

Delegitimization and US presidential electoral campaigns, 1896-1980

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Abstract: The essay focuses on delegitimization of one's political opponent as a discursive strategy in US political elections from 1896 to 1980. Starting with a definition of delegitimization as a means of contesting the legitimacy of the opponent's aspiration to power by turning him/her into an enemy outside the constitutional perimeter, the author highlights the circumstances that conduced to political delegitimization tactics in US presidential campaigns, as well as the stock themes in use over the various periods.

Keywords: Presidential elections, delegitimization, liberalism, conservatism, political parties

In search of a new “era of civility”

In 2016, during one of the most heated electoral campaigns to attain the White House, the writer Rebecca Cusey wrote: “This is not a crisis of party, or of awful candidates. It is a crisis of America’s soul. These are dark times in our country”¹. She was referring to a markedly vitriolic electoral campaign stooping to vulgarity, sexism and racism, with Donald Trump’s broadsides working on the deepest instincts, rage and resentment of a segment of the American electorate, above all white rural working class². The

1 Rebecca Cusey, “Election is reflection of dark times in America’s soul”, *The Hill*, September 26, 2016.

2 Marc Hooghe and Ruth Dassonneville, “Explaining the Trump Vote: The Effect of Racist Resentment and Anti-Immigrant Sentiments”, in *PS. Political Science and Politics*, 51, no. 3 (2018): 528-534.

pattern spilled over into Trump's first mandate, notable for its friend/foe verbal tactics and the use of deliberately brutal language.³ A survey by the Pew Research Center in April 2019 showed that 85% of Americans thought the American political debate had grown distinctly less respectful, and 55% blamed Trump for the decline in standards⁴.

The degeneration of political language has long been a central issue⁵, as politics has polarized more and more, and hostility between parties reached anthropological heights, the result of growing fragmentation and political "tribalization".⁶ In 2011, at the apex of the clash between the Tea Party movement⁷ and the Obama presidency, a rally held by the Democrat deputy Gabrielle Giffords at Tucson, Arizona, turned tragic when a white youth, Jared Lee Loughner, opened fire on the crowd causing 18 casualties including Giffords herself. It showed how easily verbal abuse can turn into physical violence. Loughner had posted a video full of hatred against the government⁸. In his speech commemorating the victims, Obama said: "if, as has been discussed in recent days, death helps usher in more civility in our public discourse, let us remember it is not because a simple lack of civility caused this tragedy -- it did not -- but rather because only a more civil and honest public discourse can help us face up to the challenges of our nation in a way that would make them proud"⁹. The subject of return to "civility" or "better politics" punctuated Obama's speeches over his two terms of office: let there be a return to cooperation and not division¹⁰.

3 Bérengère Viennot, *La langue de Trump* (Paris: Arenes, 2019).

4 Pew Research Center, april 2019: <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/07/18/americans-say-the-nations-political-debate-has-grown-more-toxic-and-heated-rhetoric-could-lead-to-violence>

5 Thomas B. Edsall, "How Did Politics Get so Personal?", *New York Times*, January 28, 2015.

6 Shanto Iyengar & Sean J. Westwood, "Fear and Loathing across Party Lines: New Evidence on Group Polarization", in *American Journal of Political Science*, 59, no. 3 (2015): 690.

7 Ronald P. Formisano, *The Tea Party. A brief history* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012); Theda Skocpol, Vanessa Williamson, *The Tea Party and the Remaking of Republican Conservatism* (Oxford-New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

8 Marc Lacey and David M. Herszenhorn, "In Attack's Wake, Political Repercussions", *New York Times*, January 8, 2011

9 Remarks by the President at a Memorial Service for the Victims of the Shooting in Tucson, Arizona, January 12, 2011, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/01/12/remarks-president-barack-obama-memorial-service-victims-shooting-tucson>

10 Remarks by the President in State of Union Address, January 25, 2011 <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/01/25/remarks-president-state-union-address>

Delegitimization as a political category

The debate over the worsening of political language has brought to the fore the issue of delegitimization as a tool of political competition in American presidential campaigns. The strictures on Obama for being a “socialist” or having no right to be president since he wasn’t born in the United States are only a few examples of that strategy,¹¹ but verbal denigration has distinguished American politics right from the outset. 19th-century electoral campaigns were prone to inflammatory talk, perfected like a theatrical performance: “political candidates are judged as much by the performances they give as by the policies they propose”¹². For instance, the federalist press described Thomas Jefferson as “a mean-spirited, low-lived fellow, the son of a half-breed Indian squaw, sired by a Virginia mulatto father.”¹³ In 1864, the Northern Union Democrats circulated a pamphlet entitled ‘Abraham Africanus’ against Lincoln’s alleged dictatorial ambitions and the risk that re-electing him might be a vote for racial mingling¹⁴. And indeed, at a local level “although the term ‘war’ was used somewhat metaphorically in the press to describe these disputes, in an alarming number of cases its use verged on the literal.”¹⁵ Dan Wood and Soren Jordan argue that party polarization is as American as apple pie¹⁶.

Taking his cue from Tocqueville, Frank Logevall concluded that one reason for such intensity of conflict lay in distrust of power and authority rooted in republican ideology, challenging of the custom of deferring to elites and a radicalized notion of equality which came in at the start of the 1800s, moulding the democracy of that century. Benjamin Franklin’s dictum – “the first responsibility of every citizen is to question authority” – thinks Logevall, clearly reflects an apparent contradiction between the im-

11 Zorica Trajkova, Silvana Neshkovska, “Strategies of Legitimation and Delegitimation in Selected American Presidential Speeches”, *Respectus philologicus*, 35, n. 40 (2019): 11–29.

12 Mark Chou, Roland Bleiker, Nilanjana Premaratna, “Elections as Theatre”, *PS Political Science and Politics*, 49, no. 1 (2016): 43.

13 Quoted in Cornell W. Clayton and Richard Elgar, “Foreword”, in *Civility and Democracy in America. A Reasonable Understanding*, eds. Cornell W. Clayton and Richard Elgar (Pullman, Wash.: Washington State University Press, 2012), xii and xiv.

14 Frank Logevall, “The Paradox of Civility”, in Cornell W. Clayton and Richard Elgar (eds.), *Civility and Democracy*, cit., 5.

15 Edward B. Foley, *Ballot Battles. The History of Disputed Elections in the United States* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 150.

16 Dan Wood and Soren Jordan, *Party Polarization in America. The War Over Two Social Contracts*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2017.

age of US politics as the fruit of ‘a nation of know-it-all’s’ and the belief that ‘real civility could be disruptive. . . . A healthy and robust democracy depends on such questioning and risks grievous damage without it.’¹⁷

But the definition of “delegitimization” as an oratorical strategy must be distinguished from merely heated, violent and sometimes offensive political discussion, since it transforms a legitimate opponent into an enemy. As I will try to show, heated altercation does not necessarily entail resort to delegitimization tactics. So, what do we mean by delegitimization and what is its semantic range? The category of “political delegitimization of the opponent” has a semantic quality all of its own, even if it derives from Max Weber’s dyad, legitimacy/legitimation¹⁸. I here employ a definition that has been honed by an Italian research team¹⁹, viz. that delegitimization is “an attitude of more or less radical contestation of a power or aspiring power’s legitimacy. . . . the term/concept ‘delegitimization’ does not indicate a state or quality of a power relationship . . . , but a process aiming to deny or withdraw recognition of the political opponent’s legitimacy by representing him/her as extraneous to the shared constitutional perimeter.” Applying such a category to the clash of electoral politics thus enables one to shift the focus “from a vertical power set-up (meaning command/obedience between the wielder of power and the subjects) to a horizontal frame of relationship and recognition among political leaders competing to govern a State.”²⁰ In this sense delegitimization is a horizontal kind of strategy and may “legitimately” be adopted by candidates against their political opponents. General elections, and especially American presidential elections, are a moment when, although there is mutual acknowledgment between the two candidates, the electoral competition to decide between winner and loser itself raises the stakes in the political battle and radicalizes positions, creating a condition where delegitimizing language becomes almost appropriate²¹.

In this essay I should like to employ this category to interpret US presi-

17 Frank Logevall, “The Paradox of Civility”, op. cit., 10.

18 Max Weber, *Economy and Society* (Berkeley-Los Angeles-London: University of California Press, 1978, vol. II).

19 Fulvio Cammarano (ed.), *Praxis, Language and theory of political delegitimization in contemporary Europe* (Rome: Viella, 2017).

20 Fulvio Cammarano, “Delegitimization as a historiographic issue” in F. Cammarano, *Praxis*, cit. 11.

21 Fulvio Cammarano and Stefano Cavazza, “Introduzione”, in Fulvio Cammarano e Stefano Cavazza (eds.), *La delegittimazione politica nell’età contemporanea. 3. Conflitto politico e propaganda elettorale in Europa e negli Stati Uniti (1861-1989)* (Rome: Viella, 2018), 8-9.

dential election campaigns from the time of the “critical election” of 1896²² down to 1980 which put an end to the New Deal order and inaugurated political and ideological. Although historians of US politics have considered the period from 1830 to 1890 as “the heyday of political parties,”²³ the span from 1896 to 1980 marks the phase in which 20th-century political and party history takes form within an economic and political transformation that would connote the rise and decline of the “American century.”²⁴ Choosing such a long time-span is justified, I feel, if we are to understand whether, and how far, a category like delegitimization, born in a European setting, may serve to interpret American presidential election campaigns. This approach may also help both to challenge the exceptionalist view of American political history, and also to revise assumptions such as taking the 1930s-1970s as a depolarized midcentury period.

This article is based on broad research into the speeches and declarations by candidates, their supporters and their adversaries published in the last three months of each electoral campaign – that is, when conflict grew most intense.²⁵ The research covered all presidential campaigns from 1896 to 1980, and made use of newspapers as its main source, above all those targeting a general audience. Since delegitimization is primarily a discursive strategy, newspapers form the main tool for ascertaining the message that was being put across and what was understood by public opinion; this we can infer from analysing editorials, candidates’ speeches when published, as so often, in full, and letters printed. In this perspective the aim of the essay is not to describe electoral campaigns and their dynamics, but to focus on the comments, news features and arguments produced in the last two/three months of an electoral campaign, which is when tempers run high. Within the time-frame I have taken, the various sections of the essay will pick out the cruxes and turning-points which emerged from my search through the press sources, as well as the arguments that were employed in the various

22 Walter Dean Burnham, “Periodization Schemes and “Party Systems”: The “System of 1896” as a Case in Point”, in *Social Science History*, 10, no. 3, (1986): 263–314.

23 Ronald P. Formisano, “The Party Period Revisited”, *The Journal of American History*, 86, no. 1 (1999): 95.

24 Henry Luce, “The American Century” (1941) reprinted in *Diplomatic History*, 23, no. 2 (1999): 159–171; Andrew J. Bacevich, *The Short American Century: A Postmortem* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2012).

25 Raffaella Baritono, “«Politics has always been a rough and tumble business»: le campagne presidenziali statunitensi (1896-1980)”, in Fulvio Cammarano e Stefano Cavazza (eds.), *La delegittimazione politica nell’età contemporanea*, cit., 175-201.

delegitimization strategies. What emerged from analysing the sources is the fact that delegitimizing language focuses above all on the fear and threat that institutional change may alter the equilibrium and “sacred” constitutional edifice that has formed one of the hallmarks of US civil religion.²⁶ Though the tone may change from one period to the next, delegitimization has not just focused on candidates’ personal traits, but seized on allegedly European political models and especially the “specters” of communism, state socialism, centralisation of power, social chaos and class conflict – all of which are viewed as “alien” to the American constitution and as challenging the exceptionalist belief in the united States as a “city upon a hill.” In some cases the anti-socialism/anti-communism issue runs like a recurring leitmotiv through elections from 1896 down to the mid-20th century.

Anarchy vs order

The 1896 electoral campaign that pitted populist-Democrat William J. Bryan against the champion of industrial and financial capitalism, Republican William McKinley, was steeped in verbal delegitimization. This was particularly evident in Bryan’s debating style. He branded the capitalist modernization project as perverting America’s democratic ideals, an attack by the elite on the people, who truly embodied the democratic virtues²⁷. An outstanding instance of such rhetoric came in the “Cross of Gold” speech he gave on 9th July at the Chicago Coliseum. Here the gold standard issue became more than a symbol of capitalist power over the common man: it formed a “polarizing” communication strategy, a “flag issue” through which the “enemy” became apparent: “Never before in the history of this country has there been witnessed such a contest as that through which we have just passed.” Bryan’s was a rallying call to a pitched battle, the prize of which was the whole of human destiny: “You shall not crucify mankind upon a cross of gold.”²⁸ His decision to radicalize the fight played into his opponent’s strategy of placing him outside the constitutional pale and the values of the nation. While Bryan focused on civilization vs barbarism

26 Robert N. Bellah, “Civil Religion in America”, *Dædalus, Journal of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences*, 96, no. 1 (1967): 1-21.

27 Michael Kazin, *The Populist Persuasion: An American History* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998).

28 William J. Bryan, “A Cross of Gold”, July 8, 1896, <http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/william-jenningsbryan1896dnc.htm>

(“If we succeed, as succeed we must, our country, our institutions, and our civilization will be secure. But if we fail our country will be despoiled, our institutions will be destroyed and our civilization will perish”²⁹), the McKinley campaign launched messages centring on order vs anarchy, social harmony vs class conflict: “We find in that [democratic] platform the hand of the Populist, the Communist, and the anarchist. The word is not too strong, we have no better one in the English language”.³⁰ Bryan rejected the charge of anarchy, but it became his opponents’ refrain. It touched a deep chord in US public opinion, conjuring American fears not just at the spectacle of the Paris Commune or of European chaos as a threat to American democracy, but above all at the class conflict that flared in the years of the Gilded Age, with episodes like the bomb exploding in Haymarket Square in 1886 (which was attributed to the anarchists) and especially the Homestead steel workers’ strike in 1892 which private security agents and state militias brutally put down.³¹

In the end delegitimization did also extend to the candidate’s character in the 1896 election. Bryan was accused of having a “paranoid” – “mattoid” – personality; his oratorical delivery smacked of a disturbed personality, raising fears and queries as to his suitability to stand³². These concerns did not arise in later elections when the Bryan-McKinley contest was repeated, or in 1904 when Republican Theodore Roosevelt was opposed to the Democrat Alton B. Parker. Not that divisive issues were lacking: first there was the issue of imperialism, following the Spanish-American war which laid bare the contradiction between “liberty and empire.”³³ The debate roused high feeling and heavy accusations, but not in terms of “expelling” the opponent, such that the *Washington Post* could comment: “Generally speaking, the pending Presidential campaign has been conducted thus far on an exceptionally high plane. There have been few departures from decency by either the press or the politicians, and the reception accorded to those few has not been calculated to encourage the mud-slingers to increased activity.”³⁴

29 “Bryan Notified Anew”, *The Washington Post*, September 9, 1896.

30 “Anarchists, says Birney”, *The Washington Post*, October 31, 1896.

31 See David Montgomery, *The Fall of the House of Labor: The Workplace, the State, and American Labor Activism, 1865–1925* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

32 See, among others, Alienist, “Bryan’s Mental Condition”, *New York Times*, September 27, 1896.

33 Michael H. Hunt, *Arc of Empire: America’s Wars in Asia from Philippines to Vietnam* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2012).

34 “Crowds Saw McKinley”, *Washington Post*, September 30, 1896.

It is not until the atypical 1912 election that one finds traces of delegitimization as the arrival of the progressives as a third competing party broke with the two-party line-up traditionally found in presidential elections. The election, of course, felt the sizable influence of the socialist candidate, Eugene Debs. However, the three main candidates – Progressive Theodore Roosevelt, Republican William Taft and Democrat Woodrow Wilson – did battle over a crucial political and institutional issue, namely boosting the role of the state and state intervention in matters social and economic, as advocated by Roosevelt’s “new nationalism.” The project smacked too much of Europe’s detested statist models. To the question: “Mr. President, do you regard the avowed program of the Progressive party as an assault upon our established institutions?” Taft rejoined: “I most emphatically do ... It is fraught with more danger to the orderly progress, the peace, the dignity, the sanity and the health of the republic than any movement of wide reach since the civil war. Not even Populism in its wildest manifestations was such a menace. ... Mr. Roosevelt and his followers in their tendency would do away completely with the Constitution framed by the fathers of the republic and substitute for it the British form of constitution, which is no constitution at all, but merely a tradition.” Taft thought this would lead to a “monstrous form of despotism”; above all, it would concentrate “the power and functions of government in the executive and make the President a more absolute monarch than the Czar of Russia”.³⁵

It was the attempt on Roosevelt’s life in October 1912 that changed the pattern. While Roosevelt was leaving a hotel at Milwaukee to attend a rally, a man fired a shot, aiming to kill. Intrepid, virile leader as he liked to portray himself, Roosevelt held his ground and, in a spectacular gesture, brandished the manuscript that had luckily foiled the assailant’s bullet. He warned: “Now I wish to say seriously to the speakers and the newspapers representing the Republican and Democratic and Socialist parties that they cannot, month in and month out, year in and year out, make the kind of slanderous, bitter, and malevolent assaults that they have made and not expect that brutal and violent characters, especially when the brutality is accompanied by a not too strong mind – they cannot expect that such natures will be unaffected by it.”³⁶ The appeal to “civility” was picked up by Wilson: “I believe that part of the sadness we now suffer from because of

35 “Taft Says Roosevelt Favors A Benevolent Despotism”, *Los Angeles Times*, October 6, 1912.

36 “Speech Roosevelt Made While Wounded”, *New York Times*, October 15, 1912.

that atrocious assault upon Mr. Roosevelt is a feeling that there is anybody in the United States who would dare attempt to interrupt the orderly course of politics and the public affairs of this country by the violence of his own hand. We deeply resent it."³⁷

Liberty vs. tyranny

The 1930s and New Deal politics formed a crucial test of how far strategy might go towards delegitimization of political opponents. The New Deal brought long-term structural change regarding key points of the American political system, changing the very content of liberalism as a political culture. A first hint came in the 1928 election when the first-ever Catholic candidate for the presidency, Democrat Al Smith, stood against Republican Herbert Hoover, the enlightened engineer and technocrat. From his position of "ordered liberalism,"³⁸ Hoover inveighed against Smith's support for state intervention in the Muscle Shoals dam project; he accused him of "state socialism," a menace to American freedom. The accusation was backed by equally delegitimizing references to Smith's Catholic faith and Italian origins. The focus on prohibitionism of that 1928 campaign was thus stoked by identity fears and racial-ethnic prejudice which made Smith out to be an enemy, not an opponent³⁹. A pamphlet of the Ku Klux Klan circulating in the South read: "Governor Smith will murder Protestants and destroy the American Government." And again: "Danger! Protestants wake up to preserve Anglo-Saxon America!"⁴⁰

Hoover himself was the butt of intolerance when Theodore Bilbo, the racist Governor of Mississippi, alleged that he "danced with a negro woman" during a tour of the Mississippi River area. The remark was branded "the most indecent and unworthy statement in the whole of a bitter campaign,"⁴¹ and showed how race might comprise a searing and two-edged political weapon.

In the 1932 electoral campaign the presidential candidates abstained from direct delegitimization. Hoover did try and discredit Roosevelt for

37 "Taft the Target of Wilson's Shafts", *New York Times*, October 18, 1912.

38 "Hoover Calls Smith Policies State Socialism", *The Christian Science Monitor*, October 23, 1928.

39 "South Turning Against Smith, Hoover Hears", *The Christian Science Monitor*, October 8, 1928; "Speech on Religion Stirs G.O.P. Replies", *Washington Post*, October 13, 1928.

40 Quoted in "Bigotry Condemned by Southern Women", *New York Times*, October 14, 1928.

41 "Defamation of Hoover Denounced", *Los Angeles Times*, October 20, 1928.

political inexpertise, and sarcastically referred to the New Deal as a “new shuffle.”⁴² Language got heightened, but still kept within the bounds of heavy political debate, not delegitimization. For his part, Roosevelt needed to achieve legitimation as a leader injecting hope into a land of “slump;” he had no intention of getting trapped in past arguments that might distract him from the goal of finding a way out of the crisis. The most evident attempts to delegitimize the opponent and make him an enemy to be expelled from the political arena came from the candidates’ supporters. Hurley, the minister for war in the outgoing administration, came out with “If Gov. Roosevelt could put in force one-tenth of the promises he has made ... he would not only deprive the people of their control of the government – he would establish an autocracy with himself as the autocrat.”⁴³ To Republican James M. Beck, Roosevelt was not just a “dangerous radical,” but a “demagogue more dangerous than the late William Jennings Bryan.”⁴⁴

Such strictures were more loudly voiced in the electoral campaigns of 1936, 1940 and to some extent 1944, though wartime ought to have encouraged greater political cohesion. In 1936 Roosevelt was up against not just the Republicans but new populist movements led by Huey Long and Father Coughlin. In front of a crowd of 125,000 he weighed in with accusations of “economic royalty” and the “insolent nomination of a few opulent, monopolizing families” defended by a Republican party that thereby forfeited its republican values. Employing long familiar populist rhetoric⁴⁵, the President appealed to revolutionary fervour such as had backed the anti-tax revolt against the English tyrant. He went on: “The United States today, as it did in 1776, must choose between ‘democracy in taxation’ and ‘special privilege in taxation’.”⁴⁶ Rebutting charges of betraying the republic’s values and embroiling the country in a centralizing rule-bound system akin to totalitarianism, Roosevelt appealed to the tenets of American civil religion and Lincoln himself who in 1864 had famously said: “We all declare for liberty; but in using the same word we do not all mean the same thing... And it follows that each of the things is, by the respective parties, called by two different and incompatible names – liberty and tyranny.”⁴⁷

42 “Another Fighting Speech”, *Los Angeles Times* October 24, 1932

43 “Hurley says promises by Roosevelt Autocratic”, *Los Angeles Times*, October 28, 1932

44 “Calls Roosevelt Dangerous Radical”, *The New York Times*, October 28, 1932

45 Michael Kazin, *The Populist Persuasion: An American History* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998)

46 “Roosevelt: Tumult and Shouting”, *The Washington Post*, October 25, 1936

47 “Texts of Roosevelt Speeches in Three States”, *The New York Times*, October 30, 1936.

The New Deal revolution was bringing a change of political direction to the Democratic party which was traditionally in favour of minimal government and a decentralized view of politics. A few Democratic leaders felt betrayed and voiced some of the loudest criticisms, like John W. Davis, former Democratic candidate for the 1924 presidential elections, who complained that “surely it is neither humanitarian nor Democratic nor American to indoctrinate the people of the United States with the idea that it is the duty of the government to support the citizen, rather than the duty of the citizen to support the government.” On the Republican side the most outspoken was not the dull presidential candidate Alf Landon⁴⁸, but Hoover, who warned: “this campaign is more than a contest between two men... it is a contest between two philosophies of government ... The New Deal repudiation of Democracy has left the Republican party alone the guardian of the Ark of the Covenant with its charter of freedom. ... Freedom does not die from frontal attack. It dies because men in power no longer believe in a system based upon liberty.”⁴⁹

At the 1936 election, in short, the use of delegitimization devices had the dual purpose of cementing consensus and extending it (by the Democrats) or eroding it (by the other side). It also aimed to reinterpret and strengthen new forms of political legitimation: the Democrats sought to broaden the tasks and duties of government (and the President); the Republicans needed to stem the political landslide that was driving swaths of the electorate towards the Democratic Party. To the Republicans the “enemy” was not just their political adversary, but a whole institutional system in the course of forming around a new ‘take’ on the constitutional principles, something that shifted the centre of gravity of the political system: from the legislative to the executive, from state government to federal government.

The Republicans returned to the attack in the 1940 election. Roosevelt was breaking with long-standing practice in running for a third term. It was further evidence that he wanted to turn the American presidency into a sort of personal government, as had happened in Europe. Once again Hoover, rather than the Republican candidate Wendell Willkie, sounded the alarm: “We are on the road that has led a dozen nations into totalitarian government.” FDR’s advisors were “publicly advocating European philosophies

48 “Roosevelt Uses Public Money, Landon Asserts”, *The Washington Post*, October 23, 1936; “The Text of Governor Landon’s Attack in St. Louis on the New Deal”, *New York Times*, November 1, 1936

49 “Full Text of Hoover’s Address in Denver”, *Los Angeles Times*, October 31, 1936

of government.”⁵⁰ Hoover even concluded that “there was a parallel between New Deal activities and Europe’s ‘one-party’ dictatorship”⁵¹. The refrain was taken up by those who saw a dangerous expansion of bureaucracy: “In Europe the Communist, Nazi and Fascist dictatorships ... did not seize power with ammunition and bayonets. They started on the path to tyranny through constitutional methods ... And once in power they perpetuated their authority by the simple device of centralized bureaucracy-dominated government.”⁵² In the end Willkie – whose foreign policy hardly differed from FDR’s – resorted to the weapon of delegitimization as a way of getting himself noted by the electorate⁵³, but Roosevelt ignored his opponent for most of the campaign.⁵⁴ To Willkie the President was launched on “the road of absolute power”⁵⁵ (the reference was to Roosevelt’s unsuccessful 1937 attempt to alter the composition of the Supreme Court in reaction to the Schechter ruling): he must be halted, or democracy itself would be destroyed⁵⁶. The ultimate choice was “whether America shall adopt a form of what might well be describe as State socialism, or if you wish the term better, State capitalism, or if you want to state it in a different way, complete centralized government dominating the complete economic life of the people.”⁵⁷

Free world

Though nothing new, as of the 1944 election anticommunism the communist infiltration threat - being “soft on Communism” or not - became leitmotifs of the New Deal opponents’ delegitimization strategy, on a proxy basis, as it were. For the candidates themselves that strategy was growing vaguer: the main issues were “presidentiability” (having what it takes to be a President) and, increasingly, the need to stand as leader of a nation going through

50 “Text of Hoover Address on Saving of Democracy”, *The Christian Science Monitor*, November 2, 1940

51 “Dictatorship Drift Charged by Hoover”, *New York Times*, October 25, 1940.

52 George H. Bender, *The Challenge of 1940* (New York: Putnam’s sons, 1940), 116.

53 Richard Moe, *Roosevelt’s Act. The Election of 1940 and the Politics of War* (New York-London; Oxford University Press, 2013), 274ff.

54 “Roosevelt Rips Willkie on False Charges Made in Campaign Speeches”, *The Chicago Defender*, November 2, 1940.

55 “Full Text of Willkie Speech on Third Term”, *Los Angeles Times*, October 15, 1940

56 *Ibidem*

57 “Text of the Willkie Speech Warning of State Socialism”, *New York Times*, October 19, 1940.

epoch-making challenges – first World War II, then the rivalry of the Soviet Union. Thus in 1944 it was not so much the candidate Thomas Dewey as conservatives like Governor John Bricker who claimed that the president in office and the whole New Deal were “in the hands of the radicals and the Communists.”⁵⁸ Dewey, by contrast, had a country at war to consider: he admitted that his broad objectives, especially on foreign policy, basically concurred. If anything, he chided Roosevelt with having in the past been too “isolationist,”⁵⁹ and having stirred up rivalry between the executive and Congress, something that needed smoothing out in the name of unity and cooperation.⁶⁰

Accusations of being “soft on communism” were central to the 1948 campaign against Truman and that of 1952 against the Democratic candidate Adlai Stevenson who was running against Second World War hero, Dwight “Ike” Eisenhower. The Republicans’ target was to cut down to size the political, economic and institutional structure that had sprung up with the New Deal reforms. In 1948 the need to counter the charge of being outside the American political framework drove Truman to step up the violent tone and demolish Dewey’s “I don’t-fight-that-way pose.”⁶¹ Besides, as of 1948 another subject was beginning to intertwine with communism, providing an equally explosive threat to the American democratic model. Racial discrimination and segregation could no longer remain on the fringe of political competition if American democracy was to stand as an example to the world. The President’s timid de-segregation policy in the armed forces caused indignation in the southern states from which, in 1948, a third candidate emerged: the Governor of South Carolina, J. Strom Thurmond, leader of the Dixiecrats (States’ Rights Democrats). Thurmond spoke of the need “[to] stand against vicious programs designed to destroy the American way of life;”⁶² defending States’ rights was “the only guarantee we have that a kind of Kremlin will not be established in Washington.”⁶³ Unlike Dewey,

58 “Bricker Attacks Foreign Influence”, *New York Times*, October 31, 1944.

59 “Dewey Hits ‘New Deal Isolation’”, *The Christian Science Monitor*, October 25, 1944.

60 “Governor Dewey’s Address in Minneapolis on Foreign Policy Harmony”, *New York Times*, October 25, 1948.

61 “Truman Hammers Dewey as ‘Doctor’ with ‘Magic Cure’”, *New York Times*, October 24, 1948; “Dewey ‘Gall’ Assailed in Truman Talk”, *Los Angeles Times*, October 24, 1948.

62 “Dixiecrats Defend US ‘Way of Life’”, *The Washington Post*, October 23, 1948

63 “Thurmond Says States’ Rights Is only Bar to Establishment of ‘Kremlin’ in Washington”, *New York Times*, October 27, 1948.

who stayed out of campaigning in the southern states⁶⁴, Truman reacted with a warning against those trends that had brought Hitler and Mussolini to power in Europe⁶⁵.

The heat grew in the incandescent 1952 election which came hard on the heels of international events like the Communist revolution in China, the Korean War, and at home the rising star of Wisconsin senator, Joseph McCarthy. In the 1952 campaign Richard Nixon, running for Vice President, stood out as a delegitimizing “on behalf of”: Nixon branded Adlai Stevenson as an “appeaser” who had gained “a Ph.D. from Dean Acheson’s cowardly college of Communist containment.”⁶⁶ It aroused comment as a “dirty campaign” – but not the first in the history of US politics⁶⁷.

As had happened in the past (in 1900, for instance), so in the Fifties the mechanism of delegitimization was only employed – among the same protagonists, note – when the political situation so encouraged. In 1956 the cast was familiar from 1952 (Eisenhower vs. Stevenson) but, though Cold War confrontation was still the bogeyman of American elections, the topic of communism was no longer used to denigrate the opposing candidate. The vexed McCarthy episode was over: political scientists and historians began to glory in America’s *exceptional* position, the “freeborn” United States, rid of the ideologies that infested Europe⁶⁸.

Within that conceptual framework the 1960 election, and even the sizzling 1968 election that put an end to the New Deal order, did not see either candidate resorting to delegitimization strategy, however heated the terms of the fray. The 1960 election is a significant case in point. The presence of a Catholic candidate, which had made Al Smith the butt of delegitimizing rhetoric in 1928, was played down from the start. A few conservative Protestant ministers from the South were for flooding their home states with pamphlets against the candidacy of Catholic John F. Kennedy: “when I vote against a Roman Catholic, more than religion is involved. Our entire American way of life is involved.”⁶⁹ Nonetheless, Nixon decided to steer clear and instructed the Republican National Committee to avoid the religious

64 “Dewey Sells Out to Dixie”, *The Chicago Defender*, October 23, 1948

65 Richard L. Strout, “President Tags GOP With Racial Bias In Curbs Set on DPs”, *The Christian Science Monitor*, October 26, 1948.

66 “Nixon Calls Stevenson Party Traitor”, *Los Angeles Times*, October 28, 1952.

67 “It’s a Dirty Campaign. But it’s Not the First”, *Los Angeles Times*, October 27, 1952

68 Seymour Martin Lipset, *American Exceptionalism: A Double-Edged Sword* (New York: Norton, 1997).

69 Ronnie Dugger, “Paper Says Kennedy Obeyed Bishop”, *The Washington Post*, October 31, 1960.

issue.⁷⁰ Both Eisenhower and Nixon deplored Kennedy's lack of experience which would bring "self-destruction" on the nations, and railed against a Democrat campaign that bred conflict and a "lack of faith in the American people."⁷¹ But that was all "normal" political gamesmanship and not delegitimization strategy in the sense of turning the opponent into an enemy jeopardizing constitutionality and the values on which it rested.

One exception must be made for the 1964 campaign when that exponent of the new conservatism, Barry Goldwater, snatched the nomination from under the noses of his own party leaders. Humphrey, the Democratic candidate for the Vice Presidency, accused Goldwater of being a radical: "he preaches and practices the doctrine of radicalism. He seeks to destroy the social and economic achievements of the past generation."⁷² While Goldwater warned that "the moral fiber of the American people is beset by rot and decay,"⁷³ outgoing President Lyndon Johnson made much of the threat Goldwater posed to national security. The ad "Daisy" made a great impact, though broadcast only once: it was designed to fuel anxiety at the danger of a nuclear war should Goldwater win⁷⁴. For his part, Goldwater raked up the still-smouldering issue of communism⁷⁵, and likewise the traditional accusation that the alliance between "big government, big labor and big business" had been a prelude to all that happened in Nazi Germany. Thus Johnson's Great Society, with his proposed extension of social welfare and the war on poverty, was likened to the welfare policies that Hitler and Mussolini provided⁷⁶. The line of the Democrat campaign planners was: "we must make him ridiculous and a little scary: trigger-happy, a bomb thrower, a radical, absurd to be President."⁷⁷

70 "Anti-Catholic Drive on Kennedy Reported Set", *Los Angeles Time*, October 16, 1960; "Texts of Speeches by Kennedy and Nixon at Alfred E. Smith Fund Dinner Here", *New York Times*, October 20, 1960.

71 "Disaster if Kennedy Wins, President Says", *Los Angeles Times*, November 5, 1960; Edward T. Folliard, "Ike Attacks Kennedy on Prestige", *The Washington Post*, October 29, 1960.

72 "H.H.H. Calls Goldwater Radical in Loop Speech", *Chicago Daily Defender*, October 29, 1964

73 "Goldwater Repeats Morality Theme", *The Christian Science monitor*, October 22, 1964

74 Robert Thompson, "Johnson Blasts Goldwater on Preparedness", *Los Angeles Times*, October 25, 1964.

75 John H. Averill, "Reds' Backing of Rivals Hit by Goldwater", *Los Angeles Times*, October 29, 1964.

76 John W. Finney, "Miller Attacks 'Big' Government", *New York Times*, October 28, 1964.

77 Charles Mohrs, "Johnson Derides Goldwater View as Risking War", *New York Times*, October 25, 1964.

New confrontation politics and the search for the centre

The 1964 election thus anticipated the ideological showdown that would erupt from the 80s on. In this light, the years between 1964 and 1980 may be viewed as a long slow hatching of social, political and racial conflict that would usher in the *Age of Fracture*⁷⁸. As social tension grew increasingly radical – from protest against the Vietnam War, to race riots –, political rhetoric seemed to take a step backward. The fundamental tenets of American politics were now being structurally queried from the bottom up. The “new confrontation politics,”⁷⁹ as the New Left movements were described, shifted the political battle onto another plane. “Mainstream” politics seemed torn between the need to ride out discontent and an inability to find new words to “mimick” civil war when this seemed truly on the verge of breaking out⁸⁰. In the election campaigns of 1968, 1972 and 1980 the political debate was waged in harsh terms with no holds barred, but did not amount to delegitimization of the opponent. Even in 1968, when Republican Nixon’s duel with Democrat Humphrey was sombered by the assassinations of Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy, there was a note of “unreality” discernible in the two candidates’ language: “No one really believes all that Humphrey and Nixon says about each other ... It has been part of the American political scene for many years to regard the other side as a heaven of thieves, scoundrels and general no-goods.”⁸¹ Partly because of the presence of the racist Wallace in the lists, the two main party candidates harped on the requirements expected of an American President, though Nixon did try and make capital out of the fears of the “silent majority.”⁸² Clearly, Humphrey was more outspoken against Wallace than even Nixon, but one can hardly talk of delegitimization towards a racist candidate backed by the Ku Klux Klan and White Citizens Council: after the 1964 Civil Rights Act he had ruled himself out of the constitutional confines⁸³.

Abandoning past accusations of being “soft on communism,” flirting with Nazi-Fascist policies, and bringing class hatred onto the sacred soil of the land of liberty, the political duel now began to concentrate on personal quali-

78 Daniel T. Rodgers, *Age of Fracture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010)

79 Irving Howe, “The New ‘Confrontation Politics’ Is a Dangerous Game”, *New York Times*, October 20, 1968

80 Roscoe Drummond, “Both Nixon and Humphrey Are Waging Empty Campaigns”, *The Washington Post*, October 26, 1968.

81 “Campaign Battle Language Anachronism Of Elections”, *Chicago Daily Defender*, October 31, 1968

82 Roland Black, “Nixon Capitalizing on Extremism”, *Chicago Daily Defender*, October 26, 1968.

83 Peter H. Silberman, “Kennedy Assails Wallace”, *Washington Post*, October 25, 1968

ties: corruption, lack of stamina, lack of personality.⁸⁴ It was pale stuff compared with the taunts hurled in the past climate⁸⁵ of mounting rumour that would explode into the Watergate affair⁸⁶. In 1976 outgoing President Gerald Ford found nothing better than to claim Jimmy Carter was “immoral,” just because the Governor of Georgia (a born-again Christian) had granted an interview with *Playboy*⁸⁷. It was an isolated episode, if truth be known, in a soft-pedalled campaign⁸⁸. As anchorman Johnny Carson said of it, it posed a choice between “fear of the unknown and fear of the known,”⁸⁹ while Ford’s was a “soporific tone.”⁹⁰

At a press conference held by Ronald Reagan in 1980 a journalist suggested that “In the things you are saying, you seem to be trying to say that you are more moderate than some people perceive you to be.”⁹¹ In a context overshadowed by the 1970s economic and oil crisis, decline of American hegemony symbolised by American hostages being held in Teheran, and white worker discontent with a Democrat party they no longer felt represented by, the strategy of delegitimizing the adversary might employ less high-flown language than in the past. Calling Carter “the preferred candidate of the Kremlin and Iran’s Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini”⁹² sounds like a resurgence of past Republican repertoire, but such instances were few and far between.

Reagan preferred to dwell on Carter’s failure: “The conduct of the Presidency under Mr. Carter has become a tragic comedy of errors. In place of competence, he has given us ineptitude. Instead of steadfastness, we have

84 “Agnew Ends Race by Attacking McGovern”, *Los Angeles Times*, November 7, 1972.

85 Robert C. Toth, “’72 Campaign Invective Pale Compared to Past”, *Los Angeles Times*, October 26, 1972

86 Jules Witcover, “McGovern Asserts Alleged Spy Drive Has Been Traced to Nixon”, *Los Angeles Times*, October 26, 1972.

87 “Carter Assails Ford on New Ad Campaign”, *Los Angeles Times*, October 21, 1976.

88 Rudy Abramson, “Ford Softens Campaign Tone, Stresses ‘Good Things’, Stops Attacking Carter”, *Los Angeles Times*, October 26, 1976; William V. Shannon, “A Singular Campaign”, *New York Times*, November 2, 1976

89 Quoted in James M. Naughton, “Reporter’s Notebook; Ford Resembles Carter at Times”, *New York Times*, October 20, 1976

90 James M. Naughton, “President, Deviating from Pledge, Attacks Carter on Foreign Policy”, *New York Times*, October 27, 1976.

91 “Transcript of Ronald Reagan’s Remarks at News Conference in Los Angeles”, *New York Times*, October 15, 1980.

92 Robert C. Toth, “Carter, Reagan Display Wide Foreign Policy Gap”, *Los Angeles Times*, October 19, 1980

gotten vacillation. While America looks for confidence, he gives us fear.”⁹³ With the opposition in disarray, as the Democrats had been since the 1968 defeat, expulsion of the opponent need not brand him as an enemy, but only a “failure” who was jeopardising the constitutional framework and with it all individual men and women of America.⁹⁴

To conclude, then, the 1980 election introduced features found in our present-day debates. If delegitimization strategy throughout the 20th century had fed on the great systemic bones of contention – industrial or agricultural capitalism, progressives or conservatives, democracy or the totalitarian peril? – the 1980 election may be seen as a turning point. With the end of the Cold War, and with politics polarizing more and more around the personalities engaged in electoral campaigns, delegitimization would end up concentrating on such personal traits of the candidate as made him “alien” and hence an enemy: race in Obama’s case, gender stereotypes with Hillary Clinton, sexism *and* racism with Trump. In 2015 Obama argued: “A better politics is one where we appeal to each other’s basic decency instead of our basest fears. A better politics is one where we debate without demonizing each other”⁹⁵. His appeal has gone unheard.

93 Douglas E. Kneeland, “Reagan Steps Up Attack on Carter’s Performance”, *New York Times*, October 31, 1980

94 Howell Raines, “Reagan Attacks President on Economy and Defense”, *New York Times*, November 4, 1980; “Transcript of the Presidential Debate Between Carter and Reagan in Cleveland”, *New York Times*, October 29, 1980

95 “Remarks by the President in State of the Union Address”, January 20, 2015 <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/01/20/remarks-president-state-union-address-january-20-2015>