

The Politics of Nostalgia:  
An Analysis of Contemporary Presidential Speeches

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## **Introduction**

The politics of nostalgia in the United States is a complex phenomenon. Both in contemporary politics and throughout much of modern political history, American politics have either directly invoked nostalgic elements, through speeches, campaigns, and ads, or indirectly played on people's nostalgic feelings. Political nostalgia tends to be a form of collective nostalgia. The collective nature of nostalgic appeals in politics seems to contradict with American individuality, which is a hallmark of American society,<sup>1</sup> and yet appeals to collective or group nostalgia seem to be a frequent and effective tactic employed by politicians seeking election or re-election. Additionally, American politicians use nostalgia in a variety of different ways, sometimes highlighting the promise of the past while other times deriding the state of the present. Regardless, evocations of political nostalgia serve as commentary on the direction a candidate or elected officials wish the future to take.

Nostalgia in politics is not a new phenomenon, nor is it unique to one party or ideology. During the 2016 Presidential election, then Republican nominee Donald Trump quickly established himself as the “nostalgia” candidate. The Trump campaign's use of nostalgia is highlighted by its tagline, “Make America Great Again,” and was frequently pointed out in news articles and opinion pieces during the campaign<sup>2</sup>. While nostalgia has become a talking point in regard to the Trump candidacy and presidency, nostalgia is not unique to formal politics and government, nor is nostalgia in politics a new phenomenon. Ronald Reagan, for example, is also frequently cited as drawing on nostalgia as his administration ushered a new wave of conservatism in the 1980s. Not only did Reagan draw on nostalgia, but Trump's use of the slogan “Make America Great Again” is doubly nostalgic, as the phrase was featured in Reagan's

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<sup>1</sup> For a discussion of American values and individuality see: (Kingdon 1999)

<sup>2</sup> See: (Appelbaum 2016; Kilgore; Irwin 2016; Dionne; Edwards-Levy 2016; Heer 2016; Baer; Brownstein 2016)

1980 presidential nomination acceptance speech.<sup>3</sup> One could argue that Reagan and Trump's context and use of nostalgia, arguably two of the most familiar uses of nostalgia in American politics, cast nostalgia as a form of Republican, conservative backlash wherein a return to past attitudes and practices is considered the proper way to move into the future. The above examples describe visible instances of presidents using nostalgia for a previous time as a tool to appeal to the American masses. However, not all instances of nostalgia in the political sphere operate in this way. Nostalgia can also operate less as a longing for the past and more as a reflection on the past or as a longing for the promise of the past. This paper seeks to explore the ways in which American presidents utilize and evoke the different types of nostalgia, and takes the stereotypical view of nostalgia as a conservative force that longs for the past derived from popular accounts of nostalgic use, such as those of Trump and Reagan, as the general view of nostalgia.

The goal of this paper is twofold. First, it aims to provide an overview of the literature on the politics of nostalgia, expound on the various usages and types of nostalgia, and explain personal nostalgia and its intersection with political nostalgia, all while highlighting the interdisciplinary, far-reaching nature of nostalgia. Second, this paper seeks to understand the types and use of nostalgia in contemporary presidencies. To complete this task, this paper will and answer the following guiding questions by analyzing twelve official presidential speeches from 2000 to 2017: Have presidents' use of nostalgia in official speeches changed since 2000? Does President Trump utilize nostalgia at a statistically significant higher rate than Presidents Bush and Obama?

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<sup>3</sup> See: (Reagan 1980)

This paper is one facet of a three-pronged project intending to examine the interdisciplinary nature and widespread influence of the politics of nostalgia. Through this lens of nostalgia, the project will consider relevant issues of power dynamics, representation, idealization, categorization, rhetoric, societal change, and more. The project intends to cast nostalgia in both a positive and negative light, examining both opposition to and application of its unique politically charged capabilities, given the recent success of President Trump's "Make America Great Again" mantra. The study of nostalgia and its effects is relevant because it introduces a variable that is often overlooked in various stratified disciplines. Without an interdisciplinary approach, much of the nuance inherent in the study of nostalgia is lost.

### **Literature Review**

While nostalgia is not an unfamiliar topic for most people, scholarly research indicates that the sentiment is more nuanced and complex than gleaned at first look. The intricacy of nostalgia is often tacit, but clearly visible when considering its scope. Nostalgia and nostalgic feelings can be experienced in a wide variety of circumstances: A certain manner of speech, a type of food, a feeling, a book, art, music, and more can all lead to individuals' feelings of nostalgia. That nostalgia, in turn, could be for a breadth of different things: family, childhood, a place, a person, an idea, a period of time outside of one's scope of memory, etc. Nostalgia is an extremely complex and extensive phenomenon, and the scholarship and discussion of nostalgia employed in this paper is a limited primarily to collective nostalgia and politics. However, the cited theories and arguments about nostalgia are not restricted to political science.

Nostalgia is more than a conservative force in politics; its operation is not always obvious and more sophisticated than one might observe at face value. Questions regarding what nostalgia is made public and what nostalgia remains private, and the ways in which those distinctions vary

for different people, reflect both nuance and contradiction for American society (Bonnett 2006). Americans value individuality and interact with nostalgia differently on a very personal level. However, politicians use of and reference to nostalgic elements speaks to a level of collective, publically appropriate nostalgia for politicians and others to engage with. Despite the society's general consideration of nostalgia as a conservative Republican force that opposes liberal change, nostalgia can work within Republican and Democratic ideologies and work both for and against change (Bonnett 2006; Murphy 2009).

Andrew R. Murphy's article, "Longing, Nostalgia, and Golden Age Politics: The American Jeremiad and the Power of the Past", provides a particularly clear and interesting argument about nostalgia and American political parties. Murphy denotes two types of nostalgia: traditional and progressive. Traditional nostalgia is generally refers to a specific time period, program, or thing, while progressive nostalgia is refers to the promise of the past. Murphy gives the examples of the Christian Right's nostalgia for post-World War II, pre-1960s society as traditionalist, and gives the abolitionist movement as an example of progressive nostalgia, with abolitionists nostalgic for the promise of freedom associated with America's founding. Murphy also asserts that traditionalist nostalgia sees the past as a model for the present and future, while progressive nostalgia seeks to restore the promise of the past (Murphy 2009). Murphy's description of nostalgia can be superimposed onto America's political right and left, as both sides certainly can evoke both types of nostalgia, and detracts from the idea that nostalgia is a force used by the political right to undermine or stop progress. For Murphy, nostalgia can both hinder and help progress, and is not restricted to a single political party.

Data can be used to support Murphy and Bonnett's arguments that nostalgia is an instrument available and used by both political parties. A 2017 study on partisan polarization in

views of the past found that Republicans and Democrats ranked their quality of life higher in the 1980s and 1990s respectively, correlating with Republican and Democratic presidencies. Interestingly, the study found that Democrats were more nostalgic than Republicans for the 2000s, when both Republican George W. Bush and Democrat Barack Obama held the presidency (Hibbing, Hayes, and Deol 2017). The Hibbing, Hayes and Deol's (2017) study, as well as Murphy (2009) and Bonnett's (2006) articles make the case how the politics of nostalgia in the United States operates in greater scope than is stereotypical associated with Republicans and aversion to progress. The politics of nostalgia in the United States is dynamic, present in both parties, and does not always operate as expected.

Relevant insight into both politics and nostalgia can also be garnered through Svetlana Boym's (2001) discussion of nostalgia, which pays particular focus to nostalgia in Slovenia. Like Murphy, Boym divides nostalgia into types: reflective and restorative. Boym casts restorative nostalgic as aiming towards a restoring "snapshot" of a previous time as though it contains "absolute truth", whereas the reflective nostalgic is interested in fragmentary and inconclusive meditation on history and time in the context of both cultural and individual memory (Boym 2001, 49). Boym's division of nostalgia is also comparable to Murphy's. Restorative and traditionalist nostalgia both attempt to bring the past forward to serve as a model for the present and future, while progressive and reflective nostalgia are both more nuanced and subjective. Boym's work not only supports Murphy's distinctions of nostalgia, but also furthers the argument that not all nostalgia is the same or only restricted to conservative and anti-change positions.

Sources outside of politics and political science also lend understanding and insight into the politics of nostalgia. Points made by Keith Leonard and Frank Einstein, both discussing

literature, support the argument against nostalgia as a singularly conservative sentiment. Leonard builds upon Boym's terms of "restorative" and "reflective" nostalgia. Basing his argument in African American literature, Leonard creates his own category to explain that African American art pulls from the past in a non-restorative fashion, thus re-contextualizing the past in an innovative manner in the present (Leonard 2015). For example, Leonard argues that Thomas Sayers Ellis's semiautobiographical work, *The Maverick Room*, "effectively refutes the idea that soul's continuity of aesthetic resistance has been broken by soul music's transformation into corporate R & B, or that blackness depends on any such coherence being restored" by "deriv[ing] from those musical styles [sixties soul, go-go culture, and Parliament-Funkadelic] an alternative literary-cultural historiography predicated on the principles of formal repetition, rigorously self-conscious attention to cultural form, conceptions of time as nonlinear, and a notion of blackness as dissident creativity." (2015, 344). Similarly, Einstein provides insight into the dynamics associated with nostalgia and group thought, arguing that nostalgia is a safe area for the dominant group, because nostalgia has limited effect on the present. He also argues that nostalgia is powerful because it not only expresses dissatisfaction with the present, but also acts "as a touchstone to judge the present" (Einstein 1980, 38). Einstein's comments reinforce Leonard, Boym and Murphy's discussion of the dynamics between the past and the present. Both Einstein and Leonard also introduce important dynamics (in the vein of race and dominant cultures) that are key to understanding nostalgia in America.

### **Everyday Politics of Nostalgia**

The politics of nostalgia operates outside the traditional realms of government and politics. Personal politics are often related to culture, race, and other socioeconomic differences, and frequently employ a politics of nostalgia that is steeped in intra-group and inter-group power

struggles that relates more to emotion and the creation of an us-versus-them dynamic than policy.<sup>4</sup>

Group nostalgia builds off of community and shared identity. Nostalgia can be used as a means of reconstructing and affirming identity, as well as of defining "presence"—place in current time and space—and also as a means for creating a sense of community, wherein private recollection is private but identifying as a member of such a society are public displays (Wilson 2005, 84-86). Different groups can look back on the same time period and feel nostalgic for completely different things.<sup>5</sup> These variations in nostalgia reinforce the unique standing of nostalgia in America, where collective nostalgia is rarely collective across the entire populace because of America's diversity.

The politics of nostalgia is also associated with dominant (or other) group backlash. Backlash occurs when one group feels that another group is making progress that the first group sees as harmful to their group or way of life. Political examples of this could include Reagan's election in the 1980s as backlash against feminism and civil rights, and Trump's election in 2016 as backlash from increasing economic prosperity of non-whites. However, this phenomenon is also clear in inter-group politics. One example of this is the resurgence of medievalism in the mythopoetic men's movement that rose in the 1990s in reaction to feminism. The mythopoetic men's movement is sometimes considered nostalgic for the Middle Ages and the masculinity of male dominated heroism and adventure, like the Arthurian legends (Aronstein 2000). Nostalgia for the Middle Ages in this context not only idealizes the time period and ignores the problems

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<sup>4</sup> See the works of Michel Foucault and the Combahee River Collaborative for more information about personal politics and identity politics

<sup>5</sup> See (Wilson 2005)



and hardships associated with it but also presents the masculinity of the Middle Ages as an ideal, representing men's feeling of emasculation with the rise of feminism (Aronstein 2000).

Similar to men in the mythopoetic men's movement, white's reflections on the 1950s also exemplify nostalgic evidence as backlash against change. Michael Maly, Heather Dalmage, and Nancy Michaels (2012) created a study and researched white use of nostalgia in the context of racially changing Chicago neighborhoods. They found that whites in these neighborhoods use nostalgia to create their identity and strengthen whiteness, blaming blacks for destroying their "good life" of racially segregated neighborhoods. Maly, Dalmage and Michaels (2012) find that whites generate nostalgic narratives meant to enhance white privilege without leaving the "color-blind" ideas of modern society. Maly, Dalmage and Michaels describe modern forms of racism as "color blind racism", arguing that, "[u]nlike previous periods where racial prejudice was more overt, today whites are more likely to express such sentiments in covert, contradictory, and subtle ways... include[ing] white virtuousness and the interconnected themes of racial resentment and white victimhood" (2012, 761). Alternatively, they argue that white "nostalgia narratives are consistently built around a segregated white world. The memories of the loss of the old white neighborhood converge with the nostalgia for a time when 'white culture' was the unquestioningly synonymous with American culture" (Maly, Dalmage, and Michaels 2012, 758). Maly, Dalmage, and Michaels's article, as well as Aronstein's work, exemplify how nostalgia informs and intersects with the backlash effect that occurs when the dominant group feels threatened by gains made by other groups. Understanding the way in which these phenomenon occur and play out in those traditional spheres, provide insight into President Trump's invocation of nostalgia during his campaign.

### **Research Methodology/Nostalgia in Contemporary Presidencies**

To determine how contemporary presidents use nostalgia, this paper examines presidential speeches from 2000 to 2017. Examining speeches from earlier presidencies creates confounding variables, like state of American society, time period events, etc., that influence America's outlook and use of nostalgia. Looking at the 43rd to 45th Presidents provides a manageable sample size, and allows for analysis of presidencies in similar cultural time periods.

Specifically, this paper examines inaugural, farewell, and the nominee acceptance speeches of elected presidents at the DNC and RNC. Comparing other types of speeches, especially those given in relation to some critical national incident, introduces context, events, and other factors that would confound research. For example, there is no comparable speech to Bush's 9/11 speech, the circumstances surrounding that tragedy are unique. Similarly, Obama's Sandy Hook speech or his speech after bin Laden was killed are also steeped in unique emotional-political backgrounds that serve to confound the comparison of speeches.

This paper will determine the nostalgic emphasis of a speech by quantifying each nostalgic moment in the speech. A nostalgic moment consists of either a single word or a group of connected sentences or paragraphs that form one example of nostalgia. Moments can be explicit or coded instances of nostalgia. For example, President Trump's "Make America Great Again" slogan is explicitly nostalgic by virtue of the word "again". On the other hand, President Obama's discussions of closed and closing factories is a coded instance of nostalgia, as it references the change in economic structures and situations that result in people looking back wistfully on the height of manufacturing in America. Additionally, this paper will use a chi-squared test at a 95% confidence level to determine if the distribution of the nostalgic moments between presidents is significant. Furthermore, this paper draws on Murphy's discussion of

nostalgia as either traditional or progressive by classifying each nostalgic moment based on Murphy's definitions as well as classifications of nostalgia discussed by other scholars.

### **Nostalgia in Contemporary Presidencies**

Before beginning to analyze the results, however, it is important to reiterate some key points. First, this paper considers a limited number of speeches. If we believe that presidents have more freedom in campaign and other, less formal speeches, then variation in nostalgia usage may exist outside of the analyzed speeches. Second, it is important to note that this paper considers five speeches each from Presidents George W. Bush and Barack Obama. At the writing of this paper, President Trump has only delivered two of the speeches Obama and Bush gave. As such, comparisons between the three presidents is limited to comparisons of first acceptance and inauguration speech each president delivered.<sup>6</sup>

The frequency of nostalgic moments compared across all three presidents yielded no significant difference. Speeches by Trump drew upon nostalgia twenty times across his two speeches, while Obama and Bush invoked nostalgia thirteen and sixteen times respective across the comparable speeches. A chi-squared test for given probabilities found that the number of nostalgic moments is distributed evenly across all three presidents, and all six speeches, and generated a p-value of 0.47 failed to find significant difference in distribution. In running a chi-squared test, the p-value returned (0.47) was higher than the demonstrated alpha level of 0.05, making it impossible to reject the null hypothesis that there is no relationship between which president gave the speech and the number of nostalgic moments. A comparison of the remaining six Obama and Bush speeches yielded similar results. With a p-value of 0.3994, the chi-squared test produced a p-value above the demonstrated alpha level of 0.05, once again failing to reject

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<sup>6</sup> Bush 2000 Acceptance Speech, Bush 2001 Inaugural Speech, Obama 2008 Acceptance Speech, Obama 2009 Inaugural Speech, Trump 2016 Acceptance Speech, Trump 2017 Inaugural Speech

the null hypothesis that there is no relationship between which president gave the speech and the number of nostalgic moments. Based on this analysis, presidents' use of nostalgia in official speeches has not changed since the start of the 21st century, and President Trump does not utilize nostalgia at a higher rate in official speeches than Presidents Bush and Obama.

Despite answering no to both research questions, the data revealed interesting differences when the nostalgic moments were broken up and classified based on Murphy's categorization of nostalgia. Each nostalgic moment across all twelve speeches was classified as progressive nostalgia, traditional nostalgia, or a mix, based on how each instance fit Murphy's definitions. Across the speeches, there were 59 instances of progressive nostalgia, 22 instances of traditional nostalgia, and 8 instances of mixed nostalgia. In running a chi-squared test, the p-value returned was less than 0.0000001, much lower than the demonstrated alpha level of 0.05, causing the rejection of the null hypothesis that there is no relationship between the president and the type of nostalgia used. Progressive nostalgia, which often emphasized hope and the promise of the past, was the most frequent type of nostalgia used. Trump did not use a single instance of progressive nostalgia. For example, Trump ends his inauguration speech by invoking traditional nostalgia when he says, "Together, we will make America strong again. We will make America wealthy again. We will make America proud again. We will make America safe again. And, yes, together, we will make America great again. Thank you. God bless you, and God bless America. Thank you. God bless America" (Trump 2017). The use of progressive nostalgia was similar between Presidents Bush (27) and Obama (32), with a chi-square test failing to reject the null hypothesis of no relationship between which president gave the speech and how many progressive nostalgic moments occurred with a p-value (0.5151) greater than 0.05. The distribution of traditional nostalgia, however, was significantly different based on a chi-squared

test with 95% confidence. Furthermore, despite only having two speeches compared to Obama and Bush's five speeches, over eighty percent of traditional nostalgic moments were used by Trump.<sup>7</sup>

While the overall use of nostalgia does not appear to have changed across 21<sup>st</sup> Century presidencies, Donald Trump invoked traditional nostalgia more frequently than his 21<sup>st</sup> Century predecessors. Trump's use of traditional nostalgia emphasized the past and used the past as a model for the present and future, evidenced by Trump's use of words such as "again" and "back," as well as his "Make America Great Again" slogan. As traditional nostalgia tends to align more closely to stereotypes and conventional examples of nostalgia, it can be said that Donald Trump does use conventional, obvious nostalgia at a higher rate than Presidents George W. Bush and Barack Obama.

### **Conclusion**

While Donald Trump's 2016 presidential campaign may support the argument that American nostalgia is a Republican backlash to progress, the politics of nostalgia in the United States is not a straightforward topic. Not only are American politics and power dynamics nuanced, so is nostalgia. The research of scholars like Bonnett, Boym, Leonard, and Murphy underscores the complexities of nostalgia by introducing or reinforcing variations and categorizations of nostalgia. Distinctions between types of nostalgia, such as progressive, traditional, reflective, and restorative, complicate the stereotypical view of nostalgia as a longing for the past and reflect a greater need for scholarly consideration of nostalgia in politics. Similarly, the scholarship of Aronstein, Einstein, and Wilson further highlight the intricacy of nostalgia by exemplifying the power dynamics inherent to group nostalgia. Nostalgia and politics

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<sup>7</sup> A chi-squared test was not run to analyze the distribution of the mixed nostalgia category because all the values were less than five (2 Trump, 3 Obama, and 4 Bush).

are both mammoth topics, full of nuance and complexities, which this paper barely begins to explain.

This paper demonstrates the nuance and use of nostalgia in contemporary presidential politics. Nostalgia has been present in official presidential speeches during the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Presidents Bush, Obama, and Trump all use nostalgia at comparable rates. However, the type of nostalgia invoked by presidents has shifted. President Trump invokes traditional nostalgia more than his predecessors while using progressive nostalgia significantly less often. Similarly, both Presidents Obama and Bush used progressive nostalgia at statistically similar rates. While it is limited in its ability to address the question of why this shift has occurred, this paper identifies a shift in the types of nostalgia used in presidential politics worth studying further. Furthermore, presidents' usage of the different types of nostalgia highlights their diverging views on the best paths to the future. The politics of nostalgia serves as a lens through which a shift in presidential politics is visible.

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