

‘Laughing at us’: humour, tweets, and Trump’s public

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Abstract

That Donald J. Trump won the US Presidential Election of 2016 defied the expectations of almost all seasoned observers of the US political system. Scholarly explanations stress structural factors that produced a substantial cohort of identity-vulnerable voters in tandem with Trump’s personal populist appeal. Trump benefitted from his political outsider status, celebrity familiarity, heteronormative masculinity, and unconventional rhetorical style including humour, all of which were amplified (and also mocked) by extensive mainstream news media coverage. Trump’s distinctive political use of the social media micro-blogging platform Twitter (now known as X) in engaging those cohorts has also been emphasized. The research presented here sits at the confluence of prior scholarly work on structural causes of identity vulnerability, on contestation involving humour, and on the enhanced political usage of Twitter. It examines the historical record of Trump’s tweets and re-tweets to see if and how the demarcation of his ‘humour brand’ affectively engaged his substantial Twitter followers and may thereby have contributed to his electoral success in 2016.

Keywords: humour, identity, populism, Trump, Twitter.

1. Introduction

That Donald J. Trump – a real estate mogul, media entrepreneur, and reality television star with no formal political experience – prevailed over a large array of candidates seeking the Republican party nomination for Presidential candidate in the US Federal Election of 2016, defied the expectations of almost all seasoned observers of the US political system. That he went on to win the Presidential election stunned scholars, supporters, and opponents alike. Scholarly explanations stress structural factors that produced a substantial cohort of identity-vulnerable voters in tandem with Trump’s personal populist appeal. Trump benefitted from his political outsider status, celebrity familiarity, heteronormative masculinity, and unconventional rhetorical style including humour, all of which were amplified (and also mocked) by extensive mainstream news media coverage. Trump’s distinctive political use of the social media micro-blogging platform Twitter (now known as X) in engaging those cohorts has also been emphasized.

The research I present here sits at the confluence of prior scholarly work on structural causes of identity vulnerability, on contestation involving humour, and on the enhanced political usage of Twitter. I focus on Trump's Twitter engagement with the public through tweets that invoked humour and laughter in relation to identity. More specifically, I examine the historical record of Trump's tweets and re-tweets to see if and how the demarcation of his 'humour brand' affectively engaged his substantial Twitter followers and may thereby have contributed to his electoral success in 2016.

This paper has two parts. In the first part, on explanations for the 2016 election outcome, I begin by briefly summarizing scholarly accounts of structural factors and contrasting rhetorical styles and their impacts on voter identity needs. Then, I briefly sketch the presence of political humour against Trump and by him. In a third and slightly longer section, I offer some considerations regarding social media, and Twitter specifically, as well as the emergent trend of political campaign uses of Twitter culminating with the claim of scholars that Trump benefitted distinctively from his use of Twitter. The second part, the bulk of the paper, is devoted to the interaction of humour with identity in Trump's Twitter practices. In it, I explain my methodological assumptions and process, and characterize the history of Trump's presidential ambitions and early Twitter usage, before highlighting four themes in Trump's 'humour brand' evident in his published writings and tweets alike.

2. Explaining the 2016 US Presidential Election outcome

Trump became President by prevailing over the Democratic candidate Hillary R. Clinton in the electoral college process (304 v. 227 votes) while narrowly losing the popular vote (46 v. 48%). What explains this outcome?

2.1. Structural and rhetorical factors

Three structural factors figure in explanations for the mixed electoral outcome of 2016. First, fundamental economic and political developments in heavily populated and highly urbanized democratic states tipped the popular vote in favour of the Democratic party. Conversely, intensifying gerrymandering in states with higher rurality skewed the electoral college outcome in favour of the Republican party. Second, the pluralistic coalitions and cross-cutting associations that had produced the Obama Presidency in dramatic fashion in 2008 were disintegrating by 2012 along divisions of race and educational level. Third, in the face of rising fiscal and cultural anxieties, for those voters who were feeling 'left behind' preserving their racial, ethnic, sexual, and social standing loomed larger than it had in recent years (Sides, Tester & Vavreck, 2017; Schaffner, MacWilliams & Nteta, 2018; Della Posta, 2020; Trujillo & Crowley, 2022). Scholars speak variously of a 'revolt of the Rust Belt' (McQuarrie, 2017), cultural 'backlash' (Norris & Inglehart, 2019), rise of the 'alt-right' (Forscher & Kteily, 2020), and 'white protectionism' (Smith & King, 2021). Cumulatively, growing cohorts of voters were becoming disaffected by the status quo, and more averse to 'social diversification and value change' that they perceived threatened their identities (Grossman & Thaler, 2018).

Trump's populism involved Republican demographic gains (relative to the 2012 electoral cycle) with whites without college degrees and/or in blue-collar sectors and hailing from rural constituencies (Morgan & Lee, 2018; Albrecht, 2022). Geographically, it was especially in the upper Midwest states that Trump overperformed the electoral expectations of scholars and the pundits of both parties (Grossman & Thaler, 2018).

To these structural explanatory factors must be added the specific rhetorical dynamics of the respective campaigns and persona of Clinton and Trump. The Trump campaign slogan, 'Make America Great Again', extolled nationalism in terms of mercantilist prosperity and the

moralized honour of the ‘true American,’ and conversely rejected internationalism that entailed neoliberal free trade and cultural pluralism (Thompson, 2021). Trump largely eschewed the long-established local aspects of conventional campaigning best practices, including face-to-face and door-to-door networking, in favour of cultivating visibility in the mainstream media, on social media, and at state-wide mass rallies. Trump’s rhetorical style as a candidate was unconventional in several respects: grandiose, informal, dynamic (Ahmadian, Azarshahi, & Paulhus, 2017), including violations of norms of politeness (Bucy et al., 2020), and invocations of visceral disgust (Richardson, 2017). Criticism was levelled at both his agenda and style.

Conversely, Clinton campaigned on the inclusive theme of ‘Stronger Together,’ understood as unity through diversity. However, she selectively skipped timely visits to some key states, was largely absent from the campaign trail in August, and lagged Trump in the volume of mainstream media attention to her personal actions. Her rhetorical style was academic and sophisticated but also as such somewhat inaccessible, and further undermined itself through the notable gaffe of referring to a vast yet vague cohort of potential voters as ‘a basket of deplorables.’ Indeed, she was dogged by criticism that her political record, agenda, and style were globalist, elitist, urban, urbane, and condescending.

2.2. The roles of political humour in the Presidential Electoral cycle of 2016.

For the purposes of this paper, I shall presume that ‘humour’ utilizing a range of widely recognized genres and forms is a communicative social transaction that elicits mirth responses in the receiver including especially ‘laughter’. *Political* humour as a strategy of political communication uses the pleasures of humour seriously to advance substantive political, i.e., ideological, partisan, and/or ethical content. Scholars, especially in the fields of communication and sociology, have sought to characterize how humour and politics interact, fostering identity, drawing in- and out-groups, and attaching affective pleasures to those distinctions (Meyer, 2000; Lynch, 2002; Smith, 2009; Becker & Waisanen, 2013; Klutz-Flamenbaum, 2014; Stevens, 2021; Buie et al., 2022).

Candidate Trump was subjected to an unprecedented volume of mimicry, mockery, satire, and ridicule in television, print, and social media throughout the period under study (Momen, 2018; Farnsworth & Lichter, 2019). Talk of clowns and carnivals abounded. If Trump’s victories first in the Republican primaries and then in the Federal Presidential election of 2016 were protracted surprises so too was the failure of this plethora of comic criticism to undermine those outcomes. Indeed, that Trump prevailed shook the confidence of proponents of progressive-democratic political humour that comedy can punch up, speak mirth to power, coordinate carnivalesque overturning, and so on. Political humour directed against Trump was on point and pleasurable to many yet finally pyrrhic for those who laughed (Kersten, 2019; McClennen & Moore, 2023).

Conversely, the shortfall and ineffectiveness of humour on the political right presumed by many scholars has also been called into question. On the contrary, Trump used verbal and gestural political humour, especially during mass rallies but also in the televised debates, to diminish opponents and critics and to register and reaffirm heteronormative and racially hierarchic identities, in ways that made him entertaining to some, offensive to others (Stewart, Eubanks & Miller, 2016; Hall, Goldstein & Ingram, 2016, 2020; Nussbaum, 2017; Buie et al., 2022).

In effect, to the primary puzzle here of how Trump won the 2016 election can be added a second one, why did political humour directed against Trump prove ineffective?

2.3. Social media, Twitter, and humour

The internet and the many social media platforms that operate through it enable spatially dispersed users to asynchronously share their user-provided content and interact with all other users, potentially worldwide. As such, to early proponents the internet promised to radically equalize and democratize access to information, expression and connection and thereby enrich the pluralistic possibilities of civic and cosmopolitan engagement. It offered the prospect of a digital *agora*, a virtual public sphere, for deliberative democratic practices (Bimber, 1998; Papacharissi, 2002; Birchall, 2020). To critics, however, these potential benefits of computer-mediated communication and social aggregation have been overtaken by other dynamics. First, the digital world has been effectively corporatized and commodified by an ‘internet oligopoly’ (Smyrniotis, 2018). Second, through algorithmic affinities it compounds the confirmation biases of its users inside virtual echo-chambers and epistemic bubbles (Terren & Borge-Bravo, 2021; Turner, 2023). Third, it has become increasingly distracting, disruptive, divisive, and destructive to civility across differences. Moreover, in permitting user anonymity (or pseudonyms and avatars) and forgoing proof of authenticity the major social networks have also been demonstrably subject to considerable manipulation (by bogus accounts and bots) and the dissemination of misinformation (Babcock & Whitehouse, 2005; Wheeler, 2013; Del Vicario et al., 2016).

Notwithstanding concerns, the self-sustaining nature of online interactions now constitutes an unruly public sphere of its own. Founded in 2006, Twitter, a social media micro-blogging platform had reached 500 million discrete tweets per day by 2013,¹ and has long since been dubbed the ‘Twitterverse.’ To the generic dynamics of internet-mediated communication and interaction, Twitter contributes some specific additional ones. The individual ‘tweet’ is a compact genre. From the onset Twitter set a character limit of 140 characters (ensuring that a complete tweet and username could be posted within the then standard length of 160-characters for SMS messages posted by smartphone).² Beyond the words themselves, and abundant character-saving abbreviations and acronyms, some additional affect can be conveyed through the use of all capitals and exclamation points. However, to communicate complex meaning involved cultivating followers and using tweets in a sequenced ‘stream’ or ‘storm’. To the extent that social networks emerge through Twitter, then, they rely on direct mentions, cascading re-tweets (RT), and ‘follow-ship’. Tweets, and more so re-tweets with editorial additions by the re-tweeter, despite their brevity, can be experienced as forms of impulsive and hence authentic intimate attention and even affective engagement (Lee & Shin, 2012; Duncombe, 2019).

In contrast to the ‘serious’ conventional media treatments of politics, though in alignment with comic treatments of news and political topics by late-night and satirical television shows, social media also enables political work and criticism by comic verbal and visual means. The embodied reaction of laughter figures in surrogate virtual form, e-laughter if you will, through the expression (especially in re-tweets) of onomatopoeic reactions such as ‘haha’, abbreviations such as ‘lmao,’ and ‘lol,’ and emojis conveying facial and performative reactions. Conversely disapproval of tweeted humour and attempts to elicit laughter can be met with responses in all-caps, or again emojis of anger and disgust (Weitz, 2016). Twitter in particular has enabled what some scholars have characterized as a seriously funny politics of irreverence or silly citizenship (Belt, 2018; Davis, Love & Killen, 2018).

Finally, Twitter evidently enhances political or partisan homophily through tweets and re-tweets as well as the reciprocated and non-reciprocated ties of accounts followed (Colleoni, Rozza & Arvidson, 2014; Lyons & Veenstra, 2016). As such, from its inception, it has been increasingly utilized by political candidates and campaigns alongside traditional media to

¹ <https://www.internetlivestats.com/twitter-statistics/>

² The character count was doubled to 280 as of late November 2017, and after the period under study here.

publicize agenda items, criticize competitors and engage with voters (Parmelee & Bichard, 2011). Tweets for political purposes are typically intermediated and intertextual. That is they draw upon and contribute to discourse occurring in other media. They are also typically of the moment, requiring some temporally sensitivity to understand them retrospectively. In the 2012 US Presidential election cycle, tweets were symbiotic with traditional news media, though not yet used consistently by candidates nor notably more so as the election neared (Conway, Kenski & Wang, 2013, 2015). However, by the time of the 2016 election cycle, campaign usage of Twitter had markedly expanded, become more contentious, and provided original content for conventional media coverage (Gross & Johnson, 2016; Jungherr, 2016). Schill & Hendricks, 2017; Galdieri et al., 2018; Buccoliero et al., 2020; Dumitresco & Ross, 2021).

Appositely, then, to explain Trump's electoral success some scholars have highlighted his seemingly distinctive and compulsive usage of free social media, including especially Twitter, through tweets and re-tweets, in cultivating and mobilizing a substantial group of supporters (Lee & Lim, 2016; Cornfield, 2017; Enli, 2017; Marx, 2017; Ott, 2017; Yaqub et al., 2017; Francia, 2018; Lee & Xu, 2018; Morris, 2018; Bryden & Silverman, 2019; Wignell, O'Halloran & Tan, 2019; Ouyang & Waterman, 2020).

3. Trump on Twitter: which humour? whose laughter?

In the previous part, I summarized explanations for the 2016 election outcome in relation to emergent demographic identity needs, vigorous humour contestation, and the campaigning turn to social media and especially Twitter. Here I now turn directly to my research question: did Trump's tweets and re-tweets appeal to humour and laughter in ways that might have contributing to the identity enhancement and differentiation of vulnerable voters and thereby to his electoral appeal? To be clear, my focus is not on assessing the presence of actual humour (or wit, wordplay, irony, sarcasm, jibes, jokes, etc.) in Trump's tweets but rather on the invocation of the appropriateness or inappropriateness of humour and the overt solicitation of laughter or unlaughter towards specific sorts of topics or targets. That is, my interest is primarily in the pattern of specifications by Trump of a sense of humour deemed to be a valid expression of values held and shared with those portions of the public who identified with and aligned themselves with him as a result.

3.1. Methodology

Twitter-centric social and political research is still developing, and hedged by potential skews in the empirical generalizability given uncertainties about the authenticity and representativeness of participants, and hence about the actual social communities that might underlie the networked ones.³ Still, the analysis of social media interactions through big-data statistical methods but also small-data interpretive approaches can inform theoretically generalizable claims about the formal elements within theories (Pal & Gonawela, 2017; Davis & Love, 2019).

The Trump Twitter Archive was established in September 2016 by a private citizen and remains without ads or agenda. It includes all of Trump's tweets and re-tweets, using the username or handle: @realDonaldTrump, from when he joined on May 4, 2009, and all of Trump's tweets until Jan 8, 2021, when Twitter (now X) suspended his account. It also includes deleted tweets from September 2016 onwards but not before. It is the primary stable and

³ See Barberá & Rivero (2015), Vergeer (2015), Cihon & Yasserli (2016), Sanders (2016), Garcia et al. (2017), and Ingram (2017), among others.

searchable archive for research on Trump's tweets, and as such, is relied upon by major news outlets and fact-checking bodies such as FactCheck.org, PolitiFact, and Snopes.⁴

Given the temporally immediate and intermediated nature of political tweets, this research employs a 'small-data' interpretive approach, emphasizing the qualitative and contextual meaning of tweets and re-tweets in relation to the wider temporal sequence of events and discourse in other media (Pal, 2017). Accordingly, I conducted searches of the Trump Twitter Archive, covering the period from May 2009 to October 2017, some 32000 tweets and re-tweets, for a series of humour-related terms and variants thereof, including: clown, comic, comedy, fool, funny, hilarity, humour, joke, laugh, ridicule, smile, and then coded them noting frequency, timing and external contextual factors, and applicability to the themes found in Trump's published works.

3.2. Trump's presidential aspirations and early adoption of Twitter

In socio-economic terms Trump the real-estate developer and later entertainment mogul was never an ordinary American. Nevertheless, in the conventional media, through his many co-authored books, and enlarged through social media, he cultivated a personal 'brand' or 'persona' as a wise-cracking expert on the American Dream that anyone can get rich if they work hard and make smart deals.⁵ Appositely, his popular reality TV show, *The Apprentice*,⁶ conveyed that in an increasingly volatile and competitive labour-market one may advance on merit through hard-work but wins by adopting the self-fulfilling appearance of success (Lair, 2011).

Prior to 2016, Trump had three times explored parlaying his self-cultivated celebrity brand as an expert on personal economic success into a potential presidential candidacy: in 1987, in 1999 (for the Reform Party), and in 2010. Though it remains unclear if in leveraging his media celebrity he hoped to win or just further amplify that celebrity value Trump also published politically telling books (2000, 2011). The flipside of his positive views on generating economic success was the negative political message to the ordinary American: since you are smart and do work hard if you are economically failing then the explanation must be elsewhere, namely, disastrous politicians, the regulatory excesses of status quo politics, or the unfair behaviour of new or enlarged foreign others at home or abroad. It was on this honed dichotomous message, duly rendered in book form, emphasizing American dishonour, and the imperative to make America great again that Trump campaigned in the 2016 electoral cycle.⁷

Trump was an early-adopter, first tweeting on 5 May 2009. Though most of his few early tweets were little more than advertising for *The Apprentice*, his new book at the time *Think Like a Champion*, or related public appearances on conventional media, he relied on it increasingly to manifest his personal brand as a jocular motivator of the entrepreneurially minded. For example, "You can only smile when the losers of the world try so hard to put down successful

⁴ <https://www.thetrumparchive.com/>

The entire archive is downloadable in a VSC format from Kaggle

<https://www.kaggle.com/datasets/headsortails/trump-twitter-archive>

⁵ The sub-titles of Trump's typically co-authored books, most of which have 'Trump' in their title and also a picture of him on the cover, might be recalled here: *The Art of the Deal* (1987, 2005, 2009, 2016), *Surviving at the Top* (1990), *The Art of the Comeback* (1997), *How to get Rich* (2004), *The Way to the Top: The Best Advice I Ever Received* (2004) which actually featured others, *Think like a billionaire* (2004), *Why We Want You to be Rich* (2006), *How to Build a Fortune* (2006), *Trump 101: The Way to Success* (2006), *Think Big and Kick Ass: In Business and in Life* (2007; 2008: *Think Big: make it happen in business and life*), *Never Give Up: How I Turned My Biggest Challenges Into Success* (2008), *Think like a champion: An informal education in business and life* (2009), and *Midas Touch* (2011).

⁶ Trump hosted *The Apprentice* from January 2004 to December 2010, and *The Celebrity Apprentice* from January 2008 through February 2015.

⁷ See variants of *Crippled America: How to Make America Great Again* (2015), *Great Again: How to Fix Our Crippled America* (2016), *Time to Get Tough: Make America Great Again! (Updates for 2016)*.

people. Just remember, they all want to be YOU!” (2013.12.3).⁸ All the same, already by late 2012, Trump declared in a responsive tweet: “Thanks- many are saying I’m the best 140 character writer in the world. It’s easy when it’s fun.”⁹

From the official onset of his campaign on 16 June 2015, when he descended the escalator at the Trump Tower in New York City and announced his candidacy, Trump the media-adept celebrity courted much of the shocked and ridiculing free coverage in the mainstream news media through his blithe bombast, ingenuous insults, curated controversy, and orchestrated spectacle.¹⁰ At the same time, Trump continued to use Twitter and other social media, and in numerous tweets and re-tweets acknowledged doing so, to directly and unconventionally cultivate a politically salient ‘follow-ship’:

“”@PolitiTrends @realdonaldtrump is dominating the discussion on Twitter with 79352 mentions today (via <http://t.co/nexlCVB8ml>)”” (2015.7.15).

“”@gqforbes: DOMINATING SOCIAL MEDIA! @realDonaldTrump's twitter edge @DanScavino @FoxNews @EricTrump @ericbolling" <http://t.co/r2FOMm5Tr0>” (2015.8.2)

“”@jonnati77: @EW Erickson: TWITTER...has allowed the silent majority to have a voice and we want TRUMP 2016!!!” #MakeAmericaGreatAgain”” (2015.8.9).

“Congrats everyone--we topped 4 million today on Twitter--and heading up fast!” (2015.9.1).

“”@Trump4potusplz: Had to join Twitter for the first time just to support Donald @realDonaldTrump. TRUMP 2016" Great!” (2015.10.19).

“I was #1 on Twitter -- and so positive. Thank you! <https://t.co/7JBjeWt6XK>” (2015.10.29).¹¹

To wit, Trump asked: “How do you fight millions of dollars of fraudulent commercials pushing for crooked politicians? I will be using Facebook & Twitter. Watch!” (2016.3.6).¹² Similarly, “To all of my twitter followers, please contribute whatever you can to the campaign. We must beat Crooked Hillary. <https://t.co/Xv8Q1GuWiH>” (2016.7.6).¹³

By January 2016, Trump had some 5.5 million followers and by Nov 8, 13 million. However, and though belatedly, Clinton was not far behind with 5 million and 10.3 million respectively. So, it is not merely the volume of followers but the distinctive linguistic and affective content of Trump’s tweets that is salient.¹⁴ Through Twitter, Trump addressed his

⁸ <https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/555553247130165249>

⁹ <https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/267286471172562944>

¹⁰ See Hall et al (2016), Hennefeld (2016), Wells et al (2016), Ahmadian et al (2017), Conway et al (2017), Winberg (2017).

¹¹ Respectively,

<https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/621336220421984256>

<https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/628019666506645505>

<https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/630295580393238528>

<https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/638783663715536896>

<https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/656302737685139461>

<https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/659827285852225536>

¹² <https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/706675395811266560>

¹³ <https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/750811268219543552>

¹⁴ Enli (2017) notes Trump’s informality relative to Clinton, and Yaqub et al (2017) Trump’s relative positivity in campaign messaging, and higher approval in tweets and re-tweets that mentioned him. Clark and Grieve (2019) also note that Trump’s informality and interaction with other Twitter users has ebbed and flowed, rising overall during the campaigning periods prior to the 2012 and 2016 elections.

sizable and growing potential supporters distinctively to complain about the mocking coverage of his movement by the status quo media, and to ridicule opponents and critics.

3.3. Four themes in Trump's humour brand

In what follows, I discuss the content of Trump's tweets and re-tweets in relation to the timing of his unfolding campaign and in the immediate aftermath of his victory, the sequence of his presence and treatment in wider media, and humour themes in his prior published books. In particular, I rely on the relatively reflective arguments of *Time to Get Tough: Making America #1 Again!* (2011), to inductively identify four themes in Trump's 'humour brand': humiliating laughter, trivializing amusement, retaliatory mockery, and vindicating last laugh. These themes are used to identify patterns in Trump's tweets and re-tweets as he cultivated a public that would identify with him and hence donate, rally, and vote accordingly.

3.3.1. Humiliating laughter

The staple in Trump's political rhetoric and 'humour brand' has long been the charge that (foreign) Others are 'laughing at us', America. It appears in Trump's first foray on the national political stage on 2 September 1987, with a paid full-page 'open letter' in the *Washington Post* (as well as *New York Times* and *Boston Globe*) criticizing Reagan's US foreign policies: "The World is laughing at America's politicians as we protect ships we don't own, carrying oil we don't need, destined for allies we won't help." The 'letter' concluded with: "Let's not let our great country be laughed at any more".¹⁵

The notion that the honour of America, and by implication of ordinary Americans, was enduring humiliating laughter as a result of President Obama, the naïve liberal Democratic Party politics, and weak Republicans was a sustained refrain in *Time to Get Tough* (2011).¹⁶ Trump's opening declaration to the intended reader established the grounds for their identification with him: "Every day in business I see America getting ripped off and abused. We have become a laughingstock, the world's whipping boy, blamed for everything, credited for nothing, given no respect. You see and feel it all around you, and so do I" (2). In his analysis, "OPEC ... [is] ... laughing all the way to the bank" (2; see also 20), and likewise China,¹⁷ Russia,¹⁸ Iran¹⁹ and sundry others. He closed with the judgement that "We're being humiliated, disrespected, and badly abused. Obama was a leftist experiment that has failed and gone horribly Wrong, and everyone knows it" (217).

Turning to the Trump Twitter Archive, sheer idiomatic frequency registers the preoccupations of his worldview. As of 7 August 2017, 'great' appeared 4554 times, 'America' 2559, 'tough' 340, 'honor' 277, 'winner' 182, 'God' 150, and 'Justice' 74 times. 'History' appeared 160 times, typically as a totality, or undifferentiated flow, or synonym for an

¹⁵ *The Washington Post*, Sept. 2, 1987, p.A9. *New York Times*, p.A28. It is a theme that was noted by the occasional media analyst pre-election, such as Reeve (2011) and Chokshi (2016), but by more soon thereafter, such as Gonyea & Montanaro (2017), and Waldman (2017).

¹⁶ The idiom figured again in *Crippled America: How to Make America Great Again* (2015) and then retitled as *Great Again: How to Fix Our Crippled America* (2016), with variously, OPEC, the Czechs, and the Ayatollah 'laughing at us'.

¹⁷ China's trade contracts supposedly in our favour are "an insulting joke" (7) and "they are laughing at us" (7), our policy towards them is "a joke" (36), "The Chinese laugh at how weak and pathetic our government ..." (42), "the Communist Chinese are laughing their heads off" (91).

¹⁸ "Obama's plan to have Russia stand up to Iran was a horrible failure that turned American into a laughingstock" (96).

¹⁹ "As pathetic and ridiculous as that is, here's the most humiliating part: Iran laughed at him and rejected the plan outright. Worse, once they heard Obama's proposal and realized what a joke the guy is, they were emboldened to get tough" (97).

ahistorical 'ever'. 'Injustice' appears only once, and early on: "Lets fight like hell and stop this great and disgusting injustice! The world is laughing at us" (2012.11.6).²⁰ It is a line that becomes a refrain.

That is, on Twitter Trump belaboured the extent to which Others (outsiders within and abroad) were (sometimes rightly) laughing at America, at Obama, and at status quo politics. In 2013: "The Obama Administration has a very important duty to provide a budget - and then negotiate! OUR COUNTRY is a laughingstock!" (2013.10.7).²¹ The following year: "We should immediately stop sending our beautiful American tax dollars to countries that hate us and laugh at our President's stupidity!" (2014.11.7).²² In 2015, Trump informed his growing follow-ship: "Remember, politicians are all talk and NO action. Our country is a laughing stock that is going to hell. The lobbyists & donors control all!" (2015.5.12).²³

Among the many anti-American laughers, Trump tapped China most often (433 times) (Huang, 2017), but also a wide assortment of other malefactors foreign and domestic, including Iran, Japan (Miller, 2018), the Mullahs, OPEC, Sudan, Russia, Syria, five released Taliban, lawyers for the Central Park 5, Mexican leadership, Putin, ISIS, terrorists, and even anti-Trump 'thugs': "Many of the thugs that attacked the peaceful Trump supporters in San Jose were illegals. They burned the American flag and laughed at police" (2016.7.4).²⁴ Indeed, in the space of one capacious tweet, Trump managed to align the mockery of America by China and the rest of the world with America's post-industrial economic difficulties, and the domestic agitation against racial injustice, and centre the responsibility on Obama: "As China and the rest of the World continue to rip off the U.S. economically, they laugh at us and our president over the riots in Ferguson!" (2014.11.25).²⁵

Trump's tweets on foreign and domestic policies implied that using coercion and even torture on others is preferable to telling the truth and suffering laughter yourself. For example, Trump tweeted: "Obama & Democrat leaders did a great disservice by releasing the papers on torture. The world is laughing at us—they think we are fools!" (2014.12.11).²⁶ And the following day: "The terrorists cut off the heads of Americans and laugh, then want to sell us the bodies for \$1,000,000. We fight over sleep deprivation!" (2014.12.12).²⁷

That the impression and idiom of America 'being laughed at' was important to Trump and resonated with his growing followers is evident in Trump's re-tweets of favourable news coverage invoking the phrase, such as:

"'Trump to Liberty U Students: 'The World is Laughing at Us'" <http://t.co/s4XyK8HP> Via @Newsmax_Media" (2012.9.25).

"'@FoxNewsInsider: U.S. Is a 'Laughingstock,' Obama 'Has No Clue What He's Doing' <http://t.co/ieJThAc9DK> @greta <http://t.co/CZRYdKthth>" (2015.5.27).²⁸

It is similarly apparent in his numerous re-tweets of followers, from 2013 on, using this idiom, such as:

²⁰ <https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/266034957875544064>

²¹ <https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/387194672885817344>

²² <https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/530802365323296769>

²³ <https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/598328562739970048>

²⁴ <https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/739080401747120128>

²⁵ <https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/537155665635344385>

²⁶ <https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/543075492849799168>

²⁷ <https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/543305177907068928>

²⁸ <https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/250660447622156289>
<https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/603755204807413760>

“"@ShawnWHughes: @realDonaldTrump @BarackObama has turned the USA into a laughing stock around the world."” (2013.7.14).

“"@SScottlilly80: @realDonaldTrump Run for president we need someone to stand up china and Russia. They laugh at us now." They do laugh!” (2013.7.14)

“@RealSonnyNewman They are laughing” (2013.7.27).²⁹

3.3.2 Trivializing amusement

For many years the pre-political Trump enhanced his celebrity status through, publishing co-authored works, soliciting media attention, and making cameo appearances in TV and film, all of which emphasized his funny flamboyance. In this regard, in *Think Like a Champion* (2009:123) Trump noted, as he has elsewhere both before and after, that “[T]he surprising thing is that I’m more humble than most people think. I’m humble enough to be grateful, for one thing, and I still have a sense of humour about myself”.

Trump had been the willing subject of a roast by the Friars’ Club in 2004. In 2012, having recently announced that he was considering running for President, he reprised his role as comic target in a televised Comedy Central Roast, taped on March 9 and aired on March 15, 2011 (Libit, 2016). In doing so, his Foundation received \$400,000 as a fee, and he garnered considerable free media attention. Crucially, he also demonstrated that he can ‘take a joke’ (Blauvelt, 2011). Privately, during the planning for the appearance he specified, though, that jokes diminishing his wealth or recalling his bankruptcies were off-limits. At the Roast, Trump entered with gilded exuberance, sat hunched with a forced smile mostly unresponsive to any of the specifics, and used his rebuttal to deliver a mini-stump speech.

On Twitter, in advance of the broadcast, he promoted the event, and jocularly goaded the presenters:

“Watch as I humiliate a dais full of "talent." #TrumpRoast airs tonight at 10:30/9:30c on Comedy Central <http://bit.ly/fugbyy>” (2011.3.15).

“Hey @SnoopDogg @ItsTheSituation @SethMacFarlane: Oh, I'm real scared. #TrumpRoast airs tonight at 10:30/9:30 on @Comedy Central” (2011.3.15).

“Hey @realDonaldTrump @whitney cummings @lisalampanelli: you call yourselves comedians? #TrumpRoast tonight 10:30/9:30c on @ComedyCentral” (2011.3.15).³⁰

During the first broadcast he encouraged affirming public commentary: “Keep talking about me: use #TrumpRoast to tweet about how good I look on @ComedyCentral tonight at 10:30/9:30c <http://bit.ly/hN3jow>” (2011.3.15).³¹ The ‘Comedy Central Roast of Donald Trump’ was in fact a notable ratings success and during the broadcast garnered 43,000 mentions across social media with the hashtag #trumproast appearing some 27,000 times.³² Trump continued to

²⁹ <https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/356306383823577088>

<https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/356305203433193472>

<https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/361101001815629824>

³⁰ <https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/47667623525224448>

<https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/47672443254476800>

<https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/47673273869283328>

³¹ <https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/47755962928463872>

³² <http://www.thefutoncritic.com/ratings/2011/03/17/comedy-central-roast-of-donald-trump-is-number-1-comedy-central-roast-ever-with-men-18-34-738010/20110317comedycentral01/>

re-tweet favourable responses to TV airings in later years, even adding a grateful personal comment:

“"@IronMan1021: I think after watching his roast I've realized that @realDonaldTrump is super fucking bad ass Props to you sir" True – thanks” (2013.4.7).

“"@MitchConnor4: @realDonaldTrump after watching the roast of you I can confirm you are ready to be president!" It was fun, thanks.” (2014.6.29).

“"@NeilForell: Watched the roast of @realDonaldTrump You took those jokes like a champ, what a good sport! Im voting for you now" Great” (2015.10.3).³³

In fact, in numerous re-tweets from 2013 to 2015 Trump registered appreciatively that, based on his various freely furnished funny media appearances, his followers attributed to him a great sense of humour, and that he made them laugh, smile etc:

“"@craigashwood: @realDonaldTrump Nice job Mr.Trump! Smooth, relaxed, and in good humour." Thanks!" (2013.3.28).

“"@thatboyred: @realDonaldTrump you did awesome! Always shooting and keeping letterman away from attacking the GOP and joking on you. Great!" (2013.3.28).

“"@kanikagahlaut: Can anyone explain why @JerrySeinfeld is so unfunny on twitter and @realDonaldTrump is so funny?" Jerry is highly overrated” (2013.4.14).

“"@kmcs1957: @realDonaldTrump I love when you get your Haters all twisted up. You would make another gazillion \$ as a comedian #love you!" (2013.4.19).

“"@MJGrilliot: @realDonaldTrump is the funniest, yet most honest person on Twitter" Thanks!" (2013.11.11).

“"@vv3762 @realDonaldTrump @DonaldJTrumpJr @EricTrump It is fine that despite your achievements, you have not lost sense of humour!" Thanks” (2014.9.2).³⁴

The notable exception in Trump's public appearances and strategic willingness to be joked about was the White House Press Correspondents' Dinner on 30 April 2011 and his treatment by Emcee Seth Meyers and President Obama, and the media's reporting of the event thereafter. It was Meyers who dropped the memorable one-liner: "Donald Trump has been saying he will run for president as a Republican — which is surprising, since I just assumed he was running as a joke." That Trump felt attacked is suggested by a tweet in which he advertised: “#timetogettough The White House Correspondents' Dinner in my new book "Time To Get Tough".....watch the #trumpvlog--- <http://t.co/uRim6jQw>” (2011.11.8).³⁵ In *Time to Get Tough*

³³ <https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/320862619273666560>
<https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/483135242551566336>
<https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/650531124419133440>

³⁴ <https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/317220698089213952>
<https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/317223247127126017>
<https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/323402549019422721>
<https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/325426015734206466>
<https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/377948452166328320>
<https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/506829407735275520>

³⁵ <https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/133986825885855744>

(2011) Trump gave a belaboured and contradictory account of the episode.³⁶ Most notably, having reassured that he enjoyed most of the mocking attention, he reported that:

“The next morning, I picked up the newspapers. The press was brutal. They said I was ridiculed, refused to smile, and was deeply embarrassed. I realized then and there that political life is not real life. The media can distort the truth, and everyone thinks that’s what really happened. I had a great time, but the press made it seem just the opposite. So for the record, the White House Correspondents’ Dinner was a real highlight for me, and I loved it immensely” (161).

As an outsider candidate for the Republic nomination and then American presidency, Trump was subjected to sustained mocking character disparagement by mainstream satirical news sources, such as Stephen Colbert, Seth Meyers, John Oliver,³⁷ as well as online news comics, such as Randy Rainbow, and anonymous sources through memes, for his putative racism, misogyny, egotism, and lack of credibility. They also made fun of his appearance in more superficial and arguably problematic ways. Crucially, the conventional news media, eager to furnish some entertainment value to audiences during what promised to be a long electoral cycle, also made condescending fun of the *nouveau politique* Trump.

The *New York Daily News*, one of the local New York newspapers long familiar with and critical of Trump, set the tone with cover headlines, and accompanying photoshopped photographs: ‘Clown Runs for Prez’ (2015.6.15). Following his loss to Ted Cruz in the Iowa caucus it ran ‘Dead Clown Walking,’ and following his win in New Hampshire, ‘Dawn of the Brain Dead,’ all of which also reverberated on Twitter.³⁸ Trump responded promptly with tweets such as: “@NYDailyNews, the dying tabloid owned by dopey clown Mort Zuckerman, puts me on the cover daily because I sell. My honor, but it is dead! (2015.6.28).³⁹

Trump persisted in allowing the mainstream media to make a concerted serio-comic spectacle of him.⁴⁰ He appeared on the *Tonight Show with Jimmy Fallon* on 11 September 2015, in an amiable dressing room mirror-sketch in which Fallon played Trump, and Trump responded as the reflection to a mock interview by Fallon-as-Trump. Following this appearance, Trump re-tweeted numerous favourable comments, such as: “@5SOS_jrt1d: Mr. Trump, you weren’t just HUGE on @FallonTonight - you were AWESOME. WISDOM and HUMOUR ARE A POWERFUL COMBINATION!!!” (2015.9.12).⁴¹

Although there isn’t space in this paper to track the social wake of re-tweets,⁴² another one such as this: “@ravila30: Loved you on Jimmy lastnight & how you showed you like to have

³⁶ “And while the President was smiling, I knew inside he wasn’t. Then, they showed a picture of the White House with ‘Trump White House’ written on top of it like a hotel sign, which was cute. The president spent a lot of time telling jokes about me. I didn’t know quite how to react. Should I be laughing? Smiling? Frowning? I wasn’t sure so I decided to keep a straight face, with a few little smiles every once in a while because I knew the cameras were on me. The fact is, I loved the evening and I loved what the president was saying because even though they were jokes, he was telling them in a nice and respectful way and he did a good job telling them” (160). He insists that he enjoyed the attention and appreciated that “the president was telling joke after joke” (161) about him, but also regarded some of the attention, notably from Seth Meyers, as “nasty” (160) and affirmed the “classy” reaction of one of the attendees at his table who “actually looked angry” on his behalf (161).

³⁷ Oliver, as guest host on the *Daily Show* in 2013, even jokingly implored Trump: “Do it! Do it! Look at me. Do it! I will personally write you a campaign check now on behalf of this country which does not want you to be president, but which badly wants you to run!”

³⁸ <https://www.nydailynews.com/news/politics/donald-trump-entering-2016-presidential-race-article-1.2259706>

<https://twitter.com/NYDailyNews/status/694408375770181632>

³⁹ <https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/615299494339592196>

⁴⁰ See Hall et al (2016), Kellner (2016).

⁴¹ <https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/642653788206055424>

⁴² See Zhang et al (2018) on Trump’s Twitter following.

fun/are able to laugh at yourself! Do you ever sleep tho? Not much” (2015.9.12),⁴³ garnered 332 re-tweets (each viewed by cascading networks of others) and 909 likes and sponsored a Twitter storm between some of Trump’s supporters and detractors. By then, the extent to which status quo political experts dismissed him and yet he kept advancing was itself a source of amusement for Trump and his followers, evident in a Trump re-tweet: “@HowardKurtz: @JoeNBC It’d be humorous to cull tweets from “experts” over past few mos who have predicted Trump’s immediate collapse” (2015.10.2).⁴⁴

Trump appeared again on *Fallon* on 15 September 2016 for a more formal interview, in which Trump noted that his losing Republican competitors outspent him on media coverage. This time, the usually apolitical Fallon was attentively genial, even going as far as to say: ‘Thank you for giving us the material that we’re doing,’ and in closing, playfully messed up Trump’s hair, all in front of an enthusiastic audience. Again, Trump re-tweeted favourable comments.

Arguably the most egregious failure of satire, though, should be credited to Saturday Night Live (*SNL*), for Trump’s appearance on 7 November 2015. Trump had previously appeared on *SNL*, on 3 April 2004, shortly after the debut of *The Apprentice*, including in a sketch entitled ‘fathers and sons’, in which Trump was the dismissive father of a young and needy Seth Meyers.⁴⁵ On the morning of the 2015 taping, Trump tweeted: “Saturday Night Live has some incredible things in store tonight. The great thing about playing myself is that it will be authentic! Enjoy” (2015.11.7).⁴⁶ Shortly before airing he tweeted: “I am at the Saturday Night Live Studio - electricity all over the place. We will be doing a “tweeting” skit, so stay tuned!” (2015.11.7). Then, in his opening monologue, Trump explained that “part of the reason I’m here is that I know how to take a joke. They’ve done so much to ridicule me over the years. This show has been a disaster for me.” He was then flanked by Taran Killam and Darrell Hammond both doing what were perhaps deliberately lame Trump impersonations. In a subsequent sketch set in the future Whitehouse of 2018, the Trump Administration was evidently so effective that Americans were tired of so much winning. In another sketch, Trump danced in parody to popular musical performer Drake’s ‘Hotline Bling’. The promised ‘tweeting skit’ found Trump live-tweeting the performance that he is “too busy” to participate in, with his typical vitriol applied to actors: “Who would marry @TaranKillam? He’s an over-rated clown.” / “I love SNL. SNL loves me. But everyone in this sketch is a total loser who can bite my dust.” / “An extremely credible source told me that Kenan Thompson’s birth certificate is a fraud.”

Media critics opined that the *SNL* episode was neither especially funny nor satirical. Rather, Trump was ribbed by hyperbolic praise and shown able to laugh at himself occasionally.⁴⁷ Over the subsequent 3 days and with grateful delight, Trump ventured 18 re-tweets of media coverage from *Breitbart News*, *Eric Shawn*, *Fox and Friends*, *Fox Nation*, *Fox411*, *NY Post*, *Piers Morgan*, *USA Today*, and the industry ratings systems that recorded a notable boost for *SNL* coinciding with his appearance, as well as of various personal commendations, such as:

“@mcjeff42: @realDonaldTrump you made SNL great again” (2015.11.8).

“Thank you to all of those who gave me such wonderful reviews for my performance on @nbcnl Saturday Night Live. Best ratings in 4 years!” (2015.11.8).

“@HillsGypsydad05: @foxandfriends Awesome time on Saturday Night Live Mr. Trump! Thanks for being YOU! #MakeAmericaGreatAgain Thank you!” (2015.11.8).⁴⁸

⁴³ <https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/642656420735897600>

⁴⁴ <https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/650132797336780800>

⁴⁵ <https://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2017/06/saturday-night-live-donald-trump-sketch>

⁴⁶ <https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/663046966180474880>

⁴⁷ See Garber (2015) and Stuever (2015).

⁴⁸ <https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/663331044674940928>

3.3.3. Retaliatory mockery

In *Time to Get Tough* (2011) Trump stressed the humiliation that America was enduring, but also affirmed his tough-dealing prowess: “I Love America, And when you love something, you protect it passionately—fiercely, even. We are the greatest country the world has ever known” (7). This was a strategic injunction that Trump had carried from the business boardroom to the mediated political stage. In 2012, Trump tweeted: “When someone attacks me, I always attack back...except 100x more. This has nothing to do with a tirade but rather, a way of life!” (2012.11.11).⁴⁹ Conversely, it was what other Republican politicians and potential leaders failed to do: “Democrats try so hard to mock & belittle Republicans—and the Republicans just don’t fight back—no energy!” (2013.2.7).⁵⁰

In categorical terms, Trump’s sense of humour, be it in person or on Twitter, made negligible use of wit, wordplay, and ‘incongruity’. It relied instead on generating the pleasures of affective ‘superiority’ and transgressive ‘release’, typically through insulting adjectives and nouns: boring, crazy, dishonest, dopey, dummy, fool, lightweight, loser, moron, ridiculous, terrible, stupid, weak, and so on. Trump also re-tweeted a variety of disparaging memes and the occasional cartoon, such as a 2004 one by Dan Collins, echoic of John Turnbull’s painting of the founding fathers at the Second Continental Congress, in which one of them is saying: “I keep thinking we should include something in the Constitution in case the people elect a ~~fucking~~ moron.” On which Trump tweeted: “An interesting cartoon that is circulating” (2014.10.22).⁵¹ To date this re-tweet has received some 35,000 further re-tweets and a similar number of likes, albeit many of them post-2016 and meant to apply ironically against Trump.

In fact, for Trump on Twitter, though ‘humour’ is typically positively valenced, many humour synonyms figure almost wholly as negative evaluations, in which the butt is meant to be laughed down. For example, Trump sought to damn a target simply by dubbing it a ‘(total) joke’. The 80+ times ‘joke’ appears in Trump’s tweets included political targets, such as the Democrats’ budget (2012.5.3), and Obama’s foreign policy (2012.9.12) but sports and entertainment events, and even T-Mobile phone service were also decried as ‘a joke’. Likewise, ‘funny’ (which appears 52 times) tends to mean strange or weird, and ‘fool, fools, foolish’ (86), ‘ridiculous’ (60), ‘clown’ (45), ‘laughable’ (3) are all predominately negative. That is, climate change: “Do you believe this one - Secretary of State John Kerry just stated that the most dangerous weapon of all today is climate change. Laughable” (2014.2.17),⁵² or Hillary Clinton defeating ISIS: “After Crooked @HillaryClinton allowed ISIS to rise, she now claims she’ll defeat them? LAUGHABLE! Here’s my plan: <https://t.co/FzRMOBnQVn>” (2016.10.19),⁵³ are laughable.

To the extent that Trump found the mainstream media wrong, false, or falsifying, those outlets deserved to be insulted, mocked, and disregarded. *Huffington Post*: “The @HuffingtonPost is a total joke & laughing stock of journalism, as is gross Arianna Huffington. They don’t report the facts!” (2015.2.24).⁵⁴ *Time* and *Newsweek*: “The Time Magazine list of the 100 Most Influential People is a joke and stunt of a magazine that will, like Newsweek, soon be dead. Bad list!” (2013.4.26).⁵⁵ *CNBC*: “The #CNBC 25 poll is a joke. I was in 9th place and

<https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/663518286915702784>

<https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/663349846095564800>

⁴⁹ <https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/267626951097868289>

⁵⁰ <https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/299530651776999424>

⁵¹ <https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/524960640117780480>

The original cartoon from 2007 had a line-through the word ‘complete’. In the modified version of the cartoon to which Trump links that word is now an expletive.

⁵² <https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/435550908307767296>

⁵³ <https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/788929328696348674>

⁵⁴ <https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/570238975157387264>

⁵⁵ <https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/327994231341846528>

taken off. (Politics?) No wonder @CNBC ratings are going down the tubes” (2014.3.10).⁵⁶ *New York Times*: “Everyone is laughing at the @nytimes for the lame hit piece they did on me and women. I gave them many names of women I helped-refused to use” (2016.5.15), and “Wow, I have had so many calls from high ranking people laughing at the stupidity of the failing @nytimes piece. Massive front page for that!” (2016.5.15).⁵⁷ *CNN*: “Wow, it is unbelievable how distorted, one-sided and biased the media is against us. The failing @nytimes is a joke. @CNN is laughable!” (2016.7.31).⁵⁸ Even *Fox News* journalists during the Republican primaries when their coverage affirmed other candidates: “Wow, @megynkelly really bombed tonight. People are going wild on twitter! Funny to watch” (2015.8.7).⁵⁹

Indeed, when humour synonyms figure positively with Trump on Twitter they tend to be in re-tweets early on, i.e., originating with others but celebrating him. On Twitter, ‘hilarious’ occurs 8 times, always in re-tweets, and attributed favourably to Trump’s actions in the media, e.g.: ““@DominicFormaro: @realDonaldTrump it's hilarious to see all these dumbasses hating on you. I bet it feels good to laugh at them” (2013.5.25).⁶⁰ Similarly, ‘funniest’ occurs four times, all re-tweets, and all favourable towards Trump. For example: ““@MJGrilliot: @realDonaldTrump is the funniest, yet most honest person on Twitter" Thanks!" (2013.9.11).⁶¹ Trump’s recognition of his followers’ appreciation of his comic *agon* abounds in his re-tweets: ““@evanmyers: I love how many negative tweets @realDonaldTrump gets. He must look at them, smile and go back to being a champion. Thank you!” (2013.11.5).⁶² Early on, Trump occasionally even spars in re-tweets with personal critics regarding the merits of his sense of humour: “@MrMokelly. Dopey, nobody is laughing at me!” (2013.2.20);⁶³ and ““@Sanfangas: @realDonaldTrump apparently you think you're funnier as well. @RealCoachHodge" Actually I do, and I don't have writers!" (2013.5.22).⁶⁴

3.3.4. Vindicating last laugh

In this latter regard, and given scholarly attention to the performance of ‘unlaughter’, i.e., the recognition and acknowledgement of the attempt at humour but disagreement over its appropriateness and refusal to comply by laughing, it is worth noting the several ways in which Trump registers with supporters what is beyond humour, joking, and laughter, or simply unfunny.

In *Time to Get Tough* (2011) Trump maintained that the policies, media and people with whom he most identifies are properly beyond laughter. First, there are some policies and problems that are not open to humorous characterization. In his view, “calling for higher taxes on private jet owners is a political joke” (52). Since the wealthy are job-creators and charity-funders they should not be demonized (55). Similarly, it is not “a joke” that America is overrun by “border deaths, narco terrorist, and waves of violent illegal criminals” (143). According to Trump, “He [Obama] thinks it’s cute and makes jokes about it, and he thinks it will win him votes on the insulting assumption that Latino Americans don’t care about America’s laws” (148). Again, America needs a tough leader “... not a commander in chief who thinks border security and the rule of law is a joke” (152). The status quo news media outlets do not appreciate

⁵⁶ <https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/443059595553275904>

⁵⁷ <https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/731804642368212992>
<https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/731923681522397184>

⁵⁸ <https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/759915863600304128>

⁵⁹ <https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/629557762427604992>

⁶⁰ <https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/338391688844283907>

⁶¹ <https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/377948452166328320>

⁶² <https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/397678728614256640>

⁶³ <https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/304334460445396994>

⁶⁴ <https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/337393010830635008>

this. Whence, about the exception, *Fox and Friends*, Trump opines: “They’re smart, quick, funny, and really know what’s going on” (170). Third, and centrally for my purposes here,

“The press constantly maligns, ridicules, and mocks the Tea Party folks. The fact is the Tea Party is made up of great citizens of this country. And in the end, I think the Tea Party patriots will get the last laugh because they will go down as having done more to change the country than any other group. They are terrific people, great Americans, and I am proud to have such a good relationship with them” (187).

It bears emphasizing, drawing on Hochschild (2016), that in addition to suffering from post-industrial economic decline, and thereby adding insult to injury, some of the cohorts drawn to Trump perceived that “[t]heir views about abortion, gay marriage, gender roles, race, guns, and the Confederate flag all were held up to ridicule in the national media as backward” (221). Like right-wing commentator Coulter (2016), who railed against the “clips [that] got played over and over, so the smart set could laugh at rubes being coached in tolerance ...” (102), they no doubt believed that “Trump wasn’t bullying his antagonists on behalf of himself; he was bullying them in defence of his movement. He protected his supporters—good Americans who had been mocked by the media for a very long time” (102).

All the same, as rising celebrity, candidate, and subsequently as President, Trump on Twitter did condemn as variously ‘unfunny’ or ‘failed comedians’, most of his prominent comic media critics, among them, Bill Maher, Seth Meyers, and Jon Stewart:

“Failing comedian Bill Maher, who I got an accidental glimpse of the other night, is really a dumb guy, just look at his past!” (2014.1.29).

“That Seth Meyers is hosting the Emmy Awards is a total joke. He is very awkward with almost no talent. Marbles in his mouth!” (2014.8.25).

“While Jon Stewart is a joke, not very bright and totally overrated, some losers and haters will miss him and his dumb clown humour. Too bad!” (2015.5.30).⁶⁵

In 2016, in the wake of securing the Republican nomination, *SNL* sought to mimic and skewer Trump with some frequency. On Twitter, Trump repeatedly registered personal umbrage, culminating with: “Watched Saturday Night Live hit job on me. Time to retire the boring and unfunny show. Alec Baldwin portrayal stinks. Media rigging election!” (2016.10.16).⁶⁶ In this regard, there is some experimental data suggesting that Trump’s tweets accusing *SNL* of sustained and unfunny media bias effectively neutered Baldwin’s Trump caricature and even prompted its association negatively with the Democratic opposition and the candidacies of Clinton and Kaine (Becker, 2017, 2020, 2021). Also in this period, from late September through October, Trump invoked and identified with the ‘Deplorables’ six times, including: “@AC360: “How can you unite a country if you’ve written off tens of millions of Americans?” #Deplorables #BigLeagueTruth #Debate” (2016.10.9).⁶⁷

Trump’s comic indomitability provided affecting momentum to the populist ‘movement’ (a word used in 70 or so self-referential tweets and re-tweets) that he will silence the laughter and take our/this ‘country back’ (in 31 re-tweets from mid-2013 to mid-2015, and thereafter in 10 tweets using the idiom, suggesting that he may even have adopted it from his followers).

⁶⁵ <https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/428703194429272064>
<https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/503876306728415232>
<https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/604826775030509568>

⁶⁶ <https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/787612552654155776>

⁶⁷ <https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/785304682960916480>

Through his re-tweets Trump himself tracked and affirmed this accumulating potential electoral effect:

“”@MiriamScher: I love your quotes. They inspire me and always bring a smile to my face. I shall FIGHT until I draw my last breathe." Nice” (2014.7.17).

“”@Chris_R_2014: Donald Trump is the man to make this country great. Obama/administration is an embarasssmnet and a complete joke!”” (2015.4.11).

“”@LynusCantwell: The world is laughing. Obama is a joke. No Hillary the sequel. Run Donald please. We need no nonsense leadership.”” (2015.4.29).

“”@_Aleshaxo: @realDonaldTrump Now that just put a smile on my face! 😊 Keeping the faith that you will run. #Trump2016”” (2015.5.26).

“”@joshuapantoja: @megynkelly @FrankLuntz @realDonaldTrump you tried to attack Trump, he took it and smiled. Trump will be the next president” (2015.8.7).

“”@jaxsiete: @realDonaldTrump Love your sense of humour...LOL Your rallies are amazing. We're standing behind you 1000%:)” @FoxNews” (2015.10.28).

“”@MyPresidentme: @EricShawnonFox That's because people are interested in you, & you've got a great sense of humour, unlike Hillary #Trump2016” (2015.11.8).

“”@robstanley79: @realDonaldTrump Your the man Don. You make me smile every day. Look forward to your inauguration." Nice!” (2015.12.3).⁶⁸

Crucially, a substantial feature of Trump’s appeal for his followers, duly reflected in Trump’s re-tweets and confirmations, was the prospect of definitively ending the perceived laughter against their America:

“”@BJKizer74: @realDonaldTrump please run in 2016 America needs a POTUS with balls to stop America from being a worldwide laughingstock” (2014.12.2).

“”@GlennInvestor: @realDonaldTrump - It's not a great country now?" No, we are a laughing stock all over the World-but we can come back big!” (2013.8.17).

“”@PeaceOut4Hire: @realDonaldTrump Nobody will laugh at us when you're in charge. #PEACEOUT" That is so true!” (2013.9.13).

“”@mike_carrion99: Uwere right, the Chinese respect smart ppl like urself, but they and evr 1 laughs @ Obama. Plz run in '16 you're STRONG”” (2014.4.20).

“We need a President who isn't a laughing stock to the entire World. We need a truly great leader, a genius at strategy and winning. Respect!” (2014.8.9).

⁶⁸ <https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/489940558169636864>
<https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/587074170485399552>
<https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/593384783104909313>
<https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/603168898058452993>
<https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/629578564388700160>
<https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/659463074806566912>
<https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/663482520646873088>
<https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/672403666809298944>

"@InTheElections: @realDonaldTrump China wouldn't be laughing at President Trump." So true!" (2014.10.13).⁶⁹

Following the final televised presidential debate between Trump and Clinton mainstream media analysts and online media contributors alike almost universally agreed that though Trump had somehow prevailed thus far he had finally sealed his fate as a failing candidate. Illustrative of the latter, on 20 October the progressive blogger Almond (2016, n.p.) in a blog post entitled 'The Night They Laughed at Trump,' concluded: "Clinton made herself look presidential. Trump made himself into a laughingstock. Whether or not he accepts the result, the election on Nov. 8 will memorialize Donald J. Trump as least funny joke in American political history."

Post-election, unsurprisingly, Trump supporters revelled in the pleasures of vindication and revenge against the media and critics of now President-elect Trump.⁷⁰ They prepared and posted online Trump-affirming video compilations. The anonymous editor of one such video, entitled 'These People Went On TV And LAUGHED At Donald Trump – Who's Laughing Now?' posted on *AngryPatriotMovement.com*, explained his sense of delight as follows:

"Before Donald Trump's election, many people did not even take his candidacy seriously. Now that he has successfully secured the presidency, it is quite enjoyable to be able to laugh at how wrong many of his detractors were. The Trump Fan Network has arranged clips of politicians and celebrities predicting that Donald Trump will not be the next President of the United States. They acted as if they were Old Testament prophets. That didn't work out for them! This article is a dedication to the humiliated fools who believed Trump didn't even have a chance."⁷¹

4. Conclusion

As President, from the onset of his term, Trump affirmed the political shift that he was now leading: "...the entire World WAS laughing and taking advantage of us. People like liddle' Bob Corker have set the U.S. way back. Now we move forward!" (2017.10.24).⁷² He also persisted in damning in person and on Twitter efforts by conventional news media commentators and news comics, such as Fallon, to criticize (and mock) him and his version of an America made great again:

"Wow, more than 90% of Fake News Media coverage of me is negative, with numerous forced retractions of untrue stories. Hence my use of Social Media, the only way to get the truth out. Much of Mainstream Meadia [sic] has become a joke! @foxandfriends" (2017.12.13).

⁶⁹ <https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/539646026437906432>

<https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/368934294334361600>

<https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/378650076316717057>

<https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/457828990825529344>

<https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/498008486551506945>

<https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/521876267193602048>

⁷⁰ <http://www.wnd.com/2016/11/revenge-on-media-who-laughed-at-trump/#vrw7BLSdr83IMUP0.99>

<http://www.excaliburreport.com/when-people-laughed-at-the-idea-of-trump-being-elected-president/>

<http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2017/jan/19/a-hearty-last-laugh-for-the-donald-trump/>

<https://www.newsbusters.org/blogs/nb/tim-graham/2016/11/17/hannitys-revenge-listing-liberals-laughing-idea-president-trump>

⁷¹ <http://www.angrypatriotmovement.com/people-laughing-at-trump/>

⁷² <https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/92283022952525477>

“@jimmyfallon is now whimpering to all that he did the famous “hair show” with me (where he seriously messed up my hair), & that he would have now done it differently because it is said to have “humanized” me—he is taking heat. He called & said “monster ratings.” Be a man Jimmy” (2018.6.24).⁷³

President Trump’s sizable base of voting followers, elusive in conventional polling methods, continued to experience his persistence as being on their behalf, as empowering, and as hilarious.

What does the record of invoked humour and laughter in Trump tweets and re-tweets, gathered under four thematic rubrics drawn from his published arguments, allow us to hypothesize, corroborate, or even conclude? Whereas most political observers were surprised by the 2016 election outcome, the analysis here confirms the claims of two notable ones who were not surprised. On the left, Michael Moore (2016), one of the very few critics to openly predict a Trump Presidency, listed the ‘Jesse Ventura Effect’ among his five reasons, namely, that enough of the electorate regarded voting for Trump as a “good practical joke on a sick political system” (np). While on the right, and similarly prescient, Ann Coulter (2016) argued that “We were supposed to be appalled that Trump was an ‘entertainer’ – considered the height of clever put-downs—but if he hadn’t been part professional wrestler, he couldn’t say the things he said. He was in on the joke. Audiences weren’t put off when he bragged about how rich he was or how he was crushing the competition—they laughed” (15-16).

In the aftermath, the election of Trump has been located by scholars within an ongoing global trend of media-enabled identity-politics in which a populist figure extols simplistic nationalist policies to address the socio-economic anxieties and resentments of those who feel estranged from the democratic political establishment, scientific expertise, and socially inclusionary policy responses to respectively the mobility, complexity, and contingency of late-modernity. The aspiring populist articulates what they regard as nationally honourable values, perspectives, and agendas that segments of the public recognize as their own and regard as superior to those of others. The populist public thereby come to identify themselves as a matter of national and personal honour with the allegedly authentic persona and status of the populist leader.⁷⁴

Further, the populist laments the violations of national honour (and thereby solemnizes the grievances of supporters) but also retaliates by whatever means necessary including transgressive rhetoric and ridicule. Twitter is an optimal platform for such efforts, and as it happens, contemporaneous populists elsewhere, such as Narendra Modi, Nigel Farage, and Geert Wilders, also turned to Twitter to express antagonistic views that might foster in-group identification and differentiation. Trump, though, outdid them in the sheer scope of his polarizing and targeted sarcasm, insults, and labelling (Pal et al., 2018). He also, of course, outdid his Republican and Democrat competitors in insulting negativity (Gross & Johnson, 2016; and Pelled et al., 2018).

In believing Trump to be an amusing candidate with an untenable agenda and as such harmless to the prosaic status quo political process, both the conventional and comic news media afforded him and his campaign substantial free humour-inflected coverage and thereby very likely contributed to his success.⁷⁵ Late in the pre-election period, this media – *New York Times*, *USA Today*, *Rolling Stone* among them – perhaps realizing that they had contributed through

⁷³ <https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/940930017365778432>
<https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/1011036519812030467>

⁷⁴ See Cramer (2016), Hochschild (2016), Oliver & Rahn (2016), Choma & Hanoch (2017), Marchlewska et al (2018), and Norris & Inglehart (2019).

⁷⁵ See Benoit & Glantz (2017) for the range of attacks on Trump, humorous ones among them. See Fowler et al (2016) on the notable drop in Presidential campaign spending, and Azari (2016), Wells et al (2016), and Francia (2018) on the extent of free media coverage.

comic coverage to the underestimation of his political viability, tried to scorn Trump by highlighting his many targets (289 people, places, and things) and propensities in tweeting insults (at a frequency of 1 in 9 after declaring his candidacy).⁷⁶ Instead of prompting fresh public outrage such media coverage arguably only deepened the perception among his disaffected base that Trump was their clowning champion. That is, seeing that his defensive and offensive insults *qua* humour were deemed ‘politically incorrect’ by his status quo targets only further endeared Trump and his brand of humour to them.

Ridicule by the status quo motivates the honour-centric populist’s identity-wounded supporters to lament the national humiliation, rally to their unfairly trivialized champion, and enjoy insults against their critics but also to act to achieve the superiority satisfaction of the vindicating last laugh. That is, whereas the inclusionary humour of the egalitarian outsider is often cathartic for sympathetic activists the exclusionary humour of the hierarchic outsider proves catalytic for the populist movement. Further, for the latter, to assure that the populist will have the last laugh is also to intend to silence detractors or at least suppress their laughter.

In this regard, scholars have since rediscovered that politicians and their supporters on the political right did and do engage in humour and laughter, using television news, talk-shows, sitcoms, and radio as well as the new social media of podcasts and memes (Smirnova, 2018; Sienkiewicz & Marx, 2021; Marx, 2022; Bauer, 2023; Butler, 2023). The alleged irony deficiency on the right has not prevented conservative politicians from finding audiences that laugh heartily at their jokes and quips. During the Trump presidency and since, then, political humour across the ideological spectrum has persisted although it is now, to some observers, more partisan, pointed, desperate, and dark and as such less funny (Farnsworth & Lichter, 2019; Griffin, 2021; Danessi, 2022).

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⁷⁶ See Stuart (2016), Collins (2016), Lee & Quealy (2016), Quealy (2016).

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