INTRODUCTION

Deplorable Elections, Despicable Discourses

In 1828 Andrew Jackson, the famously violent hero of the Battle of New Orleans, won the presidential election and defeated incumbent John Quincy Adams, son of the second president. This was the second time the two contended in a presidential campaign. The first time, Adams emerged the victor, and, predictably, Jackson did not take his defeat well, declaring the result a "corrupt bargain," and claiming he had been robbed of victory. He had a point—he won the popular vote in 1824 but lost the election in the House through the machinations of Henry Clay, who then became Adams's secretary of state. The rematch four years later was unsurprisingly bitter, characterized by personal insults, wild accusations, double dealing, and heated controversy circulated over a nastily partisan press. Adams, for example, relying on old rumors about Jackson's willingness to execute militia members accused of desertion in 1815, accused Jackson of willful murder. Jackson, equally willing to circulate rumor, asserted that while serving as ambassador to the Russian court Adams had supplied an American woman's sexual services to the tsar. Rhetorically, then, the election pitted a corrupt elitist against a brutal backwoodsman; the clear loser was the developing American democracy. That election is remembered as one of the ugliest in US history but is also treated as a sad relic of a more colorful past rather than as part of a lasting national pattern.

The framers of the US Constitution shared an understanding of democracy as based on rational, careful deliberation. They used this standard

to exclude those they considered incapable of democratic citizenship—white men without sufficient property, women, enslaved people, and, often, American Indians. But they did not themselves live up to the standard they set as they frequently governed by insult, invective, and the occasional duel. Since the founding it has become commonplace to assume that elections meet some standard of decorum and to express surprise at the perceived lapses in the civil tradition of the world's most influential democracy.

But American elections are often full of personal attacks, trivialized presentations of issues, the exploitation of the politics of fear, and other kinds of appalling elements, all of which are generally considered bad for the health of a democratic republic. Over time, the US political system has proven itself to be both fragile and resilient, susceptible to its citizens' worst instincts and capable of reaching for their loftiest goals.[1] Recent elections seem to tilt the nation in both directions at once. This, too, is a recurring theme in American national politics. This book offers a discussion of how and why antidemocratic discourses surface in some elections and not in others.

The chapters proceed chronologically, with particular attention to specific themes that tie the individual elections together and help us understand the ways in which certain conditions and the choices candidates and parties make lead to the worst kinds of politics. I consider "deplorable" elections to be those in which a variety of despicable discourses not only circulate but gain purchase among the mass public. But all elections in US political history can be understood as being, in some sense, deplorable. I use the word here as a nod to Hillary Clinton's notorious characterization of Donald Trump's supporters as a "basket of deplorables" during the 2016 campaign.[2] That characterization registered dismay at the approval those supporters offered for Trump's norm-breaking rhetoric and seemed to implicitly argue that there was something new and unusual about its appearance in national politics. I use it to mark the ways that this kind of behavior is more common than we want to believe. There is nothing new or unusual about dangerous and antidemocratic campaign rhetoric. I use "deplorable," then, in the same way we talk about good art or obscene art—we know it when we see it. Deplorable elections are those in which the candidates, their campaigns and spokespeople, and sometimes the media, rely on rhetoric that is misleading, dishonest, petty, bigoted, and malicious. Not only is this rhetoric inappropriate to democratic politics, and surely unbecoming for a future head of state, but it is also despicable.

Throughout the book, I call rhetoric "despicable" as a shorthand for language that is undemocratic, even antidemocratic. More specifically, it excludes specific members of the public, encourages authoritarian procedures for dealing with national problems, and/or actively works against the national democratic project representing the higher ideals of American national identity, by which I mean that they run counter to aspirations for an inclusive and just polity. I treat "despicable discourse" as a synonym and shorthand for antidemocratic and exclusionary language. That language is not always the same; the shape of despicable discourse is melded to its political moment. But it is always exclusionary; it always treats politics as a competition between citizens rather than a means of providing community between and for them. Resentment is thus always in evidence and is often exploited by candidates. Furthermore, deplorable discourse is often rooted in political nostalgia, evoking an Edenic past that has been perniciously disrupted. It also tends to delegitimate political opposition, suppressing debate on important issues and also seeking to suppress the vote. And finally, the parameters of national identity are always restricted when deplorable discourse is deployed as a political tool.

In focusing on this language, I am not also, in most cases, interested in the motives and character of those who use it. Candidates use the political language that is available to them. Such use can be quite intentional and can be intended to specifically exclude its targets. But it can also be less thoughtfully produced, more a matter of cultural norms and the discourses that prevail at any given moment. This does not allow the candidates to escape responsibility for their language. It does spread that responsibility more widely. To the extent that political exclusions are permitted in a culture, they will be reflected in and deepened by the language of political elites.

Given the problematic nature of our founding documents, which themselves contain elements of despicable discourse—the Constitution, for instance, instantiates slavery without ever mentioning the word, and the Declaration contains language excoriating indigenous peoples as "savages"—I don't want to claim that the nation was founded on the principles I associate with the higher ideals of democracy. But both those documents also contain ideas that facilitated arguments against slavery and for more inclusion. Democratic principles have been present since the founding, and Americans continue to reach for them today. These ideals have always

been present in contradictory and contentious ways, and the nation's ability to enact its ideals has often conflicted with the self-interest of ruling elites and those who support them. In some ways, what follows can be read as a chronicle of national failures, rendered in hopes of learning from them.

I focus on public discourse because it is in our public conversations that the limits and possibilities of our politics are most obvious. I concentrate on elections because they are moments that allow the capture of deplorable discourses as they circulate nationally. Antidemocratic discourses are always present in US politics; elections allow us to zero in on the ways in which they are widely shared and contested. Certainly, other kinds of political events feature such discourses—you can find them in debates over legislation, in hearings on political nominees for federal office, and so on. But elections entail a kind of sustained attention and participation by the mass public that other events do not offer as consistently across history. And once an election has been won because of this language, that language may insinuate itself into the political culture more broadly, proving to be a continuous, rather than an episodic, threat to the nation's democracy.

Even though elections require choices between candidates, this project is less about judging the merits of specific candidates than highlighting the conversations surrounding them. Which is to say that I call an election deplorable not because of who won but because of the public conversations that took place in the course of that election. The effort is not about deciding which candidates or which political parties are more or less wedded to despicable discourse but about determining what kinds of things make despicable discourse rise to the surface of political life. The distinction between a deplorable election, then, and one that does not fall into that category is that in a deplorable election, candidates facilitate despicable discourse; in nondeplorable elections, they do not. The 2008 election is not on my list of deplorable elections, for instance, because John McCain pushed back against claims that Barack Obama was un-American, but 2016 is on my list because Donald Trump actively argued that Hillary Clinton was unqualified on the basis of her gender.

Not every deplorable election is included in the book—I started this chapter with 1828, but I don't treat it at length elsewhere, for example. As I noted earlier, a case could be made for almost every election, and the absence of an election from the analysis here is not an argument that the

election wasn't deplorable or that despicable discourse didn't circulate—such discourse obviously did circulate, for instance, in 2008. I chose elections that I considered to be the clearest examples of what I am trying to argue, not the only examples. Readers are welcome to play along at home by thinking about the ways other elections might fit into the conversation.

I also think that despicable discourse is both episodic and cumulative. By this I mean that it circulates in individual elections and recurs across time—many of the same arguments present in the nineteenth century about immigration and nonwhites reappeared in both the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The United States is not, in other words, on some trajectory of greater inclusion but instead makes progress toward inclusion and then pulls back from it. There is no rigid, cyclical pattern to these reappearances, but it is quite clear that earlier iterations of despicable discourses resurface later. It is also true that at least since 1968 there is an additive quality to these discourses. If one candidate uses despicable discourse, and the next candidate of their party chooses not to, the discourse will probably recede, at least for a while. But if a candidate uses such language, and then the next one in line does so as well, and as audiences and parties form around the appeals present in that rhetoric, it becomes much more difficult to force it off to the margins. Recognizing this fact, the book includes three chapters and an afterword that deal with despicable discourse as it has evolved since 1968.

Most of the voices you will hear are from men, and most of those men are white. This is emphatically not because those whose voices you rarely hear lacked agency or because they did not argue against these discourses. It is because I concentrate on the exclusionary discourses themselves, and in general those who have traditionally been excluded from the nation's power are the targets, not the purveyors, of exclusion. Like the problem of racism more generally, the problems associated with despicable discourse are problems made by white people, so those are the voices you hear in this book.

Most of the rhetoric you will hear comes from political candidates and their most prominent surrogates. In locating that rhetoric, I use secondary sources and the *New York Times* for early elections and archives as well as public records for more recent ones. The *Times* did not always have the prominence it currently enjoys, but it is a consistent and detailed

record of the elections in question. Campaign records are not always pre-served in archives; there are extensive sources for the ones included here, however, and the voices of the candidates and the details of their strategies are illuminated in those records.

Yet deplorable elections do not depend solely on candidates, although they are the focus of the book. Candidates and their surrogates, of course, facilitate undemocratic language. But the public must be open to those appeals, and other elites must at least tacitly allow them, or they would not circulate with authority. Deplorable elections are more likely when political institutions are weak; when economic conditions are bad; when white voters suffer from real or imagined status anxiety; and when candidates focus attention on race, class, and gender, and on fearmongering more generally. When these elements align in certain ways, it becomes more likely that undemocratic language will find a receptive audience.

THE MAKINGS OF A DEPLORABLE ELECTION

For despicable discourse to circulate widely, the system must be open to it. Several things contribute to such systemic fragility. These are moments when the relationship of the people to the institutions that govern them shift. When institutions seem to fail, as they did, for example, in 1824, new leadership and new institutional forms feel necessary. Because both political institutions and those who occupy them lack legitimacy, a space opens for new or previously ignored possibilities. At the same time, elites who hold power under the old rules, and often because of those rules, threatened with the loss of that power, can reach out for ways to preserve the status quo. Not all those ways are either inclusive or democratic. The first requirement for a deplorable election, then, is that the contemporary institutional arrangements must have reached a certain point of fragility. For example, 1964 is not a deplorable election, despite some of the excesses of the Goldwater campaign, but 1968 is, because events between Johnson's 1964 landslide and the 1968 campaign created a crisis of systemic legitimacy.

A moment of crisis is not enough to create a deplorable election, however, because there is always more than institutional politics involved. When a fragile political system must cope with a difficult moment in the

nation's economy, the chances of a deplorable election grow. Economic tensions, which may be rooted in either real suffering or the fear of it, often bring up questions of class and labor. They also generate and increase tensions between the nation's urban and rural citizens. A resilient system can manage those tensions, while a fragile one cannot. When economic tensions appear, politics can more readily seem to be a zero-sum game in which the prosperity of some citizens is understood as coming at the expense of other citizens. Politics is then understood not as a cooperative effort among citizens but as a contest between them. When that happens, despicable discourse is more likely. The 1932 election, for example, had the potential to be deplorable, but it wasn't, because a cooperative frame was both available to the candidates and accepted by the public. But the 1924 election took place amid growing tensions between rural and urban citizens, and those tensions were exacerbated by the role of the Ku Klux Klan in the election, marking it as antidemocratic in the clearest way possible.

Deplorable elections are more likely when immigration is an important issue. Even though in some ways immigration is an economic issue, I treat immigration as different from the economy because in the contest between capital and labor, between rural and urban, between rich and poor, economic conflict is internal and pits citizens against one another. In the case of immigration, the conflict occurs between those who are already here and those who are more recently arriving. In this case, some of the economic tensions may be lessened by a shared ideological interest in opposing an increase in unassimilated residents, while other tensions may be exacerbated by opposing views on immigration. In either example, the composition of political coalitions becomes less stable, more unpredictable. And in that unpredictability, despicable discourse finds an opening. In 2008, for example, immigration was an issue, but it was not a wedge issue. By 2016, however, immigration was both a wedge issue and one concerning which overtly racist rhetoric was circulated.

These kinds of tensions are always and inevitably accompanied by questions of race. Racial inequity is constitutive of American politics, and no discussion of the less savory elements of our national politics can exclude race as a factor.[3] When the political system loses its legitimacy, the place of those deemed less than fully "American" becomes more tenuous. Only a strong and legitimate political system can make advances in racial equity. But these

advances often contribute to a loss of systemic legitimacy. When African Americans are seen to be advancing "too quickly," or to be making "illegitimate" claims on the system, the racism that simmers below the national surface will be explicitly articulated and will be attached to a major party candidacy. I do not classify 1948 as deplorable because the Dixiecrat revolt was confined to an unsuccessful third party. But I do classify 1992 as deplorable because Bill Clinton's treatment of Jesse Jackson and Sister Souljah and the way the campaign domesticated Hillary Clinton indicate the ways in which tacitly discriminatory politics had developed bipartisan appeal.

Overtly bigoted appeals are normally associated with third-party or losing candidates—one thinks of the Dixiecrats in 1948, of George Wallace in 1964, or of Pat Buchanan in 2000, for instance. But deplorable elections require more than one unheeded voice; they involve the active participation or the tacit approval of one or both major party candidates. If the major parties refuse to advance despicable discourse, and especially if they actively combat it, this rhetoric will be shoved to the shadowed corners of our politics. When they endorse such discourse, it becomes central to our politics.

Those discourses often grab hold when candidates master new media technologies. Many of these elections feature the addition of a new kind of communication, which appears to facilitate less restrained political content. Because they unsettle the communicative environment, new communication technologies also unsettle norms and behaviors. Appeals that seem "uncivil" or otherwise inappropriate when delivered through one medium may be more acceptable when delivered over another. In such unsettled spaces, exclusion often finds room to flourish. It mattered that the battle over an anti-Klan resolution at the Democratic Convention in 1924 was heard over the national airwaves. Cable television made Clinton's comments on Sister Souljah more publicly available than they would otherwise have been. And Donald Trump's ability to control the media agenda was instrumental to his political success.[4] For an election to be considered deplorable, despicable discourse must circulate; such circulation depends on media technologies and, as we see in the more contemporary chapters, on media norms and practices, such as their tendency to fragment audiences, rely on horse-race coverage (the tendency of the media to focus on the politics of an issue or event rather than the substance), and focus on candidate personality rather than policy and issues. One way we might chart elections can be seen in table 1.

TABLE 1 The Elements of a Deplorable Election

Nature of Campaign	Status of System	State of Economy	Media	Issues	Discourse	Example
Traditional	Resilient	Distribution of benefits seen as equitable	No change	Wedge issues not dominant	Campaigns accept legitimacy of opposition	1956
Anti-democratic elements	Fragile—third parties often begin to appear	Distribution of benefits seen as either equitable or inequitable	Beginnings of new technology	Wedge issues present	Some exclusionary/delegitimating rhetoric	1964
Deplorable	Precarious—third parties often present	Distribution of benefits seen as inequitable	New technology or new use of old technology	Wedge issues involving race, class, gender dominant	Exclusionary /resentment/ nostalgia/division—questions of national identity central	2016

For example, 1952 is the kind of election we think of as "normal." The system was widely understood as legitimate, even fair; distribution of benefits was understood as paralleling appropriate political hierarchies; political advertising was beginning to become important, but it was used in similar ways to existing media forms; both parties generally accepted the political parameters of the New Deal, and the election didn't turn on wedge issues; and, finally, the candidates were respectful of one another, and neither offered delegitimating discourses. By 1964, however, there were signs of both stability and change; there were indications that despicable discourse might be welcome, but there were also factors that worked against such discourse. The cohesion of the Republican Party had begun to falter. Conservatives opposed to the New Deal were increasingly hostile to the Republican mainstream and to Democrats. But the economy was expanding, and strains caused by the tension between Johnson's War on Poverty and his war in Vietnam were not yet being felt. Television was becoming increasingly important to national campaigns but was still used in largely traditional ways, conveying largely traditional messages. Goldwater and his supporters offered some divisive rhetoric based on race and other wedge issues. But he lost decisively, and there was pushback to such campaigning both from within and from outside Republican ranks. By 2016, though, this stability was all but gone. Republicans were no longer objecting to the use of divisive language or wedge issues but had been increasingly relying

on both for decades. That use was eased by the affordances of new media, especially social media. It found a receptive audience in those afflicted with racism and by "economic anxiety." Economic benefits were increasingly understood as unequal. The weaknesses of the political system meant that the Republican Party was unable to stop Donald Trump, the purveyor of some of the most despicable discourse in US history.

As these examples indicate, a fragile political system (made more so by economic tensions that implicate both continuing and aspirational citizens), the surfacing of race, gender, and/or class as explicit issues, the presence of candidates willing to plumb the depths of our political discourse (and the technologies allowing them to do so) combine to create moments that are both dangerous to democracy and important to our understanding of how to protect democratic and republican forms of governance.

THE TARGETS AND PATHWAYS OF DESPICABLE DISCOURSES

These structural elements explain why white voters are more susceptible to exclusionary language at some moments. But those exclusions are aimed at certain targets and take specific paths because those targets and paths are deeply embedded in the national political culture. So here I briefly discuss the history of national dependence on racism, resentment, and political nostalgia more generally, how those fit into the ways we understand politics, and the role of political celebrity. I weave together these various and disparate strands in order to establish the ways in which deplorable politics is connected to American national political traditions as matters of ideology and political practice, to argue that they are connected to how Americans think and act politically, and to insist that changing the way citizens conduct themselves communally is not a simple matter of removing specific political actors or electing members of a particular political party.

It's Always About Race

Politics in the US have been dominated, to greater or lesser degrees, by questions of race since before the founding.[5] Many of the issues that divided participants in the Constitutional Convention in 1787, for example, were about protecting slavery. Political compromises since the founding have all too often also centered on the maintenance of racial hierarchies.

Preserving slavery was, of course, the price of union before the Civil War, and race was a central issue in reunion following it. The New Deal was passed only because Franklin Roosevelt capitulated to Southern power— in his twelve years in office, he never signed a single civil rights bill. The election of the nation's first African American president created a vicious and sustained racial backlash. The need to maintain racial hierarchies while pretending that no such hierarchies exist has structured much of American national political history and has dominated its understanding of national identity.[6]

The narrative of the nation fighting to always come closer to its founding ideals is a comforting, if mistaken, one. Those ideals were tainted from the beginning by a commitment to slavery and human inequality. But even if we are to accept that as a necessary element of the times, the fact remains that there have been only limited and sporadic efforts to address systemic inequities. As Ibram X. Kendi points out in his magisterial history of racism in the United States, racism is not merely the product of hate and ignorance, and thus subject to correction through education.[7] Instead, racist ideas have been produced by the need to justify racist policies. The causal chain begins with discrimination and proceeds through practice to ideology. In other words, needing to justify a political economy based on slavery, racism was invented. Racism is the product of racist policy; policy is not the product of racism. By privileging white people at the expense of people of color, the nation created a system that depends on that racial hierarchy. That dependence has bred racist ideologies.

Historically, the nation has been envisioned as white, but a particular kind of whiteness has dominated that vision. On the one hand, there is "an embrace of the common man, the working stiff, the forgotten rural American," who is understood as the backbone of the nation.[8] This person is white by default. And while he (it is generally a "he") holds a valorized place in the national imagination, he also receives very little political power. The gap between the place he thinks he occupies and the way he is actually treated has consequences for our communal life, as it feeds directly into the politics of resentment.[9]

Political Resentment and Political Nostalgia

The United States has always been a rather resentful polity. The American Revolution was authorized by a declaration of grievances against

Great Britain. The list of those grievances was long; the resentments they expressed were born out of a sense of outraged entitlement. White Americans tend to believe that they have earned their place in the world, that it is not assigned to them. Therefore, that place should be commensurate with the amount of work they do—this is one of the precepts of both American Exceptionalism and the American Dream.[10] When the reality doesn't meet those expectations, resentment is a natural response.

One of the great myths of US politics is that politics plays out in a classless society. Lacking a formal aristocracy, this myth encourages Americans to believe, means that the United States also lacks immutable social hierarchies. But in fact, the United States has, and as Nancy Isenberg informs us, has always had, its share of "waste people," those who are excluded from the capacity to live the American dream.[11] The presence of these people serves as a reminder that economic inequalities persist. One way of managing that has been to naturalize these inequities by disparaging those who suffer most from them. Perhaps especially in a two-party political system, there is a tendency to understand opportunities and privileges as zero-sum, to regard the political pie as finite. When the political system, which is celebrated as the most democratic system in the world, yields results that are less than democratic, citizens blame first the system and then one another. Resentment thus operates multidirectionally—the poor resent those who keep them impoverished; those better off resent the poor for draining "their" resources. Both kinds of resentments can be activated and mobilized by political leaders and can be wielded to sustain or to undermine the political system.[12]

Historically, many political movements and associations have been forged out of this resentment. The Sons of Liberty who operated during the American Revolution are one example. Members of the American Party (better known as the Know-Nothings) were motivated by resentment of immigrants and Catholics during the 1850s. The Ku Klux Klan, originally aimed at African Americans in the years following the Civil War and amid Reconstruction, in later iterations grew to express resentment against immigrants, elites, and urban dwellers in general. These resentments are often articulated as economic and are often explained as products of economic insecurity, but the correlation between the strength of such movements and actual economic distress is weak.[13]

Political resentment is often accompanied by a pernicious sort of nostalgia. Resentment of others is premised on scapegoating them for unwelcome change.[14] It is the choice to point at others in blame rather than to the future in hope. Resentment is mired in the past. In politics, nostalgia is not merely memory; it remakes the past, creating an experience of equality or privilege where none existed. And it authorizes a sense of loss for what was once possible and is no longer. The need to restore what was lost can be a powerful motivator for political resentment because it is so often presented not as merely lost but as taken away.

There is a partisan angle to the politics of resentment. Corey Robin, for instance, argues that conservatism is a "rhetoric of loss and hopeful recovery."[15] By focusing on the loss side of this equation, conservatives are able to understand themselves as perpetually powerless, always defending that which is disappearing, constantly besieged. It is a form of what Timothy Meiley calls "agency panic," fear of powerlessness and resentment.[16] Especially active since the end of World War II, agency panic fuels conspiracy theories and reinforces a specific view of the self—one that depends on the ability to make choices. The more people see their choices as taken over by technologies and governmental forms beyond their control, the more likely it is that they will feel agency panic. And that makes them more susceptible to nostalgic rhetoric and its accompanying politics of resentment. Conservative rhetoric, therefore, tends to rely on and appeal to outsiders, those who feel displaced in the present. They succeed politically by "broadening the circle of discontent," by spreading resentment.[17]

Often this resentment spreads as one group is seen as taking the entitlements belonging to another. It operates through scapegoating, often also associated with the rhetoric of nostalgia. Historically, African Americans, indigenous peoples, and other nonwhite citizens and immigrants have been the most popular scapegoats of white resentment. Resentment thus works through what Carol Anderson calls "white rage."[18] Aimed primarily at African Americans, white rage works not openly, as through organizations like the Klan, but more insidiously, through courts, legislatures, and bureaucracies. It is triggered by fears of Black advancement. To use Arlie Russell Hochschild's metaphor, some white people feel as if they have been standing patiently in line, ever hoping that it would soon be their turn. But it never gets to be their turn because there are

"line cutters," people who have worked less hard, waited less patiently, but who are being awarded privileges and opportunities that those ahead of them in line have not received.[19] It doesn't matter than this understanding isn't confirmed by empirical evidence. Nor is it important that those perceived as "line cutters" have their own histories of exclusion and despair. What matters is that white citizens are being encouraged not to see the political problem as one of generalized inequities, but as a specific kind of inequity, with specific groups of citizens as the appropriate targets for resentment. This process has a lot to do with the way we think about politics.

Political Cognition

While we often seem to prefer politics grounded in reason and logic, there is evidence that this is not an accurate description of how our political brains operate. The human brain works not in a linear fashion, but through specific kinds of associative logics, "bundles of thoughts, feelings, images, and ideas."[20] Activating citizens' emotions through narratives and imagery is a potent form of persuasion and motivation. Our partisan allegiances, for instance, are emotional, formed early in life and associated with identities as much as policy preferences. Politics is as much about how we feel as it is about what we think. And how we feel influences how we think.

The less we know about a social group or set of ideas, the more dependent we are on media portrayals of that groups or set of ideas.[21] As John Hope Franklin noted in his essay on *Birth of a Nation*, a large part of the power of the depictions of African Americans in that film was tied to the way they were conveyed through the new medium of motion pictures.[22] Mediated narratives must reduce the context of depictions and narrow the frame; they always present a limited view of political reality. Different media have different ways of doing this, which means they will all limit the frames in different ways. This, of course, is true not just for news stories about crime, or fictionalized narratives about suburban families, but also for how members of political groups are figured by political leaders. Successful leaders turn these media practices to their own political advantage. This ability does not always lead them in the direction of the national interest if we understand that to mean a more inclusive and democratic polity.

I am not arguing here that the human susceptibility to narrativized imagery is necessarily bad, nor am I arguing that reason-based arguments are inherently superior or more politically reliable than those grounded in emotion. Both logic and emotion are prone to manipulation. Sound logic can be emotionally compelling and emotionally compelling ideas can be logical. It is worth noting, however, that arguments about difficult things—and all political arguments are about difficult things—are often couched in ways that allow us to overlook what is really at stake and focus on some other, often more palatable element. It becomes perfectly possible for someone to favor a policy with racist outcomes while denying that it is about race at all. Arguments about social justice fare better when those stakes are an explicit part of the conversation. Because Americans are embedded in structures of systemic racism, all Americans are racist in some senses, many of them unconscious. Ethical appeals on race highlight conscious values, the ones humans choose to live by, rather than activating predilections of which people may be only dimly aware.[23]

This is partly because of the way humans order thought. Kenneth Burke argues that to think is to order things hierarchically.[24] The kind of hierarchies one prefers may well be associated with one's partisanship.[25] To put this in the language of cognition, liberals and conservatives rely on different associative schemas when forming political judgments. Dannagal Goldthwaite Young, for example, notes that members of political parties prefer different kinds of humor, a finding that has implications for other forms of communication as well.[26] This makes creating arguments that are similarly understood, much less similarly valued, by members of both groups very difficult.

It is worth noting, however, that the nation's political tradition has a long history of connecting certain ideas. Immigrants are often referred to, for instance, through metaphors of disease, infestation, and contagion.[27] Such metaphors develop and sustain a belief that immigrants are somehow always inherently suspect. If these metaphors were restricted to a single period of time, it would be possible to argue that this misapprehension had little impact beyond its immediate context. But this is not how politics works. Metaphors from one era recirculate in another. These ways of understanding the political world take root in communities; political attitudes persist over time and across generations, making political change

difficult.[28] But cultures have critical junctures, moments when choices can be made overt, and change can happen. Making choices at these moments narrows options for the future—a community that chooses white supremacy at such a moment will find it ever more difficult to choose to upend that hierarchy moving forward.[29] Attitudes can soften or decay and can be changed in response to specific events. Understanding those moments of critical juncture is especially key in understanding the state of our national politics. Currently, this seems to turn on spectacle and celebrity.

Political Celebrities, Celebrity Politics, and the Media

Spectacle has always been important in American politics, and politicians as far back as George Washington and Thomas Jefferson made good use of spectacle in advancing their political goals.[30] Just as consistently, politics relying on spectacle have earned the condemnation of those who cherish a conception of democratic politics as based on rationality and logical argumentation, and who deplore the supposedly trivial nature of celebritized politics.

Theodore Roosevelt was probably the nation's first modern celebrity politician, as we currently understand that phrase.[31] His policies, adventures, and even the exploits of his children were widely covered by a media increasingly dependent on mass circulation. His example points to the important connection between political leadership and media coverage. Successful political leaders have always been able to use the available means of communication to craft and circulate their messages. As Roosevelt's example illustrates, the more open politics becomes, the more "the people" are encouraged to participate, the more important mass media also become, as leaders must circulate their messages more widely and to ever more diverse audiences. These efforts have always been accompanied by fears among the privileged that politics was being "dumbed down" to the lowest common denominator, that if politicians reached out to the general public, politics itself would be increasingly demeaned as its participants grew in number. In the current moment, such fears have reached a fever pitch. Lauren A. Wright, for example, convincingly argues that celebrities have a persuasive edge when it comes to politics, possessing as they do name recognition, a popular following, and experience at motivating large publics, and that this edge is bad for our politics, as celebrities lack expertise and may be poorly suited for responsible political leadership.[32]

While I do not necessarily share these suspicions of the mass public as always bad for politics, I do believe that how the media cover political processes and how they explain citizen participation in those processes matter a great deal, influencing how citizens respond to politics.[33] When political leaders use oppositional rather than communitarian frames, for example, that has the potential to affect the way people perceive politics. When the media pick up those frames and amplify them through the kinds of horse-race coverage that characterizes most media election narratives, that potential increases. This dynamic generally produces less than admirable election coverage.

Media norms influence both public understandings of politics and the ways candidates and office holders conduct themselves. Once C-SPAN began to cover Congress, for example, congressional behavior changed in response to the presence of cameras, and members give impassioned speeches to an empty chamber, because the audience that concerns them is not in the nation's capital but at home. It is an interesting element of deplorable elections that purveyors of despicable discourses are often more entrepreneurial in adapting to developments in media technologies. Consideration of those developments and the ways they contribute to the circulation of such language play a role in the chapters to follow, although the media tend to wink in and out of the discussion rather than forming a consistent through line. Technological change is always important in that it unsettles the communicative environment, which may facilitate despicable discourse; it is not responsible for the appearance of that discourse.

These various elements—a national commitment to structural and systemic racism, resentment and political nostalgia, the templates forming the ways Americans think about politics and the political world, and dependence on political spectacles—have all been present since before the founding. They were part of the conversation as Americans learned what it meant to be citizens of a republic. They provide the targets and the paths for despicable discourse. And they mean that changing American politics is not merely a matter of changing personal or party leadership. Change is not only about reforming national institutions. Changing US politics will require those changes, to be sure. But it will also require changing the political culture in which US parties, leaders, and institutions are embedded. To make that possible, Americans must first understand that culture and its history. It means white Americans will have to overcome their fear of others.

A FEW WORDS ABOUT THE POLITICS OF FEAR

More than anything else, antidemocratic rhetoric depends on creating and magnifying fear in its audience. If white voters do not fear others, they will not exclude them. It is both easy and conventional to deplore the politics of fear, but I want to be careful about what I mean when I write about such politics. Humans, as well as members of other species, rely on alarm calls for both self-protection and the protection of others. We should understand the ability to alert others to impending danger as both evolutionarily necessary and morally responsible.[34] For such alerts to be morally responsible, though, the danger must be real. This is easy to measure if you are an impala and there is a lion nearby. When it comes to making judgments about the politics of fear, however, the terrain quickly becomes more difficult.

It is entirely possible, for example, that a white, native-born, conservative person's politics may lead them to sense imminent danger to the republic when the number of immigrants increases. Their sense of danger may be heightened if those immigrants come from Africa or the Middle East rather than from Northern Europe. That sense may persist despite empirical evidence that immigrants from these places do not cause identifiable harm to the nation because such evidence depends on the definition of "identifiable harm"—which could be measured by instances of terrorism or crime, for example. But if the person in question is really worried about some ineffable definition of "American" national identity, then it does not matter to them that these immigrants do not engage in terrorism or commit crimes. They are worried about protecting something they understand as "their" culture. And so they may communicate alarm, alerting those who share their politics that their sense of shared community is being threatened.

Such alarms are politically potent.[35] Fear appeals create both attitudinal and behavioral changes. So persuasive are such appeals, in fact, that people react to arguments about threats with the same intensity as to experiences of actual threats.[36] When it comes to politics, rather than say health-related messages, though, these appeals are likely to resonate differently among different groups. It is easy to suppose that one's politics aren't relevant to how one responds to news of an impending hurricane or influence one's

decision about quitting smoking in response to an ad campaign featuring pictures of diseased lungs. It is equally easy to imagine that one's political beliefs are strongly related to how one responds to messages about immigration or an asserted relationship between crime and race.[37]

There are at least two kinds of fear. The easiest to deal with is primal fear, one's response to an immediate danger, such as the recognition of an impending car crash. That response is visceral and short-lived. It does not normally have important implications for politics. The second kind of fear, however, is less urgent, more cognitive. It is a response to attacks on abstractions that are important to a person, such as their values. Fear appeals grounded in the supposed threats others present to us range from FDR's declarations that the Nazis imperiled human civilization or environmentalists' claims that climate change represents a danger to human survival to racist assertions about the "mongrelization" of the white race or Donald Trump's repeated contention that migrants from south of the border threaten to contaminate the polity.[38] Evaluating such arguments depends on both their empirical validity (assuming validity can be measured) and on one's political beliefs and preferences.

Consequently, making judgments about fear appeals in politics is tricky. It isn't fair to argue that fear appeals are ethical when they flag fears I personally find reasonable (white supremacist violence, for example, or climate change) and are unethical when alerting citizens to fears I personally find unwarranted (immigrants from the Middle East, for instance). And it is reasonable, in a book on politics, to allow fears concerning threats to culture and political organization to weigh as much as fears about the continued existence of the species. I flag fear appeals as fear appeals whenever I see them. Because this book is about despicable discourses, I generally focus on examples of fear appeals that I find worrying, by which I mean that they serve antidemocratic ends. Statements like "racists are bad for democracy," and "immigrants threaten the nation," are both fear appeals. I treat such appeals as despicable discourse when they appear in political speech in ways that undermine what I understand to be the broader national democratic project. By this I mean when such appeals are used to segment the polity, and to turn citizens against one another on the basis of ascriptive rather than ideological terms, I deem that discourse despicable. When the terms used to define threats to democracy turn on a lack

of patriotism rather than a lack of agreement on basic values, I deem that discourse despicable. It is not despicable discourse to argue that violent white supremacists are dangerous to democracy. It is despicable discourse to claim that Muslims are dangerous to democracy, or that Republicans are by definition unpatriotic or unprincipled. It is not despicable discourse to state that a specific politician is engaging in unethical politics and to provide evidence for that claim. It is despicable discourse to allege that a particular political actor is incapable of acting on political principle because their principles disagree with yours. Because fear appeals are typically understood as attempts to frighten people into compliance, I treat discourse as despicable when it seems to me that citizens are being encouraged to surrender agency. Discourse that motivates citizens to turn to the government for protection from threats is more likely to be classified here as despicable than rhetoric that empowers citizens.

These definitions are slippery and depend very much on the context in which the language in question is embedded. I strive to be consistent in how I treat these ultimately unclassifiable appeals. I maintain as my standard a sense of what contributes to a healthy and robust democracy and democratic community and what undermines these things. Such a standard is necessarily subjective, and readers are welcome to disagree with specific instances of interpretation.

THE ELECTIONS: THE TABLE OF CONTENTS

Many elections fit my criteria for deplorable elections—a depressing number of them, in fact. As the case of 1828 indicates, not every deplorable election could be included. In choosing the elections for this book, I concentrated on the time period following the birth of mass politics and pay specific attention to those following the Civil War. I chose elections because of how well they highlight various elements of despicable discourse, so that every chapter adds to understanding rather than repeating themes already discussed. It is an illustrative, not an exhaustive, list. In every case, despicable discourse was present to some degree in the previous election and that election constitutes part of the context for the election I am talking about. These elections are, again, not isolated and discrete moments when

such discourse rose and fell but are instances when it attained a sufficient level of prominence to be amenable to sustained analysis.

Creating Citizenship in a Republic, 1800/1840/1852: These early elections form the first chapter and the broad context for the more detailed discussions to follow. They come at moments when the nation was figuring out what it meant to be a citizen of a republic rather than the subject of a crown and are moments when citizenship was under stress. The 1800 election, the first of the newly created party system, was rancorous to an extreme and featured conflict between Federalists John Adams and Alexander Hamilton as well as between Democratic Republicans Aaron Burr and Thomas Jefferson, and then also between Adams and Jefferson. The 1840 election, which pitted Martin Van Buren, "The Little Magician," against "Tippecanoe and Tyler too," was one of the first to include mass means of persuasion. "The log cabin campaign" is also widely considered to be a model of the trivialization of political campaigns. Less famously, it also centered on issues of race. Finally, in the last gasp of the Whig party, in 1852 Winfield Scott lost to Democrat Franklin Pierce. This election revealed a nation divided on sectional rather than political lines as the politics of slavery destroyed the legitimacy of the political system as well as the national political parties. The stories of these elections reveal both the institutional and deeply personal nature of deplorable elections—they are contests between people as well as ideas. These elections tell us that deplorable elections have always been with us and provide a baseline of judgment for the rest of the book.

Looking Backward During the Nation's Centennial, 1876: One of the most disputed elections in US history, the election of 1876 is often compared to the 2000 election. It was the last election featuring the "bloody shirt" and was characterized by bitter accusations, electoral fraud, and violence. This election featured a massive infusion of money from railroad interests, adding to the already fraught racial and sectional politics of the day. The election results were contaminated by the ways the news of those results was spun by political operatives, and the actual decision came months after Election Day. The electoral drama was finally ended by the "corrupt bargain" that put Rutherford B. Hayes (often contemporaneously called "Rutherfraud") in office and led to the end of Reconstruction.

Introducing the Politics of Fear to the Twentieth Century, 1924: The 1924 Democratic Convention, meeting in Madison Square Garden, was

attended by so many members of the KKK that it became known as the "Klanbake." The convention barely managed to avoid nominating the Klan's preferred candidate and was unable to pass a resolution condemning the Klan. At the same time, the populist tide continued in the West, personified by Robert La Follette and William Jennings Bryan. Calvin Coolidge, one of the most unpleasant figures in US presidential history, won in a three-way contest characterized by bitter racial and class arguments. This election features some of the most well-known American orators; the fact that a man known mostly for his refusal to speak emerged victorious is only one of the many ironies of this campaign.

The Veneer of Civility: The Subtle Politics of Racism, 1968: Richard Nixon defeated Hubert Humphrey in one of the most painful American elections, featuring the assassinations of civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr. and presidential candidate Robert F. Kennedy. It was also the first election to rely on what has become known as the "dog whistle," or the use of subtle, rather than overt, appeals to racism. Richard Nixon's "Southern strategy" mobilized both the South and elements of the North by appealing to the "politics of resentment," which have become a staple in our electoral history. Four years earlier, liberal Republican Nelson A. Rockefeller went to the Republican National Convention and implored the delegates there to repudiate the politics of the far right; he was booed off the stage and blamed for Goldwater's defeat. In 1968, despite his belief in the iniquity of such politics, he remained silent. Deplorable elections are made possible because of the acquiescence of elites; that point is driven home in 1968.

The Southern Strategy Goes Bipartisan, 1992: The contest between George H. W. Bush, previously associated with the racist "Willie Horton" ads in 1988, and Bill Clinton, known in some circles as "America's first Black president," sheds some bipartisan light on contemporary deplorable elections.[39] Clinton's campaign included a willingness to include racial and gendered appeals in a campaign ostensibly dedicated to inclusion. It provides evidence that despicable discourse, while subtle, had become an important element of national campaigns, and that the inclusion of some groups—such as blue-collar workers—often seems to come at the expense of others—such as racial minorities and women. This campaign also featured accusations of sexual misconduct and echoed the problems Gary Hart faced four years earlier. This election illustrates a new context

for judging candidates and elections, one that begins to mark racism and sexism as deplorable.

It Doesn't Get More Deplorable Than This, 2016: In 2016, a woman became the nominee of a major party for the first time in US history. At the same time, the long-simmering subtexts of anti-immigrant, racist, and misogynistic appeals became explicit in the rhetoric of Donald Trump. The election was one in which routines of political campaigns were upended by new forms of mediated communication, influence over those forms by the interference of a foreign government, and a generalized sense that the political system was broken. The question of whether the system will prove resilient or not remains an open, and important, question.

Or Maybe It Does: Brief Thoughts on 2020: The Trump administration was tumultuous and controversial, marked by strong resistance to the president and his policies as well as by adamant loyalty to him and his policy preferences. The president himself was a polarizing figure whose rhetoric was marked by attempts to divide rather than to unite the nation. His conduct as president led to his impeachment and acquittal on charges of obstruction of Congress and abuse of power in early 2020, actions that formed one element of the context for the 2020 campaign. That campaign took place amid a global pandemic that substantially weakened the US economy and, as of Election Day, had caused the deaths of over two hundred thousand Americans. Through it all, Trump relied on incendiary rhetoric and appeals to his base while denying responsibility for either the economic situation or the persistence of the pandemic. Characterized by divisive discourses by the president, 2020 may present a significant turning point in the history of deplorable elections.