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Trump rode pain and victimhood to power, but grievance may not be an effective basis for governing



*Following President Donald Trump's second inauguration on Monday January 20th, **Lilie Chouliaraki** and **Kathryn Claire Higgins** write that the now 47th president rode a narrative of persecution, pain and victimhood back to the White House. They argue that this victimhood is a deep-seated part of Trump's identity and that he has leveraged the politics of grievance, blame and hate against marginalized communities while at the same time playing the role of champion of the disenfranchised.*

Now that the theatre of power, privilege and white supremacy of Donald Trump's inauguration has ended, crowned by the apparent **Nazi salute** of the world's wealthiest man, Elon Musk, it is time to think back to Trump's core message throughout the 2024 US election campaign. That is: that Americans were being victimized by the "woke" agenda of a corrupt and politically insincere Biden administration, and that he, Trump—a multi-millionaire turned reality television star turned US president turned demigod of that far-right—was somehow the biggest victim of them all.

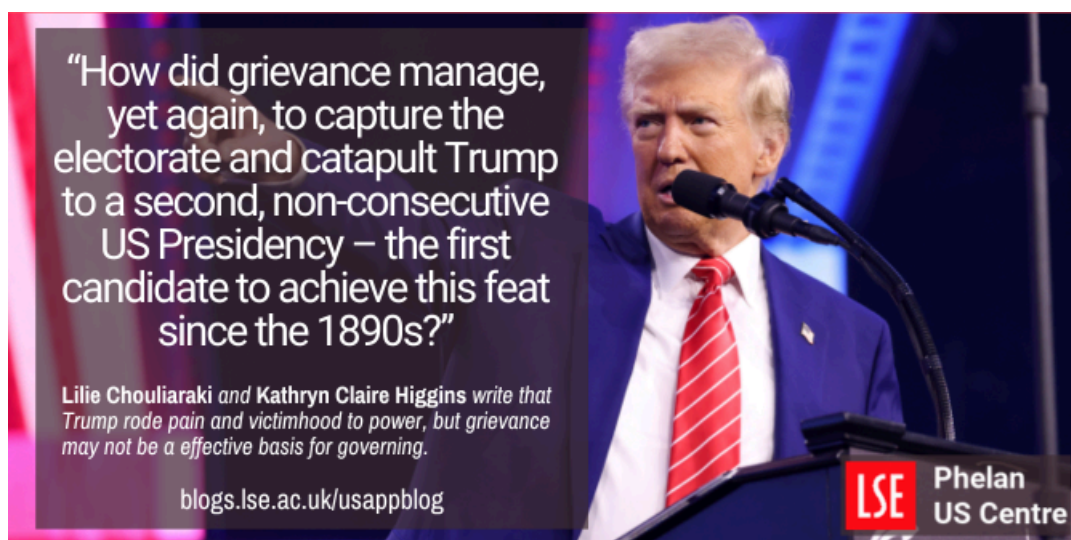
Trump's victim identity

"There has never been a President who was so evilly and illegally treated as I," complained US president-elect Donald Trump. His lament came in response to a New York judge who **scheduled** sentencing for his criminal hush money conviction on January 10th – just days before his upcoming inauguration on January 20th. That sentencing, we now know, offered very little in the way of actual punishment, let alone accountability – yet Trump's narrative remains as it was during his campaign: one of persecution, rather than of demonstrable impunity. That a President-to-be of the United States publicly presents himself as a victim of the very institutions he will soon be presiding over is

a rare thing to witness. But, for Trump, claiming to be a victim is not a one-off statement. It's a deep-seated identity and a core narrative spurring his swift return to power.

Pharmaceutical entrepreneur, Vivek Ramaswamy, and former co-head of DOGE (Department of Government Efficiency), best captures the spirit of Trump's winning narrative. In his best-selling book, *Nation of Victims*, Ramaswamy complains that meritocracy is now replaced by performances of victimhood by minorities who push their ways to the top, marginalizing those who are truly excellent – and that it is the nation that hurts as a result. This idea that the nation is in pain and that minorities, or “woke.inc” (the title of yet another of Ramaswamy's books), are to blame has been a recurring theme in Trump's politics since his first electoral campaign in 2016. His core message has been that he is a victim and, like him, so are “the people.”: “He made one essential bet”, the *New York Times*' first post-election headline announced, “that his grievances would become the grievances of the MAGA movement, and then the G.O.P., and then more than half the country. It paid off.”

How did grievance manage, yet again, to capture the electorate and catapult Trump to a second, non-consecutive US Presidency – the first candidate to achieve this feat since the 1890s? Trump himself, of course, is not an enigma. His return to the White House in the United States is part of a global ascent of right-wing populism, with grievance-driven political rhetoric delivering a growing number of (previously fringe) far-right, ethnonationalist and authoritarian rulers to seats of power. The forces precipitating this wave of global grievance are being openly debated. Some have blamed social media, arguing that the wide window it offers into the lives of more affluent others calibrates the public mood to dissatisfaction and resentment. Others have pointed to the very real material basis for contemporary grievance: widening economic inequalities, a deadly and broadly mismanaged global pandemic, and in the United States, the first generation of citizens who find themselves with fewer rights and opportunities than their parents.



“Donald Trump” (CC BY-SA 2.0) by Gage Skidmore

The *causes* of grievance, then, are not elusive. Yet, whether grievance can serve as an effective basis for governance remains unclear. To borrow rhetoric from the now-defunct Harris/Walz campaign: why, in a time of profound grievance, can an “enemy list” inspire more hope for the future than a “to-do list” can? How does a multi-millionaire, running on little more than vitriol and self-aggrandizement, position himself as the benevolent redeemer of a suffering public?

Grievance as political communication

To answer these questions, we need to approach grievance as a form of political communication. For many, grievance is a negative term associated with populist resentment, hate speech and the disinformation wars. Fundamentally, however, grievance is about pain that has long been felt without recognition or resolution. And we cannot explain its appeal, unless we grasp how pain participates in politics and how it can be leveraged for electoral gains. What’s important to note is that being in pain is not a singular concept, but a powerful language that connects communities through shared feelings of hurt and neglect, hate and resentment, hope and gratitude. The victim has entitlements to empathy, compassion and often legal protection; it has moral worth and social capital. And there is no victim without those responsible for the infliction or relief of its suffering: a perpetrator to be castigated for inflicting the suffering, and a benefactor who promises to soothe the victimized public precisely where it hurts. These roles—victim, perpetrator, benefactor—are not set in stone once and for all but are key stakes in political struggles for visibility, recognition and power. And it is these roles and their relations that help illuminate Trump’s electoral game and ultimate victory in at least three ways.

To begin with, Trump consistently styled himself as the ultimate victim—a symbolic proxy for a victimized American public and, more specifically, victimized American men. While Democrats counted on Trump’s legal woes counting against his character, Trump’s lean towards victimhood transformed *prosecution* into *persecution* as he steadily appropriated narratives of victimization by the state that were not his own. The charges levelled against Trump shored up waves of empathy and support, consolidating his image as an anti-establishment hero, while the now-iconic photographs of him bleeding after a failed assassination attempt in Pennsylvania turned him into an icon of defiant survivorship: “God spared my life for a reason,” he said shortly after his electoral win, “We are going to fulfil that mission together.” This iconography of the rising martyr is already appealing enough to millions of discontented Americans who, like Trump, feel “forgotten” by those in power.

At the same time, Trump crafted exactly such a narrative of blame and hate that targeted immigrants, the trans community, and the “woke liberal elite” as national enemies. He offered a suffering public a culpable other—a *victimizer*, the vanquishing of which could (quickly and cheaply, he insisted) deliver the public from its pain. His message sets up a clear duel between himself as the sole agent of collective redemption and “them” as the enemy: things are bad, but because “they”

are responsible, things are fixable if “they” are punished and purged. This amorphous, nefarious “they” will likely endure in Trump’s rhetoric during his second term—though he may find it increasingly difficult to position himself as a subjugated victim. With the Republican Party—now remade in Trump’s image—set to control both the Senate and the House of Representatives, Trump will have more individual power than, perhaps, any person on earth. How to claim victimhood from such stature? Talk of “deep state” interference has always insulated Trump from accountability for the power he wields; how long this ruse can hold in a new era of absolute power for Trump remains to be seen.

Finally, Trump capitalises on the spectacular force of victimhood. Victimhood involves struggles over whose pain is the loudest and the most visible in public. Trump wins these struggles because he knows how to stage pain as a public spectacle. This is as true for his intuitive use of iconography—the Philadelphia “bleeding ear” photograph being an example of defiant survivorship *par excellence*—as it is for the way his rallies were staged as carnivalesque theatres where pain is vanquished by performative strength. Trump was a pop culture icon, a reality star, long before he was a politician. The fusion of pain and entertainment is familiar terrain, as is the contortion of reality to suit the demands of sentiment. The actual content of Trump’s public discourse has become harder and harder to follow in these later years of his political career, but his *style* of discourse is consistent: an irreverent, improvised and unencumbered brashness that suggests that he is saying out loud what everyone else is too afraid to say. He has, in other words, the demeanour of a man unshackled—an aspirational, even triumphant figure for an emboldened ethnonationalist masculinity that feeds from his victimhood. Both the ultimate victim and the champion of the disenfranchised.

From weaponizing pain for division to a focus on healing and justice

In Ramaswamy’s *Nation of Victims*, healing the nation’s pain is about “reviv[ing] a new cultural movement in America that puts excellence first again.” Yet, the new Trump administration, comprising **tech moguls**, a **Fox news host**, and **sceptics of science**, has already offered a glimpse of Trump’s own idea of “excellence”. Despite using victimhood to win, these people are not interested in the nation’s hurt and will do little to alleviate the suffering of the public, benefitting only wealthy men like themselves – with the *Financial Times* **reporting**, just after the 2024 election, that “Musk’s wealth is to hit new heights, as deals fire up SpaceX and xAI”. As Trump takes office as the 47th president of the United States, one thing is clear: victimhood can be a potent catalyst for change, but at what cost?

For progressive voices, this question poses an urgent challenge: how to shift the focus from weaponizing pain for division and hate to envisioning a future grounded in healing and justice. Progressive politics is about addressing the injuries of the people and much discussion today

revolves around whether the Democrats failed to acknowledge and discursively respond to the frustrations of millions who are impoverished and feel uncared for, unseen or unheard. Now, it is important to ask: How can a politics take seriously people's pain while resisting placing grievance and resentment at the core of its message? Going forward, this radical recognition of injury while striving for a more equitable society will be crucial. Without such recognition, Trump's grievance politics will continue to change the world, but the most probable change will be to a world with more, not less, pain.

- *A version of this article will appear in the inaugural *On Violence* magazine of the *Centre for the Study of Violence* at the University of Bath.*
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