/Politics* 26: 1, 2021, pp. 210–35, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1940161220970118>.

¹⁹ Lazaros Karavasilis, ‘Perceptions of “populism” and “anti-populism” in Greek public discourse during the crisis: the case of the website “Anti-news”’, *Politik* 20: 4, 2017, <https://doi.org/10.7146/politik.v20i4.101535>; Grigoris Markou, ‘Anti-populist discourse in Greece and Argentina in the 21st century’, *Journal of Political Ideologies* 26: 2, 2021, pp. 201–219, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13569317.2020.1852669>.

²⁰ Stavrakakis and Katsambekis, ‘The populism/anti-populism frontier’.

²¹ Jan-Ocko Heuer, ‘Fiscal authority, welfare retrenchment and political populism in continental European welfare states’, in Bent Grave, ed., *Handbook on austerity, populism and the welfare state* (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2021), pp. 155–69.

²² Soraya Hamdaoui, ‘A “stylistic anti-populism”: an analysis of the Sardine movement’s opposition to Matteo Salvini in Italy’, *Social Movement Studies* 21: 4, 2022, pp. 436–52 at p. 437, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14742837.2021.1899910>.

²³ Toygar Sinan Baykan, Yaprak Gürsoy and Pierre Ostiguy, ‘Anti-populist coups d’état in the twenty-first century: reasons, dynamics and consequences’, *Third World Quarterly* 42: 4, 2021, pp. 793–811, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2020.1871329>.

²⁴ Soraya Hamdaoui, ‘Anti-populism during the Yellow Vest protests: from combatting the Rassemblement

Whatever the methods chosen by anti-populist actors, there are certain commonalities in their perspectives and motivations. Anti-populists see populism as polarizing, fraudulent and disruptive of the ‘natural’ patterns of politics.²⁵ We argue that this fosters a drive for ‘(re-)normalization’. A desire to reassert control should be seen as central to anti-populism. This is closely related to the fact that anti-populism has emotional dimensions—much like populism itself.²⁶ In the broad framework of anti-populism, there is a distinction between opposition to the *logic* of populism and opposition to *populists* themselves. Because it is the success of populists that tends to spark emotional and political reactions, our focus is on the latter.

Anti-populists sometimes experience populism as a natural disaster.²⁷ This can create feelings of perplexity or despair, leading some to question their national identity.²⁸ As discussed below, anti-populists often frame their politics through the lens of rationality and competence. However, anti-populist discourse can also favour insults over coherent analytical critique.²⁹ We stress that populist ruptures can engender highly emotive interpretations and responses, an argument that, while hinted at in the literature, has yet to be explicitly developed. Normalization, then, is a process through which anti-populists can ‘heal’ from the emotional disturbances created by populism. Politically, this requires certain (framing) strategies to identify and remedy the problem.

As happened with Trump, the ‘success’ of populist actors can prove traumatizing. The anti-populism that emerged in the United States did not deviate substantially from other cases examined in the literature. Anti-populists generally believe they are a ‘shield’ against political deviance. In ‘working through’ the Trump trauma, the FPE reinforced existing beliefs that populism is a social and political malady. The specificity of US anti-populism lies in the country’s place in the international order, the projection of its cultural power, and its broad ability to shape world politics. The hegemonic status of the United States helps explain why the effects of its populist rupture were felt so intensely. Overall, the US case provides valuable insight into the politics of those who resent populism and seek to counter its influence.

National to dealing with street populists’, *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 24: 3, 2022, pp. 493–510, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1369148120974014>.

²⁵ Simon Tormey, ‘Populism: democracy’s *Pharmakon*’, *Policy Studies* 39: 3, 2018, pp. 260–73, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01442872.2018.1475638>. See also, Barry Cannon, ‘Must we talk about populism? Interrogating populism’s conceptual utility in a context of crisis’, *New Political Science* 40: 3, 2018, pp. 477–96, <https://doi.org/10.1080/07393148.2018.1487187>; Antonis Galanopoulos and Giorgos Venizelos, ‘Anti-populism and populist hype during the COVID–19 pandemic’, *Representation* 58: 2, 2022, pp. 251–68, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00344893.2021.2017334>.

²⁶ Ali Bilgic and Athina Gkouti, ‘Who is entitled to feel in the age of populism? Women’s resistance to migrant detention in Britain’, *International Affairs* 97: 2, 2021, pp. 483–502, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iaao054>.

²⁷ Christophe Traïni, ‘L’épicentre d’un “séisme électoral”. Le vote Front National en région PACA’, in Christophe Traïni, ed., *Vote en PACA. Les élections 2002 en Provence-Alpes-Côte d’Azur* (Aix-en-Provence: Karthala, 2004).

²⁸ Christopher Browning, ‘Brexit, existential anxiety and ontological (in)security’, *European Security* 27: 3, 2018, pp. 336–55, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09662839.2018.1497982>; Caroline Koezler, Pavan Kumar Malreddy and Marlena Tronicke, ‘The colonial remains of Brexit: empire nostalgia and narcissistic nationalism’, *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 56: 5, 2020, pp. 585–92, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17449855.2020.1818440>.

²⁹ Joan Miró, ‘Beyond populism and institutionalism: the management of austerity in Spain’, *Constellations* 26: 1, 2019, pp. 116–31, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8675.12386>.

Foreign policy, trauma, and anti-populism: a theoretical framework

In this article, we analyse the foreign policy response to the political trauma of Trumpian populism in the United States. In our approach, foreign policy involves more than diplomacy and the details of states' specific programmes. Against strictly 'rationalist' conceptions of foreign policy, we emphasize its emotional dimensions. Actors involved in processes of foreign policy formation must analyse 'information and make judgments [that involve] a complex interplay between affective and cognitive factors'.³⁰ Theoretical interest in emotions has overlapped with a focus on trauma and its impact on world politics.³¹ Recent contributions have shown how emotions and trauma extend beyond the level of individual psychology, and in a manner that affects state behaviour, identity and foreign policy-making.³²

Emotions are not antithetical to rationality,³³ nor are they unrelated to the material factors that influence how policy-makers implement national strategy. Indeed, they are integral to the cognitive processes behind all decision-making. From a foreign policy perspective, emotions are important because they are central to how states define themselves and their interests. In the United States, foreign policy has been constitutive of a national identity that considers American hegemony both normal and desirable.³⁴ Scholarship on the ideology of American foreign policy likewise illuminates the emotional underpinnings of the US's expansive vision of its own national purpose.³⁵

The significance of emotions in this context is even more evident during times of trauma. Collective trauma has been studied in International Relations (IR) in conjunction with war, genocide, terrorism, famines, poverty and even natural disasters. Foregrounding *political* trauma, we define it as an event or situation that produces extreme feelings of distress across a particular community or group. (Our use of the 'political' appellation is designed to avoid trivializing victims who suffer distress wrought by violence or physiological deprivation.) As noted by Emma Hutchison, when moving beyond the level of the individual victim, trauma can be 'understood as in part a construct, produced through social discourses that widely prevail and

³⁰ Jonathan Renshon and Jennifer S. Lerner, 'Decision-making, the role of emotions in foreign policy', in Daniel J. Christie, ed., *The encyclopedia of peace psychology* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), p. 1.

³¹ Jenny Edkins, *Trauma and the memory of politics* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Adam B. Lerner, *From the ashes of history: collective trauma and the making of international politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022); Emma Hutchison, *Affective communities in world politics: collective emotions after trauma* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

³² Jonathan Mercer, 'Feeling like a state: social emotion and identity', *International Theory* 6: 3, 2014, pp. 515–35, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1752971914000244>; Brent E. Sasley, 'Theorizing states' emotions', *International Studies Review* 13: 3, 2011, pp. 452–76, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2486.2011.01049.x>.

³³ Neta C. Crawford, 'Institutionalizing passion in world politics: fear and empathy', *International Theory* 6: 3, 2014, pp. 535–57, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1752971914000256>; Jonathan Mercer, 'Rationality and psychology in international politics', *International Organization* 59: 1, 2005, pp. 77–106, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818305050058>.

³⁴ David Campbell, *Writing security: United States foreign policy and the politics of identity* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1998).

³⁵ Michael H. Hunt, *Ideology and U.S. foreign policy* [1987] (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009); Christopher McKnight Nichols and David Milne, eds, *Ideology in U.S. foreign relations: new histories* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2022).

resonate after catastrophe'.³⁶ For members of the FPE (among others), Trump's election in 2016 was catastrophic—a populist disruption of the highest order.

When we speak of the trauma of Trump, we are focused mainly on the political adversaries of Trumpian populism, whether this pertains to his persona, his policies or both. For policy-makers and the public alike, foreign policy can be highly emotive. Because foreign policy involves the projection of a nation's political ethos and values, it becomes a means for elites to seek recognition and the validation of their ideas and status. Elites can 'suffer' if their country's image is sullied. For authorities, officials and others in the policy milieu, feelings of failure or shock can shape perceptions of the national interest, leading to ideational changes regarding the overall purpose or direction of foreign policy.

The literature points to the 9/11 attacks on the United States as a paradigmatic case of emotions in IR. The response to this trauma was shaped by the feelings engendered by the events.³⁷ Thus, the 'war on terror' initiated by the George W. Bush administration was bound up in the trauma of the shock that preceded it.³⁸ Although it is most intimately associated with political violence, collective trauma can result from other kinds of events or situations. Adam Lerner, for example, has theorized collective trauma in the international political economy (in relation to poverty and the loss of opportunity), emphasizing not only its effects at the psychological and socio-cultural levels, but also its reification in economic circumstances.³⁹

From the vantage of established political forces like the FPE, populism is something unexpected, undesirable and potentially traumatic. Occasionally referred to as 'the Blob',⁴⁰ the FPE is defined as the intellectual network of elites and experts broadly committed to the bipartisan consensus in post-Cold War foreign policy-making. The FPE should not be seen as entirely monolithic. Consistent with the 'Blob' metaphor, however, and because it reflects the interests and views of a stratum of American society comprising economic elites and professionals, it can be understood as a coherent actor in the foreign policy discourse. 'US foreign policy is an *elite*-driven process', and the membership of the FPE has close links to the country's corporate and financial elite.⁴¹ We argue that because anti-populist views are deeply rooted in the economic and media establishment,⁴² the FPE channelled wider elite opposition to Trumpian populism.

³⁶ Hutchison, *Affective communities in world politics*, p. 2.

³⁷ Paul Saurette, 'You dissin me? Humiliation and post 9/11 global politics', *Review of International Studies* 32: 3, 2006, pp. 495–522, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210506007133>.

³⁸ Aylin Güney and Fulya Gökcan, 'The "Greater Middle East" as a "modern" geopolitical imagination in American foreign policy', *Geopolitics* 15: 1, 2010, pp. 22–38, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14650040903420370>.

³⁹ Adam B. Lerner, 'Theorizing collective trauma in international political economy', *International Studies Review* 21: 4, 2019, pp. 549–71, <https://doi.org/10.1093/isr/viy044>.

⁴⁰ Patrick Porter, 'Why America's grand strategy has not changed: power, habit, and the U.S. foreign policy establishment', *International Security* 42: 4, 2018, pp. 9–46, https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00311; Stephen M. Walt, 'The Donald versus "the Blob"', in Robert Jervis, Francis J. Gavin, Joshua Rovner and Diane Labrosse, eds, *Chaos in the liberal order: the Trump presidency and international politics in the twenty-first century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), pp. 40–45.

⁴¹ Christopher Layne, 'The US foreign policy establishment and grand strategy: how American elites obstruct strategic adjustment', *International Politics* 54: 3, 2017, pp. 260–75 at p. 262, <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41311-017-0033-0> (emphasis in original).

⁴² Frank, *The people, no*; Hamdaoui, 'A "stylistic anti-populism"', p. 437.

For many anti-populist elites, a populist rupture of the kind represented by Trump disrupts national narratives and jeopardizes the social and political status of those in a position to safeguard the national interest through prudent foreign policy. Trumpian populism was deeply disturbing for several reasons: not only did Trump upset normal patterns of foreign policy discourse and implementation, he did so in a way that many regarded as deeply damaging to the US's 'true' (exceptionalist) identity. Especially early in his political rise, Trump was frequently compared to charismatic and authoritarian world leaders,⁴³ with the implication that his brand of populism was somehow foreign to American politics. That Trump was something patently *un-American* added to the trauma.

Methodology

Our analysis is consistent with the discursive approach to emotions in IR.⁴⁴ Emotions are embedded in—and revealed through—discourse. To examine the anti-populist discourse of the FPE, we utilized an interpretivist mode of qualitative frame analysis. As a way of ordering or organizing a particular discourse, frames have multiple functions and logics. Frames are related to ideology, world-views and the communicative projects of those who do the framing.⁴⁵ The choice of certain frames is purposeful. The act of deliberately framing an issue or problem in a certain way implies leaving some (potentially relevant) factors 'out of the frame'.

Frame analysis is a versatile approach that is well suited to examining the roles of actors within and outside the state, 'even when the researcher does not have direct access to them, as long as they contribute to foreign policy debates and foreign policy rhetoric'.⁴⁶ To identify relevant frames, we selected texts from across the key arenas of FPE debate and dissemination: the news media, long-form publications covering international affairs, publications by think tanks, and writings and statements from officials within government. Individual texts were selected using keyword searches (for 'Trump' and either 'populism' or 'populist'). The criterion for selection was the presence of both keywords in the same text. The search time-frame began on 1 August 2015 (just prior to the first Republican debate of the 2016 election cycle) and ended on 1 February 2023 (thus also covering the first two years of Biden's presidency).

⁴³ Omar G. Encarnación, 'A Caudillo in Washington: democracy will survive—but at what cost?', *Foreign Affairs*, 10 Nov. 2016, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/americas/2016-11-10/caudillo-washington>.

⁴⁴ Maéva Clément and Eric Sangar, 'Introduction: methodological challenges and opportunities for the study of emotions', in Maéva Clément and Eric Sangar, eds, *Researching emotions in International Relations: methodological perspectives on the emotional turn* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), pp. 1–29; Simon Koschut et al., 'Discourse and emotions in International Relations', *International Studies Review* 19: 3, 2017, pp. 481–508, <https://doi.org/10.1093/isr/vix033>.

⁴⁵ See for example Robert M. Entman, 'Framing: toward a clarification of a fractured paradigm', *Journal of Communication* 43: 4, 1993, pp. 51–8, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.1993.tb01304.x>; David A. Snow and Robert D. Bedford, 'Ideology, frame resonance, and participant mobilization', *International Social Movement Research*, vol. 1, 1988, pp. 197–218.

⁴⁶ Sabine Mokry, 'Frame analysis', in Patrick A. Mello and Falk Ostermann, eds, *Routledge handbook of foreign policy analysis methods* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2023), pp. 133–49 at p. 134.

We consulted editorials and reporting from the *New York Times* and *Washington Post*, selected because they are both national newspapers of record that shape foreign policy debate. In addition, applying the same keyword criteria as above, we consulted *Foreign Affairs*, *The Washington Quarterly* and *The Atlantic*, media outlets that provide more substantive coverage of elite, expert-driven foreign policy discourse. In total, 95 newspaper articles and 84 journal/magazine articles were selected. We also consulted reports and statements from the American Enterprise Institute (AEI), the Atlantic Council, the Brookings Institution, the Center for American Progress (CAP) and the Council on Foreign Relations. These institutions were selected because they are highly influential think tanks central to the FPE ecosystem, and because all of them published content on populism following Trump's election. A total of 80 think tank texts were selected using the same search criteria noted above.

Additionally, we examined major foreign policy speeches, statements and official documents from the Biden administration's first two years in office. These texts were chosen to provide a broad overview of the Biden administration's foreign policy in contrast with that of the Trump administration. They included White House statements and documents produced by the Department of State and Department of Defense, as well as reports from the Congressional Research Service. In total, 27 government documents were selected.

Consistent with the strands of the literature that emphasize the evaluative and proscriptive dimensions of frames, we define frames as those purposeful or strategic elements of a discourse that, taken together, enable a political actor to identify not only the origins of a particular problem but the solutions to said problem.⁴⁷ Procedurally, we adopted an inductive approach to frame analysis, in which the frames arise from the texts under investigation.⁴⁸ However, our interest in the emotive aspects of the populism/anti-populism nexus factored into the analysis, in so far as we read the texts carefully to identify the discursive themes (via metaphors, tropes and predicates) that were used by the FPE to make sense of the Trump trauma and outline the contours of an appropriate response to its impact on US foreign policy.⁴⁹ Through the analysis, we identified three prominent interlocking evaluative frames: the *authoritarian frame*, *incompetence frame* and *immaturity frame*. On the prescriptive side, we identified one prominent 'master' frame: *normalization*. Of course, the evaluative and prescriptive functions of these frames cannot be completely separated from one another. The authoritarianism, incompetence and immaturity associated with Trump were abnormalities that set the conditions for a 'return to normal' as a means of repairing the traumatic break he represented.

⁴⁷ This definition draws on Entman, 'Framing', and Mokry, 'Frame analysis'. On the strategic dimension of frames, see also Snow and Bedford, 'Ideology, frame resonance, and participant mobilization'.

⁴⁸ Claes H. de Vreese, 'News framing: theory and typology', *Information Design Journal* 13: 1, 2005, pp. 51–62, <https://doi.org/10.1075/idxd.13.1.06vre>.

⁴⁹ We understand 'discursive themes' as the topics that recur in a particular discourse. The meanings associated with these topics are interpreted by the analyst through examination of the language used in the texts under investigation. Coalescing as frames, the themes provide structure to the discourse. See Norman Fairclough, *Media discourse* (London: Edward Arnold, 1995), pp. 29, 203.

Table 1: The anti-populist frames of US foreign policy discourse

Frame	Type of frame	Principal source	Discursive themes
Authoritarian	Evaluative	FPE	Illiberalism; fascism
Incompetence	Evaluative	FPE	Expertise; irrationality
Immaturity	Evaluative	FPE	Adults in the room; Trump as toddler
Normalization	Prescriptive	Biden administration	Recovery; restoration; return; healing

Source: Authors' elaboration

In the spirit of methodological reflexivity, we acknowledge that the identification and categorization of frames entails a certain degree of subjectivity. Because framing is a communicative process, its analysis can constitute a 'fractured' research paradigm, as Robert Entman put it, featuring disagreements on matters of selection, salience and more. This comes with the methodological territory. Not only do frames define problems and diagnose causes, but they also make moral judgements and suggest remedies based on the frames' initial diagnoses.⁵⁰ Our examination into the frames deployed in the FPE's anti-populist discourse served two related purposes. First, it allowed us to explore how Trump's populism was *internalized* by the FPE (the evaluative side); and second, it enabled us to grasp the appropriate foreign policy *response* to this populist rupture (the prescriptive side). The former helps illuminate *why* Trump was traumatizing; the latter helps explicate how the FPE sought to mitigate this trauma. The analysis was premised on the notion that elites were motivated to respond to Trumpian populism—a supposition demonstrated in the findings.

The anti-populist framing of the Trump trauma

Donald Trump's election in 2016 and subsequent presidency constituted a collective political trauma for many Americans. For some members of minority groups, the trepidation stemmed from Trump's racialized rhetoric and xenophobic scapegoating.⁵¹ For liberals and progressives, his presidency was an existential threat. Some deployed traumatic metaphors to verbalize their grief, while others turned to counselling and therapy.⁵² These sentiments reached the US establishment.⁵³

⁵⁰ Entman, 'Framing', p. 52.

⁵¹ Nativist and far-right politics have a long history in the US, and are distinct from populism.

⁵² Heather J. Carmack and Jocelyn M. DeGroot, 'Trauma metaphor use after Hillary Clinton's loss in the 2016 presidential election', *Journal of Loss and Trauma* 23: 6, 2018, pp. 468–83, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15325024.2018.1476076>; Eeva Sointu and David W. Hill, 'Trump therapy: personal identity, political trauma and the contradictions of therapeutic practice', *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 25: 3, 2022, pp. 880–96, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1367549420980007>.

⁵³ The dust jacket for David Frum's *Trumpocalypse: restoring American democracy* (New York: HarperCollins, 2020) tells readers the 'trauma [Trump] inflicted will distort American and world politics for years to come'. Best-selling author Mary L. Trump, estranged niece of Donald, titled her book *The reckoning: our nation's trauma and finding a way to heal* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2021).

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We argue that, for the FPE, Trumpian populism created the sense that the country was unable to live up to its own democratic standards as a responsible, civilized nation. For many members of the establishment, Trump undermined US leadership by contesting traditional foreign policy narratives, damaging the country's reputation, and unsettling its sense of ideational purpose. This added urgency to the anti-populist effort to reassert control over US politics. The social experience of trauma can help bind a community together.⁵⁴ For those within the FPE, the anti-populist imperative to counter Trumpian populism prevailed over differences on other matters.

As the Republican Party was gradually brought into alignment with Trump, his administration's approach fused with the interests of the party's existing coalition. However, this did not allay the fears of the FPE, precisely because of the negative emotional patterns of its anti-populist response. The depiction of Trump as 'traumatizing', and of his election as calamitous, reflects a certain subjectivity. Our argument is not that this calamity existed in an objective sense, but that it was 'felt' by the FPE, which attributed it to populism. The FPE needed to 'work through' this catastrophe, resulting in an anti-populist effort to return foreign policy to 'normality'. Dealing with Trump and his legacy meant framing populism as a pernicious and destabilizing force.

Trump's bombast and unpredictability contributed to widespread feelings of emotional and political breakdown.⁵⁵ By damaging US soft power and the credibility of its foreign policy commitments, Trump represented a profound crisis for foreign policy elites.⁵⁶ He was a 'populist danger' that was clearly felt to be threatening to democracy and the LIO.⁵⁷ In this discursive milieu, it becomes incredibly difficult to disentangle Trump's populism from his heterodox and largely nationalist or sovereigntist positions, and from his idiosyncratic (and sometimes contradictory) behaviour and statements. The FPE's framing of Trump(ism) reflected these complexities, even as it connected Trump's idiosyncrasies to specific populist maladies: authoritarianism, incompetence and immaturity.

The authoritarian frame

Alongside liberals and Democrats, neo-conservatives and 'never-Trump' Republicans became prominent voices in the anti-populist discourse.⁵⁸ Across the partisan

⁵⁴ Hutchison, *Affective communities in world politics*.

⁵⁵ Michelle Bentley and Adam B. Lerner, 'Introduction: Trump and unpredictability in International Relations', *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 34: 3, 2021, pp. 348–59, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09557571.2021.1919862>; Daniel W. Drezner, 'Immature leadership: Donald Trump and the American presidency', *International Affairs* 96: 2, 2020, pp. 383–400, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iaaa009>.

⁵⁶ G. John Ikenberry, 'The plot against American foreign policy: can the liberal order survive?' *Foreign Affairs* 96: 3, 2017, pp. 2–9, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2017-04-17/plot-against-american-foreign-policy>; Tom McTague and Peter Nicholas, 'How America First became America alone', *The Atlantic*, 29 Oct. 2020, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2020/10/donald-trump-foreign-policy-america-first/616872>.

⁵⁷ Frank A. Stengel, 'Forget populism!' *Global Discourse* 9: 2, 2019, pp. 439–45, <https://doi.org/10.1332/204378919X15628418445603>.

⁵⁸ Robert P. Saldin and Steven M. Teles, *Never Trump: the revolt of the conservative elites* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

divide, elites viewed Trump as inimical to US leadership. Moreover, utilizing a common frame of anti-populists, some saw a foreshadowing of fascism.⁵⁹ Similarly, the MAGA movement represented authoritarianism—bordering on fascism—even if Trump lacked an ideology or set of core beliefs.⁶⁰ In fact, the equation of populism with authoritarianism is a mainstay of the anti-populist discourse on Trump,⁶¹ and a key frame that allows populism to be juxtaposed with its putative opposite—liberal democracy.⁶² Trump's rhetorical appeals to the 'common people' made some self-proclaimed guardians of the 'liberal order' not only suspicious of his intentions, but anxious about the illiberal influence of non-elites on foreign policy.

In 2018 the CAP, a progressive think tank close to the Democratic Party, and the AEI, a centre-right think tank linked to the Republican Party, issued a press release touting the results of a 'unique collaboration focused on defending liberal democracy and the transatlantic partnership in an era of rising authoritarian populism'.⁶³ One CAP–AEI report on the 'drivers of authoritarian populism in the United States' highlighted political, economic, cultural and racial grievances and factors, but presented the 'challenge' and/or 'threat' of populism in singular terms.⁶⁴ Indeed, no matter the complexities inherent in populism, it was framed almost exclusively as a threat. At a time of heightened party polarization, the anti-populism of the FPE crossed partisan divides. This reflected the understanding that populism transcends the left/right spectrum, further diminishing whatever differences existed between Trumpism and other expressions of populist politics.

The incompetence frame

The FPE sought to actively fend off Trump's anti-establishment challenges.⁶⁵ In light of Trump's breaking of the internationalist consensus, 'the Blob asserted itself'—as Patrick Porter wrote—and despite the very real challenges to foreign policy narratives and the US' commitment to the LIO, at the level of 'grand strat-

⁵⁹ Madeleine Albright, *Fascism: a warning* (New York: William Collins, 2018); Jason Stanley, *How fascism works: the politics of us and them* (New York: Random House, 2018).

⁶⁰ Max Boot, 'Reagan was the Gipper. Trump is the grifter', *Washington Post*, 22 Feb. 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/reagan-was-the-gipper-trump-is-the-grifter/2018/02/22/5deb2c5e-174e-11e8-b681-2d4d462a1921_story.html; E. J. Dionne, Jr, 'Trump's scorched-earth nihilism will cost him the presidency', *Washington Post*, 30 Sept. 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/trumps-scorched-earth-nihilism-will-cost-him-the-presidency/2020/09/30/e7a4a00e-0316-11eb-a2db-417cddf4816a_story.html.

⁶¹ Center for American Progress, 'CAP and AEI team up to defend democracy and the Transatlantic Partnership', 10 May 2018, <https://www.americanprogress.org/press/release-cap-aei-team-defend-democracy-transatlantic-partnership>; Yascha Mounk, 'After Trump, is American democracy doomed by populism?', Council on Foreign Relations, 14 Jan. 2021, <https://www.cfr.org/in-brief/after-trump-american-democracy-doomed-populism>.

⁶² William A. Galston, *Can the center hold? Populist challenges, liberal democratic responses* (Washington DC: Brookings, 2019), <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/can-the-center-hold-populist-challenges-liberal-democratic-responses>.

⁶³ Center for American Progress, 'CAP and AEI team up'.

⁶⁴ Dalibor Rohoc, Liz Kennedy and Vikram Singh, 'Drivers of authoritarian populism in the United States: a primer', Center for American Progress and American Enterprise Institute, 2018, <https://www.aei.org/research-products/report/drivers-of-authoritarian-populism-in-the-united-states-a-primer>.

⁶⁵ Hermann Kurthen, 'Present at the destruction? Grand strategy imperatives of US foreign policy experts during the Trump presidency', *European Journal of International Security* 6: 1, 2021, pp. 1–24, <https://doi.org/10.1017/eis.2020.5>; Walt, 'The Donald versus "the Blob"'.

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egy' changes were minimal.⁶⁶ Trump's populism provided a key test for the networks of the US FPE, which sought, in different ways, to recalibrate the management of US hegemony.⁶⁷ Senior government figures (the 'adults in the room', in the common framing) would curb Trump's excesses, countering his instincts and redirecting his decision-making from within the administration.⁶⁸ One official wrote anonymously of the 'resistance' within the administration, undertaken to thwart the worst impulses of the 'amoral', 'ill-informed', and 'reckless' president.⁶⁹

One hallmark of anti-populism is the framing of populists as illogical and incompetent. Building on demophobic insinuations, this helps promote a technical or technocratic form of expertise—one that is more conducive to 'normal' forms of governance favoured by anti-populists. Under Trump,⁷⁰ populism was often framed as an expression of widespread irrationality or recklessness, reinforcing the dominant view within the FPE that foreign policy should be shielded from the whims of 'the people'. The stability of the LIO required a technical approach, and this meant protecting the authority of experts, a key plank of anti-populism. Brookings, an influential think tank based in Washington, released a report counterpoising populism with professionalism, arguing that experts needed to be insulated from the 'ignorance and irrationality' of the voting public.⁷¹

The immaturity frame

In an effort to make sense of Trump's behaviour, he was framed as driven by instincts, often incoherent, rather than having a political logic or set of interests. Trump's personal demeanour was presented as whimsical and childlike.⁷² Daniel Drezner coined the expression 'Toddler in Chief' to capture this idea.⁷³ The problem of childishness extended to his ideas and supporters. The interpretivist aspect of this frame presented Trump as either a juvenile 'pied piper' character leading his naive followers, or a mere conduit for the passions of his supporters.⁷⁴ Linking with the above frame, immaturity is an evocation of the incompetence and irresponsibility of populists. Immaturity inverts normal patterns of governance, whereby elites are the guardians of ordinary citizens who lack the knowledge to play a constructive role in foreign policy.

⁶⁶ Porter, 'Why America's grand strategy has not changed', p. 12.

⁶⁷ Inderjeet Parmar, 'Transnational elite knowledge networks: managing American hegemony in turbulent times', *Security Studies* 28: 3, 2019, pp. 532–64, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09636412.2019.1604986>.

⁶⁸ Bob Woodward, *Fear: Trump in the White House* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2018).

⁶⁹ Anonymous, 'I am part of the resistance inside the Trump administration', *New York Times*, 5 Sept. 2018. (In 2020, Miles Taylor revealed that he had authored the piece.)

⁷⁰ James Pethokoukis, 'The opportunity costs of populism', American Enterprise Institute, 25 Oct. 2018, <https://www.aei.org/economics/the-opportunity-costs-of-populism>.

⁷¹ Jonathan Rauch and Benjamin Wittes, *More professionalism, less populism: how voting makes us stupid, and what to do about it* (Washington DC: Brookings, 2017), p. 1.

⁷² Alison Gopnik, '4-year-olds don't act like Trump', *New York Times*, 20 May 2017.

⁷³ Drezner assembled a dataset to track his toddler-in-chief thesis. Daniel W. Drezner, 'The Toddler in Chief is increasingly immature', *Washington Post*, 6 Oct. 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2020/10/06/toddler-chief-is-becoming-more-immature>.

⁷⁴ Charles M. Blow, 'A ticket to hell', *New York Times*, 9 March 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/09/opinion/a-ticket-to-hell.html>.

The ‘adults in the room’ metaphor, noted above, represented a key theme in the immaturity frame. This initially referred to individuals like Secretary of Defense James Mattis, National Security Advisor H. R. McMaster and White House chief of staff John Kelly, but the term came to symbolize the wider influence of the establishment and bureaucracy on Trump’s White House. Key figures in the administration were encouraged to serve as ‘babysitters’, thus mitigating the problems of Trump’s simplicity and ignorance.⁷⁵ With ‘the adults’ in charge of foreign policy, the FPE hoped that predictability would win out.⁷⁶ Ultimately, the presence of these adults only partially alleviated the disruptive forces of Trump and his MAGA supporters. US foreign policy would need to be repaired through a broader process of normalization, one which combined conventional and healing rhetoric with a recommitment to the LIO.⁷⁷

US foreign policy after Trump: the normalization frame

For the FPE, Trump’s illiberalism, incompetence and immaturity violated the traditional narratives and processes of US foreign policy. Moreover, by putting ‘the people’ in an antagonistic relationship with the FPE, Trump undercut the authority of elites to forge a ‘national interest’ constructed in their image. The FPE felt compelled to respond to Trump’s chaotic charisma and ‘isolationist’ proclivities. Traumatic emotions notwithstanding, the FPE—and US policy after Trump—sought to exude a certain calm to stabilize US leadership and reduce the populist ‘glitch’ in the machinery of hegemony to a fleeting moment of dysfunction.

In the wake of Trump’s rise, concerns over populism broached official foreign policy discourse. In its 2017 report, for example, the National Intelligence Council identified populism as one of the global trends that would shape the world over the next two decades.⁷⁸ And in its 2021 interim national security strategic guidance document, the Biden administration wrote that ‘free societies have been challenged from within by corruption, inequality, polarization, populism, and illiberal threats to the rule of law’.⁷⁹ Biden’s 2022 national security strategy noted that ‘heightening geopolitical competition, nationalism and populism’ were rendering international cooperation more difficult.⁸⁰ Although these documents

⁷⁵ Peter Nicholas, ‘Donald Trump is all alone’, *The Atlantic*, 7 Nov. 2019, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2019/11/donald-trump-all-alone-white-house/601537>; Woodward, *Fear*.

⁷⁶ Derek Chollet, ‘An inside look at Trump’s foreign policy: “this is literally insane”’, *Washington Post*, 10 Dec. 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/an-inside-look-at-trumps-foreign-policy-this-is-literally-insane/2019/12/10/5405fb26-07fo-11ea-924a-28d87132c7ec_story.html.

⁷⁷ The White House, ‘Remarks by President Biden in press conference’, Cornwall Airport Newquay, 13 June 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/06/13/remarks-by-president-biden-in-press-conference-2>; The White House, *National Security Strategy October 2022*, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Biden-Harris-Administrations-National-Security-Strategy-10.2022.pdf>, pp. 8–9.

⁷⁸ National Intelligence Council, *Global trends: paradox of progress*, NIC 2017-001, 2017, <https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/nic/GT-Full-Report.pdf>, pp. 6 and 17–18.

⁷⁹ The White House, *Interim National Security strategic guidance*, 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/03/03/interim-national-security-strategic-guidance>, p. 7.

⁸⁰ The White House, *National Security Strategy*, Oct. 2022, p. 6.

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did not name Trump as a populist, they illustrated the broader anxieties around populism as a destabilizing global phenomenon—one which was rarely discussed in foreign policy documents in the pre-Trump era.

Within the United States, anti-populism contrasted the recklessness of Trump with the prudence of the FPE. Anti-populism reaffirmed the principles (and normal practices) of diplomacy in accordance with established protocols and policies. It blended discursive and stylistic aspects (emphasizing ‘clean’ and conventional language, diplomatic composure and cosmopolitan politeness) with more programmatic elements of policy-making. This is typical of the anti-populist discourse which strives to convey a ‘seriousness’ that contrasts with the supposed irresponsibility of populists. Because Trump was childish and unpredictable, anti-populist foreign policy needed to be mature and competent. This meant emphasizing standard themes that (nominally) characterized the pre-2016 consensus: democracy and human rights; leadership and engagement; and support for alliances and the rules-based order.⁸¹

Even before the end of Trump’s term of office, the FPE deployed a restorative rhetoric aimed at conveying—or restoring—a sense of normalcy.⁸² This was meant to ‘turn the page’ on Trump’s heterodoxies. It sought to tamp down populism by reinforcing the US’ commitment to the LIO.⁸³ Where Trump sought to discredit or undermine international institutions (such as NATO or the WHO), anti-populist foreign policy recommitted to institutions in a meaningful way, through rejoining treaties and agreements when possible. Alliances that had been frayed were revitalized.⁸⁴ The FPE was closely attuned to the need to reassure allies who had been afflicted with what one diplomat reportedly referred to as ‘TTD—Trump Trauma Disorder’.⁸⁵

Foreign policy provided an obvious opportunity to rebuild the country’s reputation, recentring those values associated with liberal hegemony. The phrase ‘America is back’ was used frequently, often being repeated for emphasis. In remarks to the Department of State, Biden said: ‘America is back. America is back. Diplomacy is back at the center of our foreign policy’.⁸⁶ This restorative

⁸¹ Jake Sullivan, ‘The world after Trump: how the system can endure’, *Foreign Affairs* 97: 2, 2018, pp. 10–19, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2018-03-05/world-after-trump>; Kelly Magsamen, Max Bergmann, Michael Fuchs and Trevor Sutton, *Securing a democratic world: the case for a democratic values-based U.S. foreign policy*, Center for American Progress, 2018, <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/securing-democratic-world>.

⁸² Daniel L. Byman, ‘Recovering from the Trump foreign policy’, Brookings, 18 June 2018, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2018/06/18/recovering-from-the-trump-foreign-policy>; Thomas Wright, ‘Between restoration and change’, Brookings, 1 Oct. 2020, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2020/10/01/between-restoration-and-change>.

⁸³ Bruce Jones and Susana Malcorra, ‘It is now time to focus on multilateral order’, Brookings, 19 April 2021, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2021/04/19/it-is-now-time-to-focus-on-multilateral-order>; The White House, *National Security Strategy October 2022*.

⁸⁴ Center for American Progress, ‘The first 100 days: toward a more sustainable and values-based national security approach’, 19 Oct. 2020, <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/first-100-days-toward-sustainable-values-based-national-security-approach/>.

⁸⁵ Frederick Kempe, ‘Here’s how Trump’s parting acts have improved Biden’s shot at history’, Atlantic Council, 17 Jan. 2021, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/content-series/inflection-points/heres-how-trumps-parting-acts-have-improved-bidens-shot-at-history>.

⁸⁶ The White House, ‘Remarks by President Biden on America’s place in the world’, Washington DC, 4 Feb. 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/02/04/remarks-by-president->

theme can be seen across the executive orders of the Biden administration, which included measures to re-engage with the WHO, join the multilateral COVAX global vaccine initiative, and combat climate change. A White House fact sheet outlining these and other executive orders began by saying they sent 'a message loud and clear to the rest of the world: America is back'. Certain executive orders were about 'restoring [the US'] historic, bipartisan policy of generous support to refugees' which was 'central to a values-based foreign policy that demonstrates American moral leadership on the world stage'.⁸⁷ On NATO, Biden's reassurances to European allies were intended to redress the 'Trump trauma', as reported by the *New York Times*, and alleviate concerns that Biden would merely be a placeholder 'between more populist, nationalist presidents'.⁸⁸ In a nod to 'normality', the administration routinely presented US support for NATO as steadfastly bipartisan.⁸⁹

In a January 2021 report, the Congressional Research Service used unusually emotive language to summarize the position of those in Washington who opposed the Trump administration:

They view the change as an unnecessary retreat from U.S. global leadership and a gratuitous discarding of long-held U.S. values, and judge it to be an unforced error of immense proportions—a needless and self-defeating squandering of something of great value to the United States that the United States had worked to build and maintain for 70 years.⁹⁰

Beyond 'rectifying Trump's day-to-day blunders', a recovery needed to 'restore institutions, soft power, the credibility of American values overseas and the deeper sources of U.S. power'.⁹¹ The Biden administration made an explicit commitment to 'revitalizing the foreign policy workforce' following a 'tumultuous period for the State Department's personnel'.⁹² It increased funding for the Department of State and the US Agency for International Development (USAID), and sought considerable increases in foreign assistance budgets associated with diplomacy, cultural and educational exchanges, development, security and humanitarian assistance, and participation in multilateral organizations.⁹³

biden-on-americas-place-in-the-world. The repetition also featured in Biden's comments at the 2021 G7 meeting in Newquay, United Kingdom. See The White House, 'Remarks by President Biden in press conference'. Writing during the 2020 campaign, Joe Biden pledged to 'rescue' US foreign policy: Joseph R. Biden, Jr., 'Why America must lead again: rescuing U.S. foreign policy after Trump', *Foreign Affairs* 99: 2, 2020, pp. 64–76, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2020-01-23/why-america-must-lead-again>.

⁸⁷ The White House, 'Fact sheet: President Biden to sign executive actions restoring America's place in the world', 4 Feb. 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/02/04/fact-sheet-president-biden-to-sign-executive-actions-restoring-americas-place-in-the-world>.

⁸⁸ Steven Erlanger, 'Biden is embracing Europe, but then what? NATO and the E.U. have concerns', *New York Times*, 6 June 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/06/06/world/europe/biden-nato-eu-trump.html>.

⁸⁹ The White House, 'Remarks by Vice President Harris at the Munich Security Conference', 19 Feb. 2022, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2022/02/19/remarks-by-vice-president-harris-at-the-munich-security-conference>.

⁹⁰ Congressional Research Service, *U.S. role in the world: background and issues for Congress*, updated 19 Jan. 2021, <https://sgp.fas.org/crs/row/R44891.pdf>, p. ii.

⁹¹ Byman, 'Recovering from the Trump foreign policy'.

⁹² Congressional Research Service, *State Department personnel: background and selected issues for the 117th Congress*, updated 7 July 2021, <https://sgp.fas.org/crs/row/R45203.pdf>, p. 1.

⁹³ Congressional Research Service, *Department of State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs: FY2023 budget and appropriations*, updated 23 Jan. 2023, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R47070>.

Anti-populism and the Trump trauma in US foreign policy

Described as ‘the best of the Blob’, Biden’s foreign policy team was designed to be highly cohesive to avoid the internal disagreements that characterized the Trump years.⁹⁴ Writing in *Foreign Affairs* in 2018, Jake Sullivan, Biden’s eventual choice as national security advisor, concluded an essay by calling on the foreign policy community to prepare for the world ‘after Trump’, arguing: ‘The opportunity remains to reconstitute the old consensus on new terms’.⁹⁵ In *The Atlantic*, Sullivan argued for a return to exceptionalism as means of rescuing America’s ‘mission’ from the unsettling uncertainties of the Trump era.⁹⁶ In his traditional first-day-in-office speech to State Department employees, Secretary of State Antony Blinken pledged to restore global American leadership, noting that the wider world and the American people were watching (diplomats) intently to see if they would be able to ‘heal [the] nation’.⁹⁷ Highlighting inter-agency ‘teamwork’ between the military and the diplomatic corps, Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin told reporters in May 2021 that it was ‘time to get back to professionalism and normal order and good process’.⁹⁸

During his first two years in office, Biden’s foreign policy did not constitute a radical departure from that of Trump. In some areas, Biden maintained the approach set out by his predecessor. The United States’ withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021 can be interpreted in this way. Moreover, the military budget increased steadily under both Trump and Biden. Similar to the Trump administration, the Biden White House articulated a strong focus on competition between the great powers.⁹⁹ On China, Biden largely extended Trump’s adversarial posture.¹⁰⁰ There were meaningful continuities on economics as well. Biden’s focus on industrial policy, ‘Buy America’ provisions in trade rules, and his integration of socioeconomic inequality and ‘middle-class’ well-being into national security strategy suggested some accommodation of populism.¹⁰¹

Biden was quick to recommit to multilateralism, rejoining treaties and organizations when it was feasible. In particular, the Russia–Ukraine war facilitated the revitalization of NATO in a way that ran counter to Trump’s America First posture (even if the reality of Trump’s policy toward NATO differed from his sovereigntist rhetoric). We cannot ascribe these differences to (anti-)populism in a reductive manner, but the normalization frame illustrates the impact of anti-populism in an emotional and ideational sense. Discursively, for the FPE, anti-

⁹⁴ Peter Beinart, ‘Is Biden’s foreign policy team the best of “the Blob”?’ *New York Times*, 2 June 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/06/02/opinion/biden-the-blob-china-us.html>.

⁹⁵ Sullivan, ‘The world after Trump’, p. 19.

⁹⁶ Jake Sullivan, ‘What Donald Trump and Dick Cheney got wrong about America’, *The Atlantic* 323: 1, 2019, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2019/01/yes-america-can-still-lead-the-world/576427>.

⁹⁷ US Department of State, ‘Secretary Antony J. Blinken to State Department employees’, 27 Jan. 2021, <https://www.state.gov/secretary-antony-j-blinken-to-state-department-employees>.

⁹⁸ US Department of Defense, ‘Secretary of Defense Austin and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Milley press briefing’, 6 May 2021, <https://www.defense.gov/News/Transcripts/Transcript/Article/2598964/secretary-of-defense-austin-and-chairman-of-the-joint-chiefs-of-staff-gen-mille>.

⁹⁹ The White House, *National Security Strategy*, Oct. 2022.

¹⁰⁰ See Amy Skonieczny and Ancita Sherel, ‘The Trump effect: the perpetuation of populism in US–China trade’, *International Affairs* 100: 5, 2024, pp. 1959–81, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iaae183>.

¹⁰¹ Andrew Gawthorpe, ‘Taking US foreign policy for the middle class seriously’, *The Washington Quarterly* 45: 1, 2022, pp. 57–75, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2022.2059143>.

populism provided a means of pinpointing the source of the Trump trauma. Beyond this, as a framing strategy, it created an avenue to 'wash away' the stain of Trumpian populism. During and after Trump's term, there was the sense that the United States could only be 'healed' if it returned to the status quo that existed before the populist rupture.

Biden sought to convey a sense of normalcy and stability in his overall approach to foreign affairs through the crises in Afghanistan and Ukraine, and despite rising tensions with Russia and China. He would push for a return to 'normal' liberal internationalism, looking to heal the nation after Trump. This remained a work-in-progress under his administration, which did not seek to transform (or reform) foreign policy so much as restore the pre-Trump consensus. It remains unclear whether the broader social, political, and economic forces at play were conducive to such a restoration. After Trump, there was the sense that the United States could only be 'healed' if it returned to the status quo that existed before the populist rupture.

Conclusion

A full understanding of the effects of populism requires examination into the reactions to political ruptures of the kind Trump represented. While changes in US foreign policy cannot be explained exclusively by the populism/anti-populism nexus, anti-populism conditioned the response to Trump on the part of foreign policy elites. Our case-study of the foreign policy establishment in the United States makes several conceptual contributions to the study of anti-populism. We showed that anti-populism has an emotional dimension. Further, we demonstrated that anti-populism, which is often preventative—usually to avoid the accession of populists to power—can become corrective when the ambition is to repair the existing political machinery following a 'populist disaster'. The first step is the externalization of the trauma that populism comes to represent; a cathartic endeavour to release the political anxieties created by populist success. In the US, this was done by framing Trump as an immature and irresponsible personality who, acting as a conduit for the masses of uneducated Americans, would dismantle the structures of the LIO. The second step is to uproot populism both symbolically and concretely; beyond framing populism as the source of the Trump trauma, meaningful change was needed (e.g. recommitting to the LIO) to restore the pre-populist order. Similar trends may be observed elsewhere. Analysts should explore the strategies used by established political actors to carry their processes of recovery, including anti-populist framing and policies that reinstate the 'normality' of a society without populism. In this context, the foreign policy realm will be fruitful for scholars looking to make further conceptual and theoretical contributions in the study of anti-populism.

Our framework highlighted key elements of anti-populism, which makes it applicable to cases beyond the United States. One element comprises the highly emotive responses to populist breakthroughs, reinforcing the notion that trauma

can extend to political phenomena that do not cause direct physical harm. Anti-populism often produces a catastrophist reaction that leads anti-populists to assign excessive negative force to populist actors; the destruction of institutions, the long-term tarnishing of a country's image or grave slides into authoritarianism can all be attributed solely to populist leaders or movements. A second element is the debate around technical knowledge, governance and national identity, which helps connect anti-populist discourse to policy-making. We saw that Trump's exuberance and 'isolationism'—both of which were related to his populism—were grotesque abnormalities, the ultimate sign that politics should not belong to political neophytes and the masses of ordinary citizens that gravitate towards them. This was especially problematic in the realm of foreign policy, because Trumpism was an affront to US identity, undercutting the traditional means of legitimating the US' post-Cold War commitment to global leadership and the LIO.

In terms of its policy implications, our study encourages practitioners to reflect on the (potential) emotional components of their responses to populist leaders and movements. This is particularly timely, given Trump's attempted return to office in 2024, at the time of writing, but the implications extend well beyond the US case. Because of the political trauma that often accompanies populist shocks, practitioners should consider whether their opposition to 'populist foreign policy' is driven by the content of the policy or by the emotions engendered by the populist actor. Future research is warranted to clarify how this populist/anti-populist nexus plays out in other foreign policy settings.

Additionally, this article underscores the necessity of moving beyond the discursive and stylistic elements of anti-populism—the main focus of the existing literature—to further consider the 'concrete' manifestations of anti-populist politics among elite and establishment-based actors. What happens when anti-populism becomes *solid*—as opposed to remaining merely ideational or rhetorical? Conscious that the policy and discursive/emotional elements of anti-populism are not fully indissociable, our emphasis on the evaluative and prescriptive aspects of framing showed how policy decisions can be used to counter the effects of populism. Moreover, our focus on US foreign policy showed the pertinence of studying anti-populism at the international level. Because elites and 'ordinary' citizens opposed to populism will often feel compelled to reassert their position and values on the international scene, addressing anti-populism from this perspective is essential.