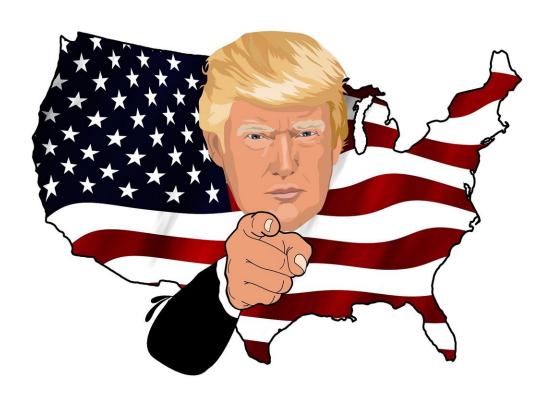# How Trump's definition of a 'real' American has grabbed his audience—what our research shows about why

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Donald Trump has recently doubled down on his derogatory depictions of undocumented migrants in his bid to win the 2024 presidential

election. In an interview with [Time magazine](#), published on April 30 2024, Trump referred to migrants as "criminals," who "come in and they steal our jobs, and steal our wealth, and they steal our country." Trump was especially disparaging towards migrants from China, who he said are a "major force that's forming in our country." In short, according to Trump, undocumented migration is "an invasion of our country."

Trump's recent anti-migrant rhetoric is particularly inflammatory, but it is not new. It has been Trump's calling card since he entered the political fray. For example, in his first speech announcing his candidacy for the 2016 presidency, Trump infamously referred to Mexicans migrants saying, they are ["bringing drugs, they are bringing crime and they are rapists"](#). Why does Trump use this kind of negative rhetoric to refer to migrants? Because it works as an electoral strategy. It has been especially successful in cultivating [support](#) from Trump's core voting base: white, working-class Americans.

A recent aggregate analysis of leading polls shows Trump 13.7 percentage points ahead [of Biden among white voters](#). This electoral advantage is even greater among white Americans without [college degrees](#), [among whom 60% prefer Trump](#). So, while many observers have noted Trump's recent gains with [black and Hispanic voters](#) as a key dynamic to watch in the 2024 election, his support remains firmly rooted in white America.

How has a billionaire from New York City managed to cultivate such strong support among working-class Americans? This has been a question many have asked since Trump's win in 2016. In response, most have pointed to his populist style and his ability to tap into the [grievances](#) of those who fear a perceived growth in "woke" politics, or who see themselves as [left behind](#) by globalization. Our take is slightly different.

Our in-depth research on Trump's [2016](#) and [2020](#) campaigns shows that

Trump's support stems from his ability to tap into an "ethno-nationalist" tradition of American identity in his campaign rhetoric. This tradition of American identity is based on a set of criteria (including being white, Christian, native-born, and English-speaking) to define who is a "real" American, and who is not. Trump uses this vision of American identity to garner support from white Americans by campaigning on the idea that he will defend them from the threat posed by people who are not perceived as real Americans—particularly the ostensible threat posed by undocumented migrants.

Trump's shifting support

How does our argument that Trump's support is based on an ethno-nationalist ideology that speaks to white Americans square with the fact he has recently been growing his support among people of color—the so-called [racial realignment in US politics](#)?

While seemingly paradoxical, Trump's messaging could also explain why he is gaining support from some Latino and Hispanic Americans. As others have shown, Trump's support among people of color is not proof that race doesn't matter in America—quite the opposite. People of color who support Trump tend to have conservative [views on race and migration.](#). Trump's recent doubling down on anti-migrant messaging picks up and reinforces these views. He is speaking to both his white voting base and a minority of people of color who hold conservative views about migration and racial problems in the US. This helps understand how he is cultivating support from ethnic minorities because of—not in spite of—his messaging.

Interestingly, even though ethno-nationalism is central to Trump's campaign rhetoric, he tends to avoid explicitly referring to it. Presumably this tactic reflects a desire to continue to build his support among people of color as well as white Americans, while also avoiding

charges of outright racism. For example, he rarely defends white Americans directly, although there are indications that he is increasingly willing to do so)—for example, at a rally in Arizona in 2022, he claimed that "white people" [were being "denigrated" and discriminated against](link) when they tried to seek "life-saving therapeutics."

Instead, Trump tends to heavily rely upon thinly veiled speech codes known as ["dog whistles"](link) to implicitly refer to them. This is what he is doing when he says he is standing up for the ["silent majority"](link) and ["forgotten men and women"](link), or when he claims he will protect ["suburban housewives"](link) from the [threat of illegal migrants](link). The examples of Trump invoking these messages are countless now—we all know what he says, how he says it, and who he is taking about.

But why is Trump's use of this type of rhetoric so effective at winning support? In short, it is because it is not new. There is a long tradition of ethno-nationalism in American politics, as we [discuss in our recent book](link). The idea at the heart of the founding documents of the US, such as the Bill of Rights—which outlines how all Americans should have equal rights regardless of their ethnic, racial, or religious backgrounds—has long been countered by the idea that America is first and foremost a white, Christian nation.

This [alternative conception of America](link) has periodically gained force among white Americans during times of heightened anxiety over their perceived loss of status, for example in relation to the emancipation of formerly enslaved black Americans or—as we are seeing today—in response to migration. Trump draws directly on this long tradition, while also adapting it so that it resonates with contemporary anxieties. Trump may be the most successful defender of this tradition of American identity in recent memory, but he is not the first.

But, as much as Trump's campaign strategy has been remarkably

effective in building his base, it is also inherently limiting. This is because many Americans—including many white Americans—reject this tradition of American identity in favor of a more inclusive one which is more closely aligned with the founding documents. This tradition underpinned [Biden's 2020 campaign](#). This is the ["soul of the nation"](#) Biden says he is trying to save.

Seen from this perspective—in which the two presumed candidates are drawing on diametrically opposed visions of American national identity—it is not surprising that Trump has not been able to meaningfully increase his support. And here Trump is faced with a puzzle as he ramps up his 2024 campaign: the very ideology that has enabled him to make a powerful connection with his base is just as powerfully repellent to many other Americans.

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