Title

The Symbolic Politics of Status in the MAGA Movement

Abstract

Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork among MAGA activists during the 2020 presidential campaign, we explore the status dynamics behind the appeal of Donald Trump's right-wing populism. While existing explanations emphasize partisanship, economic anxiety, racial resentment, rural identity, and media polarization, we underscore a less-explored explanation for Trump's core support: it is a status-based social movement. We find that Trump's activists are not simply voters responding to policy preferences or culture war appeals but are also participants in a grassroots social movement organized around a shared perception of lost honor, declining esteem, and institutional disrespect. To make this argument we use the concept of the *symbolic politics of status* to explain how political conflict extends beyond contests over material distribution or moral values to include battles over whose values and lifestyles are considered worthy. For MAGA activists, reclaiming lost status means seeking public affirmation for identities they feel have been unfairly denigrated. The MAGA movement blends grievance with joy, cultivating pride, belonging and celebration alongside anger at elites. By centering status in our analysis, we offer an integrative framework that connects material, cultural, and emotional motivations into a broader account of MAGA as a right-wing social movement grounded in grassroots populism.

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Introduction

Political scientists have sought to explain the rise and continued support of right-wing populists such as Donald Trump through a variety of conceptual approaches. These include theories of material resources and economic anxiety; moral values and culture war; identity-based factors such as racism, xenophobia, and sexism; attachment to rural community; political polarization; and the rise of misinformation and media bubbles (Mendelberg 2022).

Less prevalent is work on Trump supporters that explores how these themes connect through overarching concepts. Status, symbolism, and social movements are key concepts in sociology, as we discuss below, but they have been underutilized features of the political science literature on Trump. Even more uncommon is work that explores a key segment of Trump's political support: his activists. That is, not only has the concept of status been relatively undeveloped in political scientists' explanations of Trump's rise, but the field has paid even less attention to the lived experiences of Trump's core supporters, with notable exceptions we will discuss. Consequently, we know little about Trumpism as a grassroots political movement, or about the role of status in what is arguably one of the most significant political developments in the contemporary United States.

In this paper we draw on five months of ethnographic fieldwork of the 2020 Trump campaign in the rustbelt of Pennsylvania to develop an integrative account of Trump activists. This ethnographic method is immersive and inductive, involving extensive time spent among MAGA supporters to explore their activities and worldviews. Ethnography allows for exploration of the meanings that political actors attach to different economic, social, and cultural phenomena, and how they interpret those concepts in making decisions about the political world

(Schatz 2009). Rather than testing hypotheses or establishing statistical relationships, we engage in a "constitutive analysis" that examines how status dynamics manifest among this group (Cramer 2012, 518).

We build on previous work on Trump's early organizational support (Gervais and Morris 2018, Skocpol and Williamson 2016, Thom and Skocpol 2020, Zoorob and Skocpol 2020), as well as studies on how rustbelt communities became Trump strongholds amid the decline of Democratic social institutions (Newman and Skocpol 2023, Ternullo 2024). We also draw on rich studies of status-related themes such as white working-class marginality and the "left behind" (Gest 2016, Hochschild 2016). Additionally, our argument aligns with research showing how threats to collective status can drive conservative or reactionary politics, as seen in Cramer's "rural resentment," Gest, Reny, and Mayer's "nostalgic deprivation," and Gidron and Hall's "subjective social status" (Cramer 2016, Gest, Reny and Mayer 2018, Gidron and Hall 2017). Their research underscores the role of status in shaping groups that overlap with or precede Trump's base, emphasizes local networks, and highlights the importance of perceived losses in social esteem rather than material or economic decline. This paper expands the understanding of grassroots Trump support through participant-observation of the lived experiences and status-driven motivations of Trump activists themselves.

We add to this body of work a rare ethnographic study of Trump activists. Ethnographic studies of election campaigns are rare (though see Nielsen 2012) and none have provided intensive *participant-observation* of Trump's grassroots supporters. Our study examines how these activists not only participate in electoral politics but also actively construct a broader social movement. By highlighting the role of status in shaping their worldviews, we offer unique insights into how status dynamics influence political behavior. Ethnography, unlike other

qualitative methods such as structured interviews, allows us to observe activists in their everyday environments, providing a more nuanced understanding of how they practice politics beyond what they say in interviews. To our knowledge, this is the first ethnographic study to focus specifically on Trump's campaign activists. The group we study shares some overlap with, but is distinct from, other slices of Trump's coalition, such as white evangelicals, police officers, gun club members, and general Trump voters, who have been explored in prior research.

The argument and its theoretical foundations

We make two arguments about the Trump phenomenon. First, as we will elaborate, Trump's core supporters were motivated by more than the factors established in the literature, such as economic decline, partisanship, ideology, or social identity. Our findings suggest that much of the explanatory power of these factors comes from their connection to status.

As defined by Ridgeway, status is "a comparative social ranking of people, groups, or objects in terms of the social esteem, honor, and respect accorded to them" (2019, 1). Through its emphasis on shared perceptions of group rank, status is distinct from material self-interest, morality, or group and partisan identities.

To develop the concept of status as an explanation for Trump support, we offer a theory of the *symbolic politics of status.* According to this theory, political conflict extends beyond contests over material distribution or moral values. It implicates battles for social esteem conferred by institutions, which signal whose values and lifestyles are either favored or disparaged. Importantly, government, schools, workplaces, and media can *symbolically* affirm or deny status. They can do so both through the formal work of policy and the informal work of political culture. Thus, deep political cleavages can arise over the role of government in

advancing “shared status beliefs” that frame what kinds of practices and what sorts of people are worthy of respect (Ridgeway 2019, 3). Consequently, social conflict intertwines with political conflict, as influential institutions signal the social value of particular traditions and behaviors (Mendelberg, 2022; Sears, 1993). Elections therefore encompass more than just resource allocation, policy enactment, or moral framing: they also serve to delimit which people and whose standards of conduct hold greater or lesser value in the collective perception of society. We argue that the lens of status helps explain how Trump activist understand issues of partisanship, racial prejudice, place-based deprivation, and the role of the economy.

Second, Trump's supporters are not merely voters. Some of his core supporters were embedded in a social movement—the MAGA movement—that engages them in a holistic way; through media and offline political behavior; through cultural practices and interpersonal connection as well through electoral actions; through emotion and symbol as well as information and cost-benefit calculation; and through joy and celebration as well as anger and resentment. We build on studies of organized rightwing grassroots groups (Newman and Skocpol 2023, Skocpol and Tervo 2020, Ternullo 2024), and, more directly, on studies of “status movements,” which prioritize social standing over economic class and material distribution (e.g., Gusfield 1964, Plotke 2001). Social movement analysis, particularly its focus on the politicization of collective identity and the importance of emotions like anger and joy, offers valuable insights into the role of status (Goodwin and Jasper 2006, Klandermans 2007, Van Stekelenburg and Klandermans 2017). We apply this framework to explore the affective dynamics, discursive practices, and social interactions that shape how status influences what it means to be a MAGA participant. Elections thus become more than contests over resources, but also avenues for social

actors to rescue their status positions through the symbolic work of social and political institutions.

Our theory of the symbolic politics of status builds on the sociological literature on symbolic boundaries, which examines how actors create distinctions to define and include certain individuals, communities, or entities while excluding others, often based on moral criteria of worthiness (Lamont, Pendergrass, and Pachucki 2015; Lichterman, Prudence, and Lamont 2009; Lamont and Molnár 2002; Lamont 2017). This boundary work is essential in shaping group identities within social movements, where grievances are collectivized and politicized around a unified "us," with blame directed at "them" (Braunstein 2018, Taylor, 2013, Van Doorn, Prins, and Welshen 2013). While much of the literature on boundary setting focuses on how individuals and groups define, enforce, and interpret these distinctions, our focus on elections connects democratic contests and political institutions to this literature. The symbolic politics of status highlights how social and political institutions act as arbiters of social worth, positioning electoral contests as key sites within the broader process of boundary-making and identity formation.

Our fieldwork illustrates how the political mobilization of MAGA supporters is not only a function of electoral preferences, but also of broad notions about what government should do to signal the worth of 'people like me.' We argue that a status motive fuels a political movement that engages people beyond the voting booth and is shored up by more than misleading facts. It also gives meaning to their lives.

Explaining Support for Trump

Scholarship about Trump support has sought to understand his rise and popularity through the explanatory power of various factors, including partisanship, racial and ethnic resentment, place-based deprivation, and economic distress. Each of these explanations has produced important insights into contemporary politics, and each has explanatory power in understanding Trump support. But as we discuss in this section, they do not explain some key aspects of MAGA activists' worldviews. In addition, much of their explanatory utility when it comes to MAGA activists derives from their connection with status.

Partisan identity and media bubbles help explain some of Trump's popularity (Sides, Tesler and Vavrek 2018). Trump support in 2016 and 2020 was strongly shaped by party identification, as partisans fell in line with their party's nominee. Polarizing media, fueled by the increasing isolation of partisans on social media and in news viewership, also played a role (Settle 2018). However, this explanation has limitations. First, it does not explain why some Democratic voters switched from Obama in 2012 to Trump in 2016 (Reny, Collingwood and Valenzuela 2019). Perhaps more importantly, as we will show, many MAGA supporters are animated by a dislike of the partisan *establishment*, much as many Trump voters distrust *both* parties (Dyck, Pearson-Merkowitz and Coates 2018).[1] This is not simply about negative partisanship—the dislike of the opposing party—or positive partisanship—loyalty to one's own party (Abramowitz and Weber 2018; Dyck and Pearson-Merkowitz 2023). Rather, our findings align with the impact of non-partisan populism (Uscinsky et al 2021). Our ethnographic evidence will help address these gaps, focusing on the role of status in disillusionment with both parties.

[1] In addition, explanations that hinge on partisanship struggle to explain the stability of Republicans' partisan support in the face of the important differences between Romney and Trump.

Another explanation argues that Trump's support is rooted in his ability to stoke racial resentments, especially towards Black, Latinx, and immigrant groups. Many studies confirm that racialized views form a key basis of support for Trump (Schaffner, MacWilliams and Nteta 2018, Sides, Tesler and Vavrek 2018). However, theories of racial resentment and immigration backlash struggle to account for some important elements of Trump's support. First, while Trump certainly demonizes immigrants, some of his rhetoric also incorporates Latinx Americans into the category of "deserving hard workers," albeit with paternalistic overtones (Lamont, Park and Ayala-Hurtado 2017). As we will show, many MAGA activists echoed this rhetorical inclusion. In addition, existing accounts have not fully explored why some people of color support Trump and agree with his messages (Geiger and Reny 2024).[2] To be sure, some people of color are xenophobic, and some immigrants hold prejudice against Latinx and African Americans. However, given Trump's mixed racial narrative, and the fact that Trump's support was not exclusively white, explanations of political motivations must go beyond the acceptance or rejection of racial sentiments. As we will show, the symbolic politics of status helps explain how race and sentiment about immigrants function in the MAGA movement. Among activists, overt racism is viewed as immoral, but liberal elites' accusations of MAGA racism are seen as an unjust tarring aimed at stripping participants of social status. We explore the nuanced ways race features in the worldviews of Trump activists and how these views connect with status motivations.

[2] Exit polls indicate that Trump's 2020 vote returns with people of color were not much lower than those of George W. Bush, despite Trump's anti-immigrant rhetoric (Roy 2020) . Further, between 11% and 15% of 2012 Obama voters likely voted for Trump in 2016, raising questions about the strength of purely racial explanations (Reny, Collingwood and Valenzuela 2019, Skelley 2017).

A third account focuses on place-based identity. Our fieldwork confirms that MAGA participants indeed harbored place-based resentments towards elites. This aligns with research on rural consciousness and local deprivation, where cities were often the target of MAGA supporters' ire (Cramer 2016, Gest 2016, Hochschild 2016, Monnat and Brown 2017). Further, the characteristics of northeastern Pennsylvania align with recent research showing how the decline of economic opportunities, educational attainment, and population growth in rural areas has contributed to the urban-rural divide (Brown & Mettler 2023). Our research builds on these findings, while complicating them in two ways. First, though MAGA participants in this study used place-based distinctions, they did not live in rural bubbles, nor hold manichean views about the urban-rural divide. Northeastern Pennsylvania is a mix of urban, suburban, small-town, and rural areas. Further, in a region where Philadelphia and New York are a few hours away, participants expressed positive emotional connections to these cities, not only derision towards cosmopolitan elites. Most importantly, MAGA participants routinely articulated their status beliefs in *national* terms. We will show how they constructed a righteous "American" people, defined by national values, called to fight back against an "unamerican" and corrupt elite. This type of American identity features prominently in right-wing movements (Federico and Golec de Zavala 2018). MAGA supporters thus fit a classic profile of right-wing populism, where national identity is a source of status and heightens the political conflict against opponents both foreign and domestic, who are seen to have reduced the standing of both the nation and its people in the international order (Hawkins and Kaltwasser 2019, Mendelberg 2022, Mutz 2018).

Finally, economic explanations also attempt to explain Trump's popularity, arguing that the white working class has abandoned the Democratic Party due to economic distress (e.g. Frank 2016). However, Trump voters were more affluent than the average American, and there is

little empirical support for the notion that material distress was the main driver of Trump's support (Mutz 2018, Sides, Tesler and Vavrek 2018). To be sure, some studies found that community decline predicted Trump's county vote share, and rising import competition pushed white-majority districts to the right (Autor, et al. 2020, Monnat and Brown 2017). However, it is unclear why these factors should cause people to turn toward Trump, who has not directly served the material interests of people in distressed places. An account centering the symbolic politics of status better integrates economics and community decline into a more accurate explanation of MAGA participation. Several studies suggest that the decline in white Christian men's status motivated Trump support (Mutz 2018, Newman, Shah and Collingwood 2018, Sides, Tesler and Vavrek 2018).[3] Our ethnographic evidence expands on work that emphasizes the importance of status in understanding the role of economics and community decline in political behavior.

Our aim is not to dismiss explanations centering partisanship, racial identity, local decline, or economics. Rather, status is a lens through which to integrate these explanations and address their gaps and complications. As we show, MAGA participation cannot be fully reduced to universal human tribalism manifest in party loyalty, racial threats, or cultural difference, rural identity, or economic self-interest. MAGA participants felt they were denied honor, esteem, and respect by powerful political forces, including mainstream Republican leaders. Trump's base was expressing their need for status in society and their suspicion of those they believe held power and used it to denigrate them. They targeted government as a source of their status loss and as the potential site of its redemption.

[3] Similarly, Cramer's study of Wisconsin found that rural areas received more government support per capita than urban areas, yet felt they received less (2016). Thus, the rural resentment she observed was driven as much by perception and interpretation as by material conditions.

The MAGA Movement from the Inside Out

To explore the practices, motivations, and beliefs of Trump voters, the first author conducted an ethnographic study of the 2020 election in five counties across northeastern Pennsylvania. Several characteristics make this region a useful case, including its history as a Democratic stronghold; its recent and dramatic electoral swing to Trump; a declining manufacturing base; and high levels of economic, health, and social distress (Bradlee 2018, Monnat and Brown 2017). Consent was secured from all interview participants, and consent from ethnographic participants was obtained when possible. Additionally, the research approach was designed to minimize any impact on the election, with the researcher focusing solely on observation and participation, without any attempts to influence voters. Details of the case selection, research design, and ethical considerations can be found in the online appendix.

The core of the research involved participant observation as a Trump campaign volunteer. Over five months, the researcher became embedded in the local MAGA community, participating in typical electoral campaign activities, including canvassing, attending events, and making phone calls. These activities ranged from one-hour sessions to full-day commitments, with the researcher in the field between three and seven days a week, increasing as the campaign progressed. Data were collected during the execution of these volunteer duties and through observing interactions among Trump supporters at formal campaign events and informal political gatherings. Ethnographic research was further enriched by roughly seventy unstructured interviews with participants, conducted before and after the election. Ethnography offers several benefits into the status politics and motivations of MAGA participants (Schatz 2009). Immersion allowed for a deeper understanding of the existing explanations for Trump's support and revealed how they worked in practice. The method also captured how political actors interpreted

economic, social, and cultural concepts in real-time and within their own social spaces (Kubik 2009, Pachirat 2009, Shehata 2006). This approach allows us to see not only how people perceive their environment, but also how they make political decisions based on their lived experiences. Ethnography is particularly suited to exploring how personal and political experiences intertwine to form a social movement.

Status in the MAGA Movement

At a backyard party a musician takes a break from playing the guitar to call on people to get involved in the election:

> "You guys gotta tell people, you got to talk, especially to young people, because the schools are ruining their minds! They don't appreciate our values. They don't appreciate our customs. They don't think that foreigners should assimilate to the American way, apple pie, baseball, Chevrolet. What's wrong with that? When did that go away? We have to cherish those things. And if we don't, we're gonna lose them."

Sitting around an outdoor table on a warm summer afternoon, I (the first author) hear this sense of fear and loss underlying the lively conversation among the party attendees. Discussions about vacation plans or the hopes for good weather are continually punctuated by political concerns.

One attendee laments his inability to freely express his political views at work, fearing repercussions like those faced by a colleague who was criticized for their conservative perspective. He is certain that voicing his opinions could cost him his job. But underlying his fear is resentment: he feels silenced at the same time other coworkers are praised for displaying Black Lives Matter signs. Another attendee, a schoolteacher, voices frustration about liberal

teachers for pushing college attendance over trade work and complains that some schools aren't even allowing students to wear American flags. Her friend, equally irritated, complains that recommending military service is apparently now discouraged due to Democratic portrayals of the military's recruitment efforts among people of color as racist and exploitative. "Isn't that messed up? Probably one of the most egalitarian places on the planet is the United States Military."

Everyday conversations like this illustrate how, at its heart, the discursive community of the MAGA movement is one of status reversal (Mendelberg 2022; Petersen 2002). The key grievance for many was a perception that mainstream society, captured by political opponents with immoral beliefs, had unfairly judged them, their values, and their customs to be undeserving of respect and honor. Their critiques of schools, of teachers, of workplaces, and of government were grounded in the notion that these core institutions of society should be signaling the supreme value of "traditional" mores such as military service, assimilation to a uniform vision of America, and the authority of the law. The gravest status injury for many MAGA adherents was the loss of institutional stamps of approval and signals of esteem for a way of life and a set of values they viewed as morally superior.

Like many right-wing populist movements, the MAGA movement connected these issues to a particular enemy—the corrupt elite who have unjustly hurt and maligned everyday Americans like them (Hawkins and Kaltwasser 2019). The movement constructed a populist notion of the virtuous "American people" called to fight against domination and oppression by those in power. In doing so, the movement combined the status concerns of MAGA participants with a sense of righteous injustice about this loss, coupled to a normative vision of how the country's problems could be solved by re-centering the traditional status order. Beliefs about

cultural elitism, electoral fraud, and conspiracies explained political opponents as corrupt, authoritarian, morally decayed, yet powerful. Taken together, MAGA participants not only saw their loss of status as incorrect and unfair, but also as *oppressive*—legitimating their resistance as righteous opposition to a repressive status regime. These grievances justified a war, a fight for control over state institutions that were understood to be fundamentally tainted by corruption. Regardless of its accuracy, these perceptions of disrespect and oppression were routinely discussed among MAGA participants.

In late August, I heard these concerns of symbolic status directly from the source, at a rally where President Trump spoke to a relatively small outdoor crowd of 300 people. Though the venue and crowd size were held in check by ongoing COVID restrictions, the thousands of people lining the street in both directions created an atmosphere in line with the arena-sized spectacles I had seen on television. Echoing the conversation at the party above, Trump expressed self-righteous anger and indignation directed at political elites as immoral frauds who not only look down on hard-working Americans but actively seek to undermine all that they hold dear in their quest for power and money. In his populist critique of the elite, Trump also underlines those institutions and practices that MAGA participants believed were status worthy:

> "A lot of people got rich and got powerful at your expense. Now these same liberal hypocrites want to open up borders and let violent mobs rule the streets while they live in Waldorf compounds and communities. They want to defund police while hiring private security. They want to let rioters burn churches while jailing you for praying in your church. They want to abolish school choice while sending their children to the best private schools in the land. They want to cancel you. Totally cancel you.

> Take your job, turn your family against you for speaking your mind, while they indoctrinate your children with twisted, twisted, world views that nobody ever thought possible."

As he takes a pause someone shouts, "That's right!" causing the crowd to cheer before Trump goes on: "Joe Biden is the candidate of these privileged liberal hypocrites who hold you and your values in disdain. But you can send them all a thundering message on election day by voting for Trump-Pence." The crowd roared its support.

To explain how the MAGA movement found such purchase among ordinary Americans we need to look to the status narrative of the MAGA movement, a story where status was unfairly lost, recently regained, and will possibly be lost again without the commitment of the participants. In this narrative, people who hold traditional values and occupations have been unjustly denied respect by social and political institutions, while the undeserving have gained status through corrupt favoritism by the elite. Status has not only been lost; it has been *taken*. And if 2016 was a successful fight to take it back, 2020 was a moment where it all could be lost again.

MAGA as Social Movement

Trump's base is best understood not simply as supporters of a candidate, but as participants in a social movement—the MAGA movement. At the events I observed, participants were forming a new collective identity as MAGA members. Status beliefs and sentiments were a key component of that identity and contributed to its politicization. As with many rightwing movements, the participants were not only motivated by material self-interest or ideological policy positions but also aimed to reclaim a vision of status grounded in emotions, practices, and

symbols (Gusfield 1964). The perceived loss of status at the hands of corrupt, powerful opponents fueled self-righteous anger among MAGA participants, an emotion that frequently underpins the shared grievances central to collective identity and protest activity (Goodwin and Jasper 2006, Van Stekelenburg and Klandermans 2017). Of course, such emotions are part of a movement ecosystem that include the intentional cultivation of these perspectives by movement leaders and through the media (Peck 2019, Van Doorn, Prins, and Welshen 2013). Ultimately, the MAGA movement seeks to restore the honor its supporters feel they have unjustly lost. Crucially, they not only seek to advance their values; they want government and other institutions to adopt symbolic signals that indicate their values and ways of life are esteemed (Mendelberg 2022).

A movement perspective expands our understanding of the MAGA phenomenon, revealing how political causes affect collective identity, solidarity, and participants' lived experiences (Koenig 2022). As Taylor argues, movements are discursive communities united not only by action but also by shared identities, symbols, and narratives that frame participants' experiences as responses to perceived injustices (2013, 43). While the MAGA movement's political aim is electoral, its core is about group identity—delineating boundaries between "us" and "them," highlighting the group's perceived injustices as intrinsic to its identity, and contesting symbolic group descriptions (Taylor and Whittier 1992). In this process of group identification, MAGA participants become politized based on "the shared definition of a group" rooted in common experiences and emotions (Van Doorn, Prins, and Welshen 2013, 61).

As we discussed above, the grievances of the MAGA movement were directed at a society experiencing social, economic, and cultural shifts that participants perceived to unfairly reduce their status. Research on status illustrates that people will give up monetary rewards for

additional respect, and research on social movements indicates people are more likely to politicize based on shared perceptions of unjust treatment rather than economic hardship (Klandermans 2013, Ridgeway 2019). Thus, status concerns provide fertile soil for the politicization of collective identity. In the MAGA movement, individuals experience how they are part of a larger group defined by the shared grievance of lost status, they understand that loss as unjustly imposed, and they collectively attribute those grievances to their powerful opponents—all determinants of when identities collectivize and politicize (Simon and Klandermans 2001). And, as described below, the positive emotions felt by many participants further cemented their psychological ties to other MAGA participants and strengthened their identification with the main symbols of the movement.

A key feature of these interactions is how MAGA participants use status-based grievances as fuel for political mobilization. At the end of a campaign party, one young volunteer does just this, telling the crowd that "the biggest thing for this is we want to get people active. I mean, we're not the mean people that everybody thinks we are, are we?" "No!" comes the response from the crowd. "I don't hate anybody," he continues. "Do you hate anybody? How about you?" As he points to people, sharp "no"s are the reply. "We are not bad people. Trump isn't a bad guy... I encourage people to do great things for Trump." Status grievances shape the MAGA narrative, where participants frame themselves as 'not bad people' doing 'great things,' actively rejecting the judgments they feel are imposed by elite political opponents.

While the movement had a clear electoral end—electing Trump and other allies—the MAGA movement did not require people to do electoral work to belong. Indeed, while the campaign held many events with the goal of organizing new volunteers for the day-to-day needs of running the campaign, many who routinely attended were uninterested in volunteering. Yet

none of these people were rejected from the community. One could simply show up to dance and sing at a rally and need not even post a yard sign—or even vote. MAGA provided a porous, low-stakes community that derived some of its power from its sheer size, a size maximized by an extremely low membership threshold that did not even demand political action, merely dedication to the President and the status narrative. The focus was on creating social ties, a common identity, and a frame for political analysis. Whether this scaffolded overtly political action or not, for many participants, simply taking part was a meaningful and positive experience (Goodwin and Jasper 2006). A fuller understanding of Trump support benefits from a social movement framework that expands our analysis beyond individual vote choice to consider issues of collective identity, solidaristic action, and the lived experiences of the participants themselves as they navigate symbolic boundaries and asses where "people like me" belong (Lamont, Pendergrass, and Pachucki 2015).

In the following sections we apply this framework to two themes that emerged from the fieldwork, namely the affective dynamics and symbolic practices of the MAGA movement, demonstrating the fundamental role of status in shaping a MAGA identity among its participants. A social movement frame demonstrates the powerful role of emotions at play in the MAGA movement. Their affective story draws on Trump's vilification of the "privileged liberal hypocrites" offered above and maps it onto the status narrative of the MAGA movement—anger over its loss, joy and dignity over its renewal, and rage over the possibility that it would be lost again. Movement events embodied a style that contributed to the sense of status resurgence, the salve to the wound of status loss, the narrative that places Trump supporters within the esteemed social categories of great Americans. As we discuss below, attention to the relationship between

status and emotion illustrates how participation in the MAGA movement involved speech acts, practices, and symbolic performances that are distinct from voting for a particular candidate.

Anger, Pride, and Joy: The Emotions of Status Reclamation at MAGA Events

In September of 2020 Joe Biden traveled to northeastern Pennsylvania to hold a televised rally at an outdoor arena, and the MAGA movement was determined to meet him in force. As I turned onto the two-lane road that led to the arena a good five hours before Biden was due to appear, hundreds of Trump supporters had already arrived, with cars parked bumper to bumper along the breakdown lane. I parked in the next space I could find, about a third of a mile from the center of the action, where a sound system had been set up next to several parked tractor trailers plastered with MAGA slogans. Walking upstream towards this center I passed scores of people lining the roads waving flags, holding yard signs, some in folding chairs to help pass the time.

As I got closer to the center of the action I was greeted by the sounds and sights of what might be characterized as an angry, self-righteous crowd. Flags that proclaimed, “No More Bullshit” or showed Trump riding a tank with explosions filling the sky, sometimes on extra-long poles with multiple flags, waved alongside “All Lives Matter” and “Back The Blue” signs staked into the ground. One sign, hand painted onto a tipped-over folding table, blamed Biden for COVID deaths, murders, and forest fires. I found a spot next to a woman sporting a “Stomp my flag and I’ll stomp your ass” shirt, as someone got on the microphone to proclaim that “This is the best time for the people of America to come together because we now know what it's all about. It's either democracy and capitalism…" the crowd roared its support, “…or socialism!” Boos rained down. “We're not going to tolerate the destruction of the American Constitution,” another roar, “…we're not gonna have the life of the unborn taken…” the speaker paused for a

response, but not many people reacted, "…and we're not gonna have our second amendment taken!" At this one there was a wave of cheering. Such a scene may seem familiar from media coverage of Trump's rallies, where the anger of the crowd seems palpable.

For those who feel they have lost respect in the eyes of society, and the declining self-esteem that accompanies this perception, anger, especially when grounded in perceptions of unfair treatment, is a powerful spark of collective identity and politicization (Goodwin and Jasper 2006, Klandermans 2013, Van Zomeren 2013). Anger is thus a key emotion in the political mobilization of status loss. But anger only captures one part of a complex affective story at play at this event and during the fieldwork, a story that included expressions of joy and pride and a celebration of belonging.

As the cheering died down, the familiar sounds of the Village People's song YMCA began to loudly play over the speakers. The mood of the crowd shifted quickly as people danced in place, waving flags and signs to the music. As the lyrics started, it became clear that the song was a popular cover of the original, with pro-Trump lyrics and a chorus that spelled out MAGA rather than YMCA, and attendees spelling the letters out with arms and bodies in a sea of smiles and laughter. One participant likened the scene to an event a few weeks ago, where people had similarly lined a road to see Trump drive by: "I mean, it was great, it's like a…" Here she looked around and gestures at the assembled people. "It's America, you can feel it!" She laughed, "it's a vibe." With a broad smile she continued to play her tambourine along with the music.

Soon after, two small groups of people found each other in the crowd, hugging, as a new arrival looked around with wide eyes. "This is amazing!" she exclaims. Her friend replies with a laugh, "I'm so glad you made it! I told you, it's crazy here!" At a break in the music after an Aerosmith song, someone gets on the microphone to remind everyone about the free sodas,

snacks, and hamburgers being made, “donations not required but are welcome!” As people eat, drink, dance, and sing along, conversations include someone’s obsession with Wawa hoagies, while others talk about how excited they are for a few more weeks of warm weather. At one point, we all squeeze together so that someone can take a photo with a wide lens camera, an effort that many find hilarious due to the number of people spread out along the road. And as cars drive by and honk support, there are endless waves of cheering and applause. People have been here for hours, and they are clearly having a good time in the celebratory, dance-party atmosphere.

This was, of course, an explicitly political event. But the politics were only part of a wider structure of social identification and community building essential to social movements, and social emotions were essential to its meaning. Alongside the anger about status reversal was a joyful bonhomie that served as a social glue for the people in this movement. Attached to both was a sense of empowerment and pride about belonging to the Trump community and what it stood for. To be sure, there were negative sentiments directed toward an opposition perceived to be a hypocritical elite committed to an evil system antithetical to America. But participants not only constructed a bad outgroup; they went out of their way to build a positive ingroup. They welcomed new people, made friends, and celebrated. They sang along to Toby Keith’s “Courtesy of the Red White and Blue” with the same feel-good attitude they did with Neil Diamond’s “America.” More complex than simple anger at political opponents, MAGA participants felt honor and pride to live in America under Trump and to be connected to the movement.

These positive emotions were not an isolated occurrence. In the Trump rally in August, volunteers shared their excitement about being able to see Trump in person, and many evinced pride at being chosen to volunteer for the event. One older man, wearing a black suit amidst the

intense sun of the day, explained that "when you represent the President you have to look the part." The small size of the venue translated into a feeling of privilege to be able to be inside while so many lined the roadways, and more than one person held out hope they would get a chance to personally meet the President given their role as volunteer. Practically everyone had an item—a hat, photo, or shirt—they wanted him to sign. If association with, and proximity to, the President allows participants to experience his celebrity and pride, these physical objects also become meaningful *positive* symbols of status.

We should not under-estimate the political importance of the mass entertainment aspect of these events. The festive style effectively coupled social interaction and leisure with political symbols and action. Dancing, singing, and sign waving produce a sense of belonging and bonhomie necessary to social movements. And the abundance of food, drink, music, and conviviality produced an atmosphere that could pull people in from the margins. Attending a MAGA event meant making friends, sharing positive experiences, and building community. While these dynamics can occur in the world of virtual interactions and media consumption, in-person events held special meaning to participants. The proximate experiences of Trump rallies, campaign events, and parties gave people the opportunity to belong to a political community in a physical, embodied way. Given that these events took place during the COVID-19 lockdowns, their importance was heightened. Such events also point to the importance of micro-level interactions, the "meaning making processes taking place in interpersonal interactions that strengthen or weaken the ties between group members" and are fundamental to the ability of any movement to find success (Van Doorn, Prins, and Welshen 2013, 65).

Collective emotions and celebrations are not only central to social movement activity and solidaristic identification; they are also crucial for issues of status. As Durkheim theorized in his

notion of collective effervescence, the sharing of emotions in collective spaces solidifies shared values and strengthens in-group identification (1912). When people come together this way, they "leave the crowd endowed with positive affect, strength and self-confidence, and openness to other individuals" (Garcia & Rime 2019, 618). For those experiencing a loss of status, and the loss of dignity and respect that this embodies, such events help recover status, re-build self-esteem, and develop collective identities (Cacioppo, Reis, and Zautra 2011). Thus the MAGA movement is "emotionally resonant" for participants because it is a dynamic, interpersonal space that both draws on and reworks shared emotional states in order to help solve the dilemma of an elite driven, marginalized social context (McDonnell, Bail and Tavory 2017). These events provide meaningful solutions to status-related struggles, solidifying the MAGA status narrative through embodied, emotional collective experiences.

Since collective pride and celebratory social interaction are common in many social movements, their presence and importance at these events illustrate the dynamic processes of collective identity at work in MAGA and why it is worth considering it as more than simply an electoral vehicle. While many movements perform a status function—left-wing movements, for example, aim to elevate low status—right-wing movements often focus on rescuing lost status (Mendelberg 2022). Thus, in the MAGA movement, the anger of status loss was combined with the joy of status renewal. In 2020, America was already on its way to being great again, and there was much to celebrate—and defend.

The Practices of Symbolic Status in the MAGA movement

Several days after the election, I join a bus full of MAGA participants to attend the Million MAGA March in Washington D.C. After an initial rally at Freedom Plaza, we march to

the Supreme Court to hear a long list of speakers as they hit on themes familiar to the crowd: the tyranny of COVID lockdowns, the corruption of Biden and the Democratic party, and the overwhelming concern of a stolen election. On the north side of the rally a different scene unfolds, as a vocal contingent of supporters have pressed up against metal barricades to train their attention on a small group of Antifa and Black Lives Matters counter-protestors. These MAGA activists pay little attention to the speakers, instead yelling at the counter-protestors and trying to engage the wall of police whose backs face us. One activist shouts at a passing officer "all those assholes want you defunded! I would walk away and let us do our thing." While the tone is belligerent on both sides, the overwhelming number of MAGA activists dominates the confrontation.

The aggressive posturing and chants take place in a sea of flags, shirts, hats, and signs with slogans from Trump's campaign as well as many images of the President himself. As they make fun of the counter protestors for wearing masks, call them traitors, toss anti-LGBTQ slurs in their direction, and talk eagerly about how to get around the police to start a fight, one chant continually comes back in waves: "Donald Trump! Donald Trump! Donald Trump!" Separated by fences and riot shields, the crowd seems excited and possibly eager for a physical confrontation, though none take steps to try to engage.

Sitting in the back of the bus on our ride home, one of the participants proudly shares that "me and Antifa were screaming at each other's faces, and I was on CNN." Someone asks what Antifa is, and another explains that George Soros, a "billionaire asshole" who is "the puppet master of the Democratic Party," pays for Antifa to travel around to protests. Nodding knowingly, the first person explains that when Antifa and Black Lives Matter show up at a peaceful protest, "we got to keep an eye on these people," especially when "the girls" (meaning,

the women on the bus) are also present. The concern about attacks from Antifa seem especially salient to the activists. Antifa members are thought to wait until nightfall and then, "when the last stragglers are going home, that's when they attack, when it's just one or two people alone." Luckily "the Proud Boys were there to keep us safe." For the first hour of the ride we share videos of physical altercations between Antifa and MAGA protestors from the past year alongside ongoing reporting of the March. There is a tangible sense of accomplishment in the bus as we make our long trek home.

The symbols in the scenes above—flags, signs, and chants, often with Trump himself at the center—may, at first glance, seem the classic stuff of social movement repertoires grounded in the collective anger discussed earlier. But these symbols illustrate how the MAGA movement, like many movements, is not reducible to tactics, strategies, or public sphere contestations of political power. It is also a social space where movement specific symbols, activities, and norms come together to actively and collectively construct what it means to be MAGA, and thus what it means to be status worthy, in real time. These practices also engage in the negotiation of group and personal identity, a negotiation that encompasses "the myriad of ways that activists work to resist negative social definitions and demand that others value and treat" their own group with more respect (Taylor and Whittier 1992, 118). From the celebration of belligerent rhetoric to the role of China, MAGA activists draw on status-based symbols to renegotiate "what kinds of people, and whose codes of behavior, are worthy in the eyes of society as a whole" (Mendelberg 2022, 52). The collective identity of the MAGA movement is thus not only found in political opinions or emotional states, but it is produced through various "performative practices" that simultaneously construct and enact that identity (Wedeen 2009, 97).

Perhaps the most important symbol of the MAGA movement was Trump himself. He was the political object that most clearly signaled the renewal of status among his supporters through his 2016 victory. Not merely a political representative, Trump exemplified the triumph of the virtuous people over the corrupt elite of the opposition. And while Trump was clearly a wealthy Manhattanite, he was understood to be "one of us" through his narratives and practices. One would often hear variations of this symbolic role: "I would die for him," "He's our only hope," or he "just makes me feel better about myself" (or the country, or the world). A key aspect of this was anointing ills and naming enemies, providing a simple and compelling story of status loss and resurgence. But he also provided the symbolic markers of what practices should be considered status worthy through his own rhetoric and style. That his approach was subject to critique by the very elites that were seen as the cause of lost status for MAGA participants only added to his symbolic power. Trump often framed attacks against himself as attacks against the base, a strategic element of the discourse that defined MAGA as a social identity and amplified the anger and resentment felt by participants.

MAGA participants appreciated and replicated Trump's pugnacious style, such as calling his opponents "losers," "scum," and "low-lifes," or expressing his desire to punch a protestor in the face at one of his rallies (Quealy 2021). This was routinely celebrated by MAGA participants, who often noted how it was a key reason they supported him: "he tells it like it is," "he stands up to people," "he's not afraid, and that's what we need," or, the refrain most often heard, "he doesn't take any shit." These were often offered as a clear way Trump differed from other politicians. And as we see above, this approach was replicated in how MAGA activists engaged with their counter-protester opponents. These are not spaces of rapprochement, persuasion, or debate.

Trump's rhetorical style—combining reactionary "truth" telling with a belligerent approach to opponents—intersects with status in three ways. First, his style was understood as a response to how elite society unfairly cast Trump and his supporters as low status. MAGA participants understood such judgements as hypocritical, given that their opponents engaged in confrontational "witch-hunts," protests, and media attacks. Second, Trump's discourse represented the resurgence of masculine and authoritarian norms attached to status. Rather than defending indiscriminate violence, the pugilism of Trump's speech signaled a return to "tough guy" values where justice is dispensed, and honor defended, with one's fists. This quasi-vigilantism described a vision of independence and masculine strength, ultimately restoring the status lost to disrespect.

Further, it is not that MAGA participants simply enjoyed Trump's style acted because they shared it, they saw his success as proof that this aggressive discourse was both valuable and effective. Through Trump, tough-guy discourse was framed as a marker of competence and respect. By participating in events like the MAGA March, they embodied the restored status that Trump's victories symbolized. Thus, Trump himself became a symbol of high status for those he claimed to champion, with his electoral victories reinforcing the value of this combative style and those associated with it. MAGA participants would sometimes engage in a fantasy version of this rhetoric, where they imagined themselves "shutting up" protestors or purchasing firearms to defend against imagined Antifa activists who they knew were planning to "[burn] your church, and your house, and your area, and your business." Sometimes this involved the celebration of actual violence, such as the harassing counter-protestors, heckling of Biden supporters, or celebrating the "battle trophy" of a Black Lives Matter sign stolen from activists by a militia

group at the March. These links between hostility and status are thus both central and emergent to the status politics in the MAGA movement.

However, symbols also played a role in more celebratory spaces, such as the rally discussed earlier, where cultural symbols reflected the participants' values. In a community deeply resentful of elite judgment these were spaces of a particular kind of popular culture. The music blended classic rock and country, and songs like YMCA became viral fixtures at Trump rallies, often with videos of Trump dancing along. The food was straightforward American staples--hotdogs, hamburgers, chips, Coke, and beers like Miller Lite or Yuengling. Baseball hats, t-shirts, and polos were the common apparel alongside camouflaged clothing, biker jackets, and workwear brands like Dickies and Carhartt.

For many participants, these cultural symbols were markers of a national American culture. When people felt these symbols had been historically denigrated as low-class, their role within the MAGA movement was to reassert them as status-worthy (Hetherington and Weiler 2018). As part of the movement's identity, even small consumer choices could become political statements. Cultural markers of other groups—such as expensive coffee, hybrid cars, or trendy clothes—were denigrated not only for their attachment to those groups but also for the perception that mainstream society viewed those cultural trends as more deserving of status.

The Symbolic Politics of Status Compared to Existing Frameworks

In the preceding, we elaborated ways in which MAGA is a movement, articulated how status concerns underpin it, and discussed the importance of movement events, social bonds, emotions and symbolic practices in the movement's construction of politicized collective identity. Our approach centered the concept of the *symbolic politics of status*, the struggle over

the social esteem conferred by powerful institutions. The symbolic politics of status helps us to go beyond, and complicate, some of the standard theories that examine support for Trump: partisanship, racial prejudice, place-based deprivation, and the role of the economy. Our intention is not to dismiss these theories; rather, we highlight how participants' desire for status in society plays a role in these themes. MAGA functions in part as a collective movement to articulate their distrust of a system they perceived to deny them respect and to gain the power to influence government to symbolize the superiority of their values and lifestyles.

Partisanship or Populism?

As we noted, existing explanations of Trump support highlight the dominant role of party identification. Once Trump gained the Republican nomination, rank and file partisans lined up behind him nearly unanimously. However, our study suggests there was much more at play in MAGA than partisanship. An important indication that participants were not merely partisan actors is that they lodge their critique at *both* parties—elites who not only saw no value in the people of the United States but were actively seeking to debase and destroy all they had worked for. From this perspective it is both the elites in the Democratic Party and "Republicans in Name Only" (RINOs) who are at fault. These elites represent a set of immoral, destructive, and ascendent status beliefs that celebrated "bullshit" service and professional work, overvalued college education, and denigrated morally central institutions like the military and police. This frame went beyond the denigration of Trump supporters by their opponents, to include how they exalted groups such as "Silicon Valley CEOs," cosmopolitan urbanites, "illegal immigrants," foreign countries and their citizens, and the "lazy unemployed" over "hard-working Americans." Democrats were viewed with deep suspicion, often seen as actively malicious, but the

Republican Party was also criticized for routinely failing to stand up for what was right. Trump activists saw themselves as "the people who built this country," believing that both parties had stood aside as their cultural values had been degraded as prejudiced, their social contributions disavowed as unwelcome, and their economic work and sacrifice as unworthy.

Once we recognize the prominence of this 'pox on both houses' perspective in the MAGA movement, we can see the need to go beyond party loyalty as an explanation for Trump's support. Of course, movements like the Tea Party, which helped define these shifts, have always been fundamental to the political dynamics of the United States (Gervais and Morris 2018, Schlozman 2015, Skocpol and Williamson 2016). But the evolution of these views cannot be captured by the concept of party identification.

Race, Immigrants, & Status

There is substantial evidence that racial views form a key basis of support for Trump. But the role of race in the MAGA movement went beyond prejudice, with implications for how participants understood the landscape of grievance and status. To be sure, many MAGA participants indeed felt they were losing ground against other often racialized or minoritized groups. But race mattered in other ways too. They viewed accusations that they were racist or prejudiced as stigmatizing labels that decrease their status, pushing back hard against these labels as part of their attempt to reclaim their standing. And they were resentful not only of those below them in the status hierarchy, but at least as much of those above them. They attempted to redeem their eroded standing against the accusations of those with *more* influence and prestige, such as liberal coastal elites, the "mainstream media," and "RINO" Republican leaders.

At the rally discussed above, Trump himself offered a hint of how these pieces fit together. The community that Trump invoked in his speech was mirrored in the makeup of the crowd, a group mostly–but not exclusively–white. Signs such as "Black Americans for Trump" and "Latinos for Trump" dotted the audience.

> "They want to put low-income housing in the suburbs. So the American dream—and by the way, we have a lot of minority groups that live in the suburbs. African American, Asian American, Hispanic American, all did phenomenally last year with jobs."

Each of these demographics triggers a joyful shout from a few people in the crowd as Trump names their demographic while he continues.

> "Best jobs we've ever had in the history of our country, the best economy we've ever had. But they're a big part of the suburbs. And they want to put low-income housing in the suburbs at a level that they've never done it before… people have to aspire to go there. They want to aspire to live in the suburbs."

In this crowd, "low-income housing" was not merely a dog whistle of segregation, but also an invitation to a certain kind of *non-white* listener invested in the status-based meritocracy presented by Trump's image of the suburbs. Hard working Americans of *all* backgrounds, ones who must "aspire" to goals like suburban living, are viewed as the ones under attack by opponents who would seek to undercut their efforts and reward the undeserving. His comments on the suburbs matched the version of inclusivity I often heard in the field, such as a reflection by a Black volunteer that "We're Americans. Let's be proud to be Americans, you know? We don't have to say we're sorry for who we are."

Many MAGA participants of color legitimated Trump's language as racially and ethnically inclusive or labeled their co-ethnic opponents as traitors. At the Million MAGA March, several Latinx men chanted "Latinos for Trump" at a counter-protestor they perceived as Latinx, calling him a "communist" and "sellout." In response to something shouted back, one incredulously asked the black man next to him "is anybody here racist?" For many MAGA supporters, the status competition was framed not by race, but by a divide between hardworking, law-abiding Americans—of any color—and lazy, criminal, un-American people.

Analyses of racism are often based on the concepts of racial prejudice or stereotypes. These concepts are often theorized as the result of basic human cognition that holds the "other" at arm's length (Kinder and Kam 2010). But racial resentments can also be a function of status competition, grounded in the symbolic politics of signals of relative rank (Mendelberg 2022). MAGA participants were not simply averse to racial differences, motivated by racial or ethnic animus, acting from universal human cognitive shortcuts, and racially resentful of the perceived unfair advantages accruing to people unlike themselves. Their racial views were also interwoven with status beliefs. MAGA participants felt they were competing for honor, esteem, and prestige against other groups that they felt were undeserving of their status positions.

These perceived outgroups did not neatly map on to racial or ethnic categories per se, and the place of immigrants in the fieldwork underscores this complexity. One voter expressed that Democrats were "pushing immigrants, immigrants, immigrants" and prioritizing "illegal aliens" over both "legal citizens" and immigrants who arrived "legally through Ellis Island." In contrast, Trump represented what "real American people wanted." However, the voter quickly clarified that "I don't mean white people. I mean *American* people," drawing a distinction not based on ethnicity or race, but between those who follow immigration law and those who break it. In fact,

participants regularly expressed pride in their own immigrant heritage in a region where many could claim third and fourth generation immigrant roots. Surprisingly, there was also significant respect for segments of the Latino community whose values were seen as aligning with hard work, family, and devotion to Christianity. As a result, they framed their opposition to undocumented immigration as a matter of safety, security, and fairness under the law rather than as xenophobia, and references to Ellis Island and the idea of immigrating "the right way" were common. Thus, the source of anger for many was status based—why political elites would not only protect "illegal aliens" who broke the law, but also regard them as more deserving of respect and attention than native-born citizens.

Racial stereotypes were indeed present among some supporters, though they were not widespread. These references often appeared as jokes, which frequently targeted the Obamas. While these jokes clearly had racial undertones, they were also framed as critiques of corrupt elites. This dual focus allowed participants to engage in discourse that both addressed race and critiqued elites, without confronting the social and psychological consequences of openly discussing race (Pérez 2017).

But at the core of the racial landscape for MAGA participants was a shared belief that they, as individuals and as a group, had been unfairly labelled as racist by the powerful arbiters of symbolic status seeking to discredit Trump and his supporters. It was routine for Trump supporters to spontaneously explain why they were not racist and to and highlight their anti-racist beliefs in striving for a color-blind society. This rejection of explicit racism made them particularly offended by such labels, which they saw as stigmas that undermined their social esteem. Consequently, part of the MAGA movement's identity work was to reshape the racial narrative, turning it into a source of respect through a symbolic politics of status.

Relatedly, there was a belief that Democrats, elites, and mainstream society viewed them as an underclass—Biden's "chumps,' Clinton's "basket of deplorables," or Obama's people who "cling to their guns or religion." Many saw themselves as the undeserved butt of the joke in popular culture. This was also a source of their status loss. Such examples amplified other status issues for MAGA participants. They believed their "working-class values" had been judged racist and as such marked unworthy of status by powerful political actors. One retired white volunteer wove the themes of race, judgement, and polarization in this way:

> "Let me go back to Hillary and the basket of deplorables. When national politicians start categorizing Americans, and pitting one group against another… I can understand policies. 'Hey, this is where we stand. We're strong for social programs. We want to take care of this and that, and the other party, hey you know, they're fine people, but they just have a different—' No, it ain't that anymore. 'We believe in this and if you don't, you're racist.' They are not caring. They're not kind. I should be able to say what I want without fear of somebody telling me I'm a racist. I should be able to put a sign in my yard without somebody driving by telling me 'fuck Trump.'"

In addition, racial views were not only important in driving support for Trump, as the literature often shows, but they also played a role indirectly. MAGA spaces typically involved the freedom to "tell it like it is." This filter-less approach to political speech freed participants to engage in vicious denouncements of political opponents, and air conspiracies about COVID, elites, and the stolen election. It included a rejection of "political correctness" by advancing conservative talking points on racial views and other identity issues. This was often couched within a populist

framework. They no longer felt silenced by the powerful, and “finally felt comfortable” critiquing welfare programs or progressive gender politics.

Thus, the racial landscape of the MAGA movement was multifaceted—a space where "laissez-faire racism" and "racial resentments" framed racial inequality in meritocratic terms (Bobo 2017, Kinder and Sanders 1996), even as these views were seen as unjust triggers of status loss in the eyes of powerful institutions. Together, these elements signaled a rejection of “political correctness” which itself became a type of catharsis. Speakers used it to reassert that their views were both legitimate and shared, and that those who had previously judged them were wrong and immoral. This move conferred social status by illustrating the freedom to express one’s thoughts and feelings, which is not only valuable for the freedom itself but also because it forces others to recognize that one has power to speak freely. The MAGA movement was attractive as a means to restore the status eroded by accusations of political incorrectness lodged at people with laissez faire racial views.

MAGA as National Identity

Influential theories of rural consciousness might interpret support for Trump through the lens of rural identity, local deprivation, or the urban-rural divide (Brown and Mettler 2023, Cramer 2016). While these theories that center local place-based perspectives are extremely useful in understanding Trumpism, the fieldwork illustrates the important, status-based role of *national* identity.

Among MAGA participants, discussions of foreign policy played an important role in the symbolic politics of status, where Trump’s “take no shit” rhetoric was directed at both domestic and international actors. Trump blamed America’s perceived enemies for the troubles of working

people, most often China (Lamont, Park and Ayala-Hurtado 2017, Mutz 2021). Even in their experience of localized deficits, participants felt a sense of *national* deprivation as well, often framing their grievances as about America as a whole rather than local problems. One Trump supporter, a registered Democrat, was quick to link her local concerns about Black Lives Matter protests to national issues:

> "I'm ashamed to be a Democrat because of what they are doing to our cities… They're burning down everything!... I can't stand the Democrats. I hate them all. Because of what they're doing to our country. We're going to be a third world country because of them."

The galvanizing element was not so much the status of their local community, but America's status as a country.

> "You know, I'm afraid that on the on the world front, we have to be strong, we need to be strong. [The Democrats] see strength, or having that presence as being, you know, boastful, or ego or whatever it is. But you need to have the strength…We need to keep doing what Trump wants to do."

Within this framework, status renewal requires that people perceive the country as fighting to reclaim its proper place in the international hierarchy. The MAGA movement saw Trump's bellicose approach to foreign enemies as part of the answer, where the solution to domestic and international problems required hard stances and aggressive tactics. One local political actor framed it as such in a stump speech:

> "Under President Trump, we had the best economy ever in northeastern Pennsylvania… He will finally stand up to China for all the things they have done to us over the years, to finally make China pay for the

Coronavirus lies, and for the stolen manufacturing jobs that have left our people out of work."

Status resurgence on the local level was symbolized in the grandiose version of the "best economy ever," linking these rewards to the vilification of China as the cause and the assertive actions of the Trump presidency as the source of status renewal. Campaign events and the symbolic framing they contained reinforced to participants that they were actors in a movement to 'make *America* great again,' and Trump's repeated exhortation of that slogan as part of an aggressive international strategy was an important part of this.

Such nationalist rhetoric helps explain why foreign relations resonate for MAGA participants— if personal self-esteem is partly tied to national strength, then symbolic or rhetorical attacks on the country challenge personal status. This connects to recent work on collective narcissism, the "exaggerated belief in the in-group's greatness that depends on external validation from others" (Federico and Golec de Zavala 2018, 111). Empirically, individuals high on the collective narcissism scale endorse American exceptionalism and feel compelled to combat its opponents. However, collective narcissism also predicts that fears of national weakness can escalate aggression toward opponents (Golec de Zavala and Federico 2018, Golec de Zavala et al 2020). When MAGA supporters tie their personal status to their perceptions of how well the United States is respected, Trump's symbolic attacks on perceived enemies does the dual work of status renewal for nation and individual. But this approach comes at a cost, as it not only fuels conspiracist thinking, but also makes it increasingly difficult for participants to de-couple their own sense of renewed status from the need for special recognition of the nation (Golec de Zavala and Federico 2018, Golec de Zavala, Federico and Sedikides, et al. 2020).

The Symbolic Status Economy

Economic issues were a constant refrain in the MAGA narrative, both in elite talking points and casual conversations. Participants routinely discussed pre-pandemic unemployment numbers or stock market figures. At first glance, this aligns with theories of retrospective voting, supporting economic explanations for Trump support. However, the nature of participants views on the economy are also linked to issues of symbolic status.

To understand how MAGA participants framed economic issues, we must pay attention to the hyperbole— "the best economy ever in northeastern Pennsylvania," "he's brought back all the manufacturing jobs," or "the strongest stock market in the history of the country." This discourse featured superhuman gains achieved by Trump after decades of decline capped off by eight disastrous years under Obama. MAGA participants routinely described a country where all the manufacturing jobs had indeed returned. These descriptions served as sources of pride, folded into a status narrative where people's esteem was tied to the economic dominance of the United States—for the country to be atop the international hierarchy, it must also be the global economic leader. Trump was considered personally responsible for these improvements, adding to the perception of his strength and further renewing his supporters' status. In "making China pay" with saber rattling and aggressive tweets, Trump had returned both manufacturing jobs and global dominance to the United States.

However, this language celebrated economic strength in ways only vaguely connected to participants' personal economic circumstances, and many of their perceptions of macro conditions were empirically questionable. Northeastern Pennsylvania saw an economic rebound after the 2008 recession, and much of the Trump-era recovery followed trends started during the

Obama administration.[4] Trump did personally restore all lost manufacturing jobs, no more than he was individually responsible for the performance of the economy.

Underlying these claims were conspiracist, Manichean views common of right-wing populism. Economic problems, real or perceived, were blamed on domestic and foreign political enemies. For example, the hardships of COVID-19—lockdowns, recession, and unemployment—were seen as the intentional actions by opponents who aimed to defeat Trump and destroy America. A common talking point suggested that Democrats like Pennsylvania Governor Tom Wolf would wait until the day after the election to lift the COVID lockdown, because, as a campaign speaker put it to much applause, "They don't give a damn if they're hurtin' people! …People are starving, and they don't give a damn. Whatever it takes to beat Trump!" In line with conspiracist thinking, participants expressed certainty that Biden would "reverse everything President Trump has done," with taxes "up by 70, 75%," and turn America into a "communist country."

That MAGA members held these views is perhaps unsurprising, given how much the average voter understands about the economy's role in politics (Achen and Bartels 2016). But to discount these positions as mere ignorance or electoral hot air is to miss the status work at play. In the MAGA movement the symbolic role of the economy was to stitch together material concerns about issues like income and trade with status themes about relative class position and the loss of political power. It's no surprise, given that material self-interest rarely shapes political

[4]As one example, the average estimated growth of median income in the northeastern counties of Lackawanna, Luzerne, and Wyoming between January of 2009 and 2016 (17.1%) was higher than between January of 2017 and 2020 (12.9%). The average growth rates of real median income in the U.S. during those two periods were 7.5% and 8.2% respectively (US Census Bureau 2024).

attitudes alone, and that people often prioritize status over resources—especially since political systems dispense both resources and status (Mendelberg 2022).

MAGA participants felt they were denied honor, esteem, and respect by powerful forces. By constructing shared grievances and blaming common enemies, the MAGA movement elevated the moral worth of its participants on economic terms (Lamont, Park and Ayala-Hurtado 2017). The hyperbolic claims of economic success bolstered their sense of a resurgent America, and thus a renewed sense of status for Americans. And yet, an electoral loss would strip that status away just as quickly.

Conclusion

In the preceding we have offered two arguments regarding the relationship between status and support for Trump. First, we illustrated how focusing on status provides a more integrated explanation MAGA participants' motivations of than those that isolate partisanship, out-group prejudice, local deprivation, or economic decline. Partisanship alone cannot explain their populist anger against mainstream institutions that they felt dismissed by. Resentment was not only racial, local, or rural, but part of a broader, populist status dynamic articulated in *national* terms: Make *America* Great Again. This "greatness" included an economic component, but its narrative strength was more symbolic than empirical. MAGA participants sought to reclaim their lost status in an electoral context, defined by the symbolic politics of status, where political conflicts extend beyond material distribution or moral values to include battles over institutional recognition and social esteem. Through their participation in a high stakes electoral contest, supporters engaged in these symbolic politics of status, struggling for recognition of their traditions, behaviors, and identities.

Second, we complicated explanations of Trump supporters as individuals engaged in electoral behavior. Instead, we emphasized the social status dynamics within the MAGA movement. This movement engaged supporters holistically, offering community and camaraderie that transcended voting decisions, with status concerns deeply influencing group identity formation. Our observations highlighted how status considerations shaped MAGA participants' identities, affecting the movement's emotional dynamics and discourse. Crucially, the MAGA movement went well beyond campaign work for Trump and included a rich array of social and psychological experiences. This deep engagement carries important implications. Core Trump supporters are not simply backing a candidate —they are embedded in social networks that position Trump as a central symbol in a broader system of symbols representing their identity and their vision of government's role in restoring their esteem. These findings suggest that the impact of the MAGA movement will outlast Trump's presence as a candidate.

MAGA participants believe they live in a world that has long disrespected them via unfair societal values designed to keep them low-status. Four years of Trump's presidency helped re-frame these losses as unjust, their opponents as immoral, and their values as high-status. Yet it did not fully remove the fear and anxiety of their lost status or the power of their opponents to take it away again. For them, status lost, and then regained, must be defended.

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