Comeback or Continuation? 
Race and Its Relevance in the Trump Era

American author Ta-Nehisi Coates has described Donald Trump as America’s “first white President”—because contrary to his predecessors, Trump obtained the office through a campaign that was in many ways based on fanning the flames of white racial resentment. While Trump may differ in that sense even from his Republican predecessors, the New York businessman’s campaign to capture the White House could not have succeeded without the decades of work at the hands of other Republican politicians and strategists that laid the groundwork for a nativist path to the presidency.

Far from being a remnant of the past however, sentiments related to race and identity play a significant role in shaping political debates and majorities in the United States today. Even amidst the coronavirus epidemic, discussions have raged about Donald Trump’s apparent use of xenophobic rhetoric by labeling the virus as explicitly “Chinese.” This is occurring in an environment in which racial attitudes have become one of the primary dividing lines between the two parties—a divide that may only widen further as white anxieties concerning their impending minority status have driven up fears of persecution and discrimination not just among the far-right fringe. The Trump era may therefore not represent the last gasps of the political pertinence of race and nativism but instead be a sign of things to come.

Philipp Adorf is a research assistant at the Institute of Political Science and Sociology, University of Bonn. His Ph.D. thesis assessed how the Republican Party captured white Southern voters by way of racialized appeals. He has also written about the role race played in Trump’s election and the transformation of right-wing populist parties into the preferred choice of the white working class in both Europe and the U.S.

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