Strategically Hijacking Victimhood: A Political Communication Strategy in the Discourse of Viktor Orbán and Donald Trump

Jessie Barton Hronešová and Daniel Kreiss

This article introduces the concept of "hijacked victimhood" as a form of strategically leveraging victimhood narratives. It is a subset of strategic victimhood, which is a relatively common communicative strategy whereby groups claim victimhood status in contests over power and legitimacy. Political leaders who use the strategy of hijacked victimhood present dominant groups as in danger, as current or future victims, and in need of protection (especially by the crafter of the narrative) from oppressive forces consisting of—or indirectly representing—marginalized and subaltern groups. In the process, leaders hijacking victimhood blunt the rights-based claims of such groups. Analyzing Viktor Orbán's and Donald Trump's elite rhetoric in Hungary and the United States, respectively, we inductively document varieties of hijacked victimhood in their political communication, showing how Orbán leverages historical suffering and resistance while Trump constructs economic and value-based harms for dominant groups. Making both conceptual and empirical contributions, we argue that at the heart of hijacked victimhood is a reversal of the victimizer–victim dichotomy, a new portrayal of moral orders, a teleological ordering of past and future harms, and a mobilization of security threats—all used to preserve or expand a dominant group's power.

In May 2022, Viktor Orbán predicted a decade of war and instability as he took the oath of office for his fourth term as the Hungarian prime minister. As is customary in Orbán's public remarks, he squarely blamed "the West" for what he referred to as an "age of danger" and cast Hungarian citizens as victims of hurtful European Union policies. For example, Orbán elaborated on a "European population replacement program," calling it a "suicidal policy … which seeks to replace the missing European Christian children with migrants, with adults arriving from other civilizations." Coupled with "gender madness which sees the individual as the creator of their identity,"

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Orbán outlined Hungarian victimhood in terms of "economic woes, the threat of war, Europe's internal spiritual weakness and Brussels' political errors" (see annex 1 for the list of cited speeches; VO1).

Five years earlier, across the Atlantic, President Donald Trump deployed a similar set of claims. On January 20, 2017, Trump delivered a fiery inaugural address in which he promised to rebuild the "country and restore its promise for all of our people." Trump described how a "righteous people and a righteous public" were the victims of political elites who kept people in poverty, shuttered factories, fattened the wallets of teachers at the expense of children, sent trillions of dollars overseas while ignoring needs at home, and allowed gangs, drugs, and crime to run rampant across the American landscape. Declaring that "this American carnage stops right here and stops right now," Trump positioned himself as the voice of the "just and reasonable demands" of a morally righteous American people, living in solidarity under God's word, who were victimized by a "small group in our nation's capital" (DT1).

Despite their differences, the communicative strategy that both these speeches share is alleged victimization. Even more, Orbán and Trump both proclaimed the greatness of their nations when ruled by governments formed from members of historically dominant groups—even as they constructed clear threats of the subjugation, harm, or oppression of those same groups. Claiming victim status for dominant groups in this fashion is a political communication strategy that we call "hijacking victimhood." Hijacked victimhood is a subset of a more general and widespread phenomenon of "strategic victimhood" that has been discussed in various scholarly iterations for more than a decade. It is well documented across the literature that groups strategically communicate their actual, perceived, or threatened victimhood in the course of contesting (or defending) power. For example, groups that were subjected to human rights violations during wars and conflicts can leverage an often loosely defined victimhood status to achieve redress in contexts where authorities deny them recognition (Barton Hronešová 2020). Foreign policy is often informed by the leveraging of previous suffering to justify present responses—most visibly in the rhetoric coming from Eastern Europe after Russia's invasion of Ukraine (Šitera and Eberle 2023); also informed by suffering are a range of domestic policies targeting groups that are cast as inimical for nationalist purposes (Barton Hronešová 2022; Ejdus 2020; Subotić 2019). It is equally well documented that at the heart of populist appeals is the alleged victimhood of the good "people" at the hands of malicious "elites," which serves as a mobilization strategy. The vast scholarship on populism as a communicative phenomenon (Jagers and Walgrave 2007; Jenne, Hawkins, and Silva 2021; de Vreese et al. 2018), for instance, demonstrates that populist leaders (and would-be leaders) strategically claim some circumscribed group of people to be righteous victims in their pursuit of power. Like strategic narratives, strategic victimhood has a political objective or a policy aim (cf. Lerner and O'Loughlin 2023).

In this sense, strategic victimhood can be a routine part of politics, wielded by various groups in pursuit of very different ends. Our contribution to this scholarship lies in the conceptualization of "hijacked victimhood." We borrow the term "hijacked" from Jelena Subotić's (2009) analysis of how efforts at transitional justice were politically abused by elites in the Western Balkans in arguing that hijacked victimhood is a narrative communication strategy to present dominant groups in danger of subjugation, disappearance, or suffering from oppressive forces consisting of or representing marginalized and subaltern groups. Victimhood is "hijacked" specifically because it involves appeals to dominant in-groups in the service of maintaining, expanding, or defending their power, as well as that of the political actors who claim to represent them. In hijacked victimhood narratives, dominant groups are presented as either current or future victims and often in need of protection by the elite crafters of these messages. In other words, during these appeals dominant groups communicatively adopt the victimhood positions of nondominant groups that have been previously or are currently marginalized or oppressed. Hijacked victimhood therefore not only inverts victim–victimizer relations (Chouliaraki 2021) but also strategically presents oppressed groups—and those they claim represent them—as a threat.

Normatively, we see hijacking victimhood as a dangerous strategy for democracies. These claims securitize victimhood, sow moral confusion about justice and injustice, and blunt rights-based calls for justice. Hijacked victimhood narratives delegitimize the victimhood of those whom they characterize as threats to the power of dominant groups—refugees, minorities, historically oppressed groups, and those who represent them—and dilute efforts at redress and justice. For example, these narratives often portray groups such as racial, ethnic, and religious minorities as victimizers, while casting the political opposition as the morally polluted defenders of these victimizers. Or they might portray the opposition as victimizers and the marginalized groups, such as refugees, as their pawns and thus indirect victimizers.[1] In these ways, hijacked victimhood goes beyond being a weaponized "rhetorical maneuver" (Bebout 2019, 65). Far more damagingly from a democratic perspective, hijacked victimhood muddles and even reverses agency (about the victim, victimizers, accomplices, etc). It also misuses an emotionally, politically—and sometimes legally—loaded position of suffering, harm, and injustice to sow confusion about morality. Furthermore, hijacked victimhood claims can absolve dominant groups of their political responsibilities or provide a moral justification for the future domination of marginalized groups. Worryingly, hijacked victimhood

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claims potentially undermine a sense of a legitimate opposition by presenting the opposition as malicious and evil victimizers, while empowering the defenders of dominant groups as protectors who remedy present harms or resolve future threats. In the process, those crafting hijacked victimhood narratives maintain, create, shape, and cue the dominant political identities that are constitutive of dominant groups and mobilizational for political power (Kreiss, Lawrence, and McGregor 2020).

We ground our analytical framework of hijacked victimhood in the transitional justice and human rights literature before we expand on it. For scholars working on issues of peace and justice, there are investigative, judicial, and truth-seeking methods of identifying victims of past harms, such as in the context of wars, often against those who would deny their victimhood or attempt to diminish its scale or legitimacy (García-Godos and Lid 2010; Hearty 2018; Robins 2017). Although we appreciate that even in postwar situations discussions about "complex" (Bernath 2016; Hearty 2020) and "guilty" (Moffett 2016) victims animate justice-related discussions, we maintain that there is utility in linking victimhood to actual harms and injustice—rather than reducing it to a relativizing set of claims in the symbolic interactionist tradition (Denzin 2008). This approach dovetails with other literatures, notably critical race theory, where legal and social scholars offer frameworks for analyzing multiple, interlocking, intersectional, and often historically and institutionally based and enduring patterns of the victimization of nondominant groups (Crenshaw and Gotanda 1995). Victimhood is hijacked strategically and specifically to defend the extant privilege and power of dominant groups in a given social hierarchy.

In the rest of this article, we develop the concept of hijacked victimhood and a framework for analyzing appeals that accounts for the importance of the political context, the sociopolitical identities of elite speakers and their targets, the presence of victimizers/victims, and the ordering of moral relations. After developing this framework, we analyze two cases—Orbán's and Trump's contemporary elite rhetoric in Hungary and the United States, respectively—and inductively document varieties of hijacked victimhood claims in their political communication. We build on the limited analytical and comparative work on political and social elites' strategic communication of victimhood in the service of dominant groups (notably Armaly and Enders 2021; Banet-Weiser 2019; Campbell and Manning 2018; Horwitz 2018). We then show how Orbán relies on historical suffering, resistance, and battle to target constructed internal enemies and domestic opposition to his party's dominant coalition, whereas Trump constructs economic, religious, and cultural harms to target a multiracial and multiethnic Democratic Party.

SITUATING AND TRACING VICTIMHOOD ACROSS DISCIPLINES

In human rights scholarship, the term "victimhood" originally referred to the experiences of individuals designated as victims in a legal and rights-based sense, before its use expanded into other disciplines. Today, we see the analysis of victimhood occurring across three primary strands of research. Despite some differences, these strands of work conceptualize victimhood as the sociopolitical assertion of identities and narratives grounded in perceived or actual group positions that are characterized by injustice, violence, suffering, or harms (victimization[2]). The first strand primarily deals with the experiences of victims of violence/oppression during wars or under authoritarian regimes, where the focus is on the violation of human rights. Here scholars focus on the experiences of victims, their attempts at redress, and their sociopolitical struggles during and after violence (Baines 2017; Druliolle and Brett 2018; Helms 2013). While appreciating the complexity of victim positions, the concept of victimhood in this strand focuses on those who make empirically verifiable claims to direct suffering and harm based on human rights violations and to the "status" of victims (Citroni 2014). The main focus of this scholarship is on direct and immediate victims, not enduring social patterns of victimization.

The second strand of literature also addresses the collective suffering and trauma and historical experiences of groups in wars or under oppressive regimes, but it is less focused on empirically verifiable direct victimhood claims and more on how victimhood is *constructed* in collective memory. In this vein of work, historians, political scientists, and international relations scholars focus on the collective cultural work of various actors to craft narratives to control uses of the past for the present and future. The emphasis is on the constructions of trauma and memory and how they influence politics, security, and policies, as well as on how past collective suffering can be experienced in the present through narratives (Clarke 2019; Edkins 2003; Lerner 2022; Lim 2021; Steele 2008). Importantly, in this constructivist strand of literature, victimhood does not have to be directly experienced or empirically verified: instead, it is crafted through communication in the course of politics and comes to be perceived, asserted, or acted on.

A related body of work comes from scholars who have identified victimhood as an important part of specifically populist and nationalist appeals. Scholars have long been attuned to the ways that populism is a communicative phenomenon—often a strategic one in which claims are wielded by actors in power (Jagers and Walgrave 2007)—and that those leaders at the intersections of nationalism and populism make special use of victimhood claims (Jenne, Hawkins, and Silva 2021). Populist and nationalist leaders often construct groups in an "us" vs. "them" binary manner such as elites versus people, minority versus

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majority, or dominant group versus immigrants, using moral vocabularies that evoke a sense of suffering at the hands of the "others" (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2013).

For example, as Wodak (2021) argued, a constructed sense of "threat" is often at the core of populist discourse and nationalist claims. Pappas (2019, 110) demonstrates that populism is premised on resentment, which is "both moral (i.e., the offender has violated the fundamentals of established morality) and normative (i.e., it seeks the vindication of the victim and the restoration of the normative and moral order)." He shows how the populist promise to repair the moral order on behalf of the (victimized) righteous majority can be "illusory" (110). As such, populists divide the world into crude categories of "the people" who are the victims and the "elites" who are the victimizers. In this work, populists and nationalists strategically construct victimhood to reinforce a sense of belonging, shore up political support, or build power on behalf of some circumscribed groups of people.

The final strand of literature expands the understanding of victimhood into the experiences of sociocultural, economic, and political discrimination. This literature couples the constructivist approach with the analytically or empirically validated experience of victimhood in the human rights strand. The focus here is on *structural* victimhood—outside the context of war or dictatorships—that entails relatively enduring patterns of unequal social, political, economic, and cultural power between dominant and nondominant groups and is often found in democracies. Scholars focus on the structural, systematic victimization of nondominant groups, which is the result of discriminatory norms and legal frameworks and so might be less visible and thus more easily dismissed or disputed than other forms of victimhood (Eroukhmanoff and Wedderburn 2022). Disproportionately situated in the United States, this literature focuses on the intersectionality of group-based inequality (Crenshaw 2013), such as gender (Banet-Weiser 2021), race (Gest 2016; Lacy 2010; Perez and Salter 2020), and other social groupings. It also tackles a paradox in analyzing victimhood. To be a victim originally meant to have no participation in one's suffering: to be innocent, helpless, or even sacrificed. Yet to achieve recognition as a victim requires agency, or social activism, or both, which may delegitimize victimhood status (Cole 2006). As such, in this literature, victimhood is understood within rights-based frameworks and can be wielded strategically as nondominant groups seek to gain redress and equity.

Although these literatures are rarely directly integrated (with some notable exceptions such as Lerner 2022), we see some striking similarities among them. They all implicitly present victimhood as a *strategic* phenomenon. For those working under the human rights framework, the focus is on how victims of conflicts gather, communicate, demonstrate, and obtain their status, such as advancing claims for redress through judicial and other institutional forums. For those analyzing the ways trauma and memory are constructed, victimhood is wielded strategically to become the basis for politics, nationalism, or social solidarity. And for those primarily concerned with structural victimhood, communication of that status becomes a primary means of advancing political claims. All three strands also start from the premise that claims of victimhood inherently create *moral hierarchies* (where innocence sits at the top) that shape and are shaped by power dynamics.

However, although they are all concerned about the consequences of claims to victimhood status that translate into demands for rights, privileges, benefits, and recognition, these literatures differ in their analysis of who victims, victimizers, and other implicated agents *are*—which points to the need for an analytical approach that expressly incorporates various faces of power into the analysis of victimhood.

STRATEGIC AND HIJACKED VICTIMHOOD

We bridge this scholarship and build on it by introducing the concepts of "strategic victimhood" and a subset of appeals we call "hijacked victimhood." Following the various literatures just presented, we see strategic victimhood both as a commonly used political communication practice and a tool for social actors seeking equity and justice. Strategic victimhood is a politically useful construction of harm; however, when it is hijacked, dominant groups and their representatives strategically invert moral relations and subvert empirical understandings of harm to defend, preserve, or expand their power.

To start with the broader category, strategic victimhood always positions groups in relation to others against the backdrop of existing power relations (political, symbolic, or social) and evokes violations of rights. Victimhood claims exist within a symbolic field in which there are contending groups with various types of power and abilities to violate rights. The effectiveness of strategically using victimhood depends on the specific context, which is a historically articulated set of understandings that shape individual identities, social groupings, and moral relations (Abend 2016). The messengers of victimhood narratives need to be cognizant of the context and power dynamics to make resonant claims that will correspond with the contextual repertoires of victimhood (cf. Browning, Joenniemi, and Steele 2021).

Strategic victimhood occurs not through direct inventions but through constructions based on historical narratives, events, and contexts: there is a temporal link between past and future harms in strategic victimhood narratives. These narratives often draw on "usable pasts" (Ricoeur 2004) that connect history with the present through stories of past events such as wars, losses of territory, and hardships that are projected into the present and future. Strategic victimhood seeks to leverage those narrated pasts

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of real or imagined past experiences either in the present—showing groups as currently victimized—or as a future-oriented risk of victimhood. In accordance with the literatures described earlier, strategic victimhood is thus commonly used by social movements and in the course of political competition by many actors in political systems from liberal democracies to authoritarian regimes.

Finally, communicative constructions of strategic victimhood shape groups' self-understanding across time (cf. Mitzen 2006) by drawing on contemporary policy needs. To delegitimize opponents, intellectual elites often tell national narratives of suffering, which frequently work to "reinforce feelings of belonging that aim to maintain social cohesion and defend symbolic borders" (Jelin 2003, 27). Such narratives construct understandings of ontological security and can be very useful in foreign policy (Mälksoo 2015). For example, international relations scholarship shows that narratives of past victories, heroism, and greatness, as well as suffering, generally reinforce a collective sense of belonging and social cohesion while ostracizing opponents (Ejdus 2020; Subotić 2019). National-level narratives can unify some constructed, legitimate "people" and defend their place in a wider network of relations. Other scholars have focused on how strategic appeals can be mobilized for electoral or political gain in concrete policy-making or election contexts, such as elite attempts at "identity ownership" in the course of electoral politics or governance processes (Kreiss, Lawrence, and McGregor 2020). Thus, strategic narratives of identity—for example, those including appeals to suffering or wrongs—often map onto whom political leaders and parties represent (or claim to represent), even as they articulate and continually rearticulate these very identities to achieve clear policy aims (Lerner 2020; Lerner and O'Loughlin 2023).

In contrast, hijacked victimhood is a subset of strategic victimhood claims that explicitly rewrite moral hierarchies. As already suggested, victimhood as a status entails a special position within a moral hierarchy that demarcates those wrongfully harmed in relation to some mutually recognized violation of a shared moral order (Vandermaas-Peeler, Subotic, and Barnett 2024). The implied innocence and purity attributed to real victims mean that "true," "actual," and "legitimate" victims (as understood within a particular context) sit at the top, and victimizers—along with illegitimate victims—sit at the bottom. Actors hijacking victimhood use this moral power. Hijacked victimhood is used by political elites, including those who espouse populist or nationalist claims, who represent groups that have historically enjoyed dominance and who recognize the potential of victimhood claims in their pursuit of power. Leaders (or would-be leaders) use the discourse of alleged marginalization, inferior status, or potential threat to gain or defend their current political standing and that of the dominant groups they represent. In the process, these leaders delegitimize rights-based claims made by nondominant groups. They may also target their political opponents who represent and defend marginalized and subaltern groups in an attempt to undermine their moral standing. Hijacked victimhood narratives especially work to vilify political and geopolitical "enemies" so that historically dominant groups can assume a legitimate moral high ground while weakening subaltern groups' calls for justice.

To extrapolate how we expect the structure of hijacked victimhood to work, let us turn to recent American politics. In literature developed over the past 20 years, scholars have shown how in US cultural discourse whites are constructed as the "innocent race" (Lacy 2010) and victims of "reverse" racism (Norton and Sommers 2011) even while maintaining outsized, disproportionate power politically, economically, socially, and culturally vis-à-vis other racial groups. That is, whites are culturally constructed as victims of antiracist policies that have marginalized them from mainstream political discourse and vilified them globally. There is a partisan divide in perceptions of antiwhite bias in the United States: hijacked victimhood claims are part of a Republican Party political strategy that maps onto its predominantly white and white Christian coalition identity (Mason 2018), reinforced by Barack Obama's election since 2008 (Samuels 2022). Republicans say this antiwhite (and antiwhite Christian; see Armaly, Buckley, and Enders 2022) bias is institutionally housed within the Democratic Party, which on the whole acknowledges that Black people have been the victims of police violence and social inequality (a notion denied by Republicans; see Armaly and Enders 2021). The "villains" (McLaughlin et al. 2023) or "perpetrators" in Republican discourse are the Democratic leaders who are representatives (and political defenders) of the nonwhite (and non-Christian) groups in their party coalition. As Conway, Grabe, and Grieves (2007) show, the military, Republicans, and [white] citizens are deemed "virtuous" victims of immigrants, Blacks, and terrorists, as well as their Democratic politicians and media enablers. Similarly, Peck (2019) shows how Fox News broadly constructs a virtuous [white] working class as the victim of media elites who exploit it and elevate the "takers" over the "makers." Meanwhile, in the European context, the additional governance layer of the European Union provides a convenient target for strategically hijacked claims of a "Brussels dictate" through which migrants and minority groups (e.g., LGBTQIA+) victimize nation-states and their pro-family policies (Enyedi 2020).

These strategies aim to present the political opposition, and the groups they represent, as threats to dominant groups and at the same time numb their activism. In the course of doing this, leaders who hijack victimhood allow historically dominant groups to be absolved of responsibility—claiming their innocence by disputing the

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marginalized/oppressed group's victimhood and adopting it as their harm (or potential harm). Hijacked victimhood can thus justify or defuse guilt for historical or present-day transgressions (Gordy 2013; Lerner 2020). For example, in Poland and elsewhere, local participation in the Holocaust has been nearly erased from national history. Poles have embraced "national" wartime suffering as a way to erase Jewish victimhood during World War II, blunting claims to reparation and transforming Jewish victimhood into *Polish* victimhood (Grabowski 2016). In the United States, the "Lost Cause" narrative of the Civil War—the idea that the South fought for the protection of its rights against the immoral North, rather than for the preservation of chattel slavery—implies that the South was a victim of aggression (Cole 2006).

Hijacking victimhood can work at multiple levels: it can manifest through usurping the experiences of marginalized groups (such as the reversal of victimhood; see Chouliaraki 2021), delegitimizing claims of marginalized groups, presenting nondominant groups as threats in the present or future, and portraying the political opposition as enablers of dangerous subaltern groups. We ground our analysis of victimhood in rights-based approaches, which have a developed set of practices for analytically and empirically determining victimhood status (however imperfect). There are several categories of socially recognized types of victimhood that vary across contexts.[2] Victimhood can entail being the subject of violence or death; losing political, economic, social, cultural, or legal status through unlawful ways; or losing claims on land or possession of a state/nation. In conceptualizing "dominant groups," we are not claiming that all members of dominant social groups are hegemonic in every context. Instead, we are conceptualizing dominance based on the formulation of victims and victimizers in the narratives of leaders in a historical and political context.[3] For example, as we document later, the white Christians whom Trump and Orbán present as victims are members of historically dominant racial and religious groups in the United States and Hungary, respectively. These groups may perceive themselves as victims (and may actually be) of global socioeconomic precarity; however, in their respective contexts as a group, they have occupied the politically and historically dominant stratum within their states. (Adopting an intersectional lens, marginalized groups would then be doubly victimized not only by global precarities but also by discriminations stemming from their identities.)

METHODOLOGY: QUALITATIVE SPEECH ANALYSIS OF TRUMP AND ORBÁN

To analyze hijacked victimhood empirically, we selected two prominent cases of politicians embracing victimhood appeals in communicating to their supporters: current Hungarian prime minister Viktor Orbán and former US president Donald Trump. Much has been written about the contemporary threats to democratic institutions in the United States that Donald Trump presented (e.g., Haggard and Kaufman 2021), culminating in the spectacular attempted coup at the US Capitol on January 6, 2021 (Peyton et al. 2022). Similarly, a wealth of literature has studied Hungary's post-1989 transformation into a semi-authoritarian state under the leadership of the once-liberal Viktor Orbán and his Fidesz Party (Bánkuti, Halmai, and Scheppele 2012; Bernhard 2021; Kovács and Trencsényi 2020) in part through the use of anti-migration, exclusivist, and nativist rhetoric (Barna and Knap 2023; Enyedi 2020; Krekó and Enyedi 2018; Pető 2021).

Yet, to what degree do they hijack victimhood? Rarely have specific variations of victimhood been an object of interest in the research literature, even amid an ongoing backlash to changing demographics and movements for racial and religious equity, as well as a defense of white Christian status vis-à-vis other racial, ethnic, and religious groups. Given the need to understand the structure of strategic victimhood claims through an analytical approach, we developed a qualitative and interpretive study of these two prominent political leaders who operate with differing victimhood discourses. We chose Orbán and Trump with inductive-theory generation in mind as purveyors of exclusionary and right-wing discourses that use victimhood narratives but in different contexts, which allowed us to refine our conceptual arguments.

We specifically analyze the communicative construction of hijacked victimhood by these two leaders based on the framework we outlined earlier, focusing on moral relations, agents, and time, as well as the hijacking of the moral positions of marginalized groups. We pay close attention to the stated sources of victimhood—namely, who or what was being blamed as the agents, groups, or circumstances that were perpetuating wrongs and creating victims, the stated paths to remedy, and how the two leaders position themselves vis-à-vis these claims (i.e., self-victimhood). Although we were sensitive to our framework, we also wanted to ensure that we would be open to discovering new elements. Our categories, then, were both developed in advance and emerged in the data. We make no claims for the statistical distribution of hijacked victimhood claims during this period, nor do we study the change in focus across time. Instead, we aim to reveal the utility of a more developed analytical approach to the strategic communication of hijacked victimhood.

To generate a sample of leader communications, we first identified archives of Orbán and Trump speeches in English. For Trump, we used Factbase (https://factba.se/), which has a searchable database of full videos and audio transcriptions of Trump's speeches. Given the vast amount of data (1,955 speeches from the president while in office), we chose the full calendar year of 2020 to coincide with the US presidential election in November; we then developed a

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set of keywords that we believed were likely to return claims of victimhood in the US context. We conducted individual searches for the following terms mentioned in "speeches," which also included more casual remarks and interviews: *victim (N = 182)*; *Black Lives Matter (N = 3)*; *immigration (N = 1,062)*; *deplorable (N = 147)*; and *Christian (N = 245)*: they generated a total sample of 1,639 references. Given the theoretical aims of this piece, we then reviewed these references specifically for victimhood claims and developed recurrent themes that captured the range of Trump's construction of victimhood narratives during the time period in an analysis sensitive to, but not bound by, the categories delineated earlier—relations of victim and victimizer, moral order, and the temporal structuring of the usable past's projections to the future. Although the audience of these speeches would be in the thousands, it is worth noting that presidential (and candidate) speeches are often covered in local, national, and social media and otherwise set a standard for party discourse.

For Orbán, we used the official government website (*AboutHungary.com*), which publishes all official remarks by the prime minister, which then are generally partially or fully reproduced across Hungarian media that are nearly under full control of the Fidesz Party (Krekó and Enyedi 2018). The website publishes only the main remarks and speeches by the prime minister, making the sample smaller than Factbase's. We thus had to choose a different approach. Rather than reducing the available data by year and keywords, we analyzed Orbán's last term in office from 2018 through the April 2022 elections. (This period also covered the 2020 presidential election that Trump lost.) We closely read all the text (transcripts) ranging from weekly appearances on the radio show *Good Morning, Hungary*, interviews, and public speeches to diplomatic statements and essay-style pieces (called "samizdat"), manually selecting speeches relevant to victimhood. For the studied period, this rendered 221 relevant instances of remarks, of which 49 contained substantial explanations of Hungarian victimhood (in interviews, press statements, and speeches) that we analyzed according to the categories outlined earlier. We could have selected a longer time frame, but we aimed to illustrate how hijacked victimhood works, rather than describe in detail all its manifestations, which would necessitate a long empirical paper. For the list of cited speeches with denotations, see annex 1.

ON DOMINANT GROUPS, MORAL ORDERS, AND FUTURE HARMS

Both Trump and Orbán offer sweeping and simplified narratives delineating the groups they claim to represent (and fight for) while linking contemporary concerns with the past. They also construct a moral order that presents righteous, deserving in-groups versus causal agents of injustice (their political opponents and those they represent). The strategic communicative appeals to these identity groups are aligned with the political coalitions of the two leaders and their political parties. Their constituents are consistently portrayed as the rightful national inheritors, even as they have been or are in the process of becoming disenfranchised through the morally compromised actions of allegedly ill-intended groups among their political opponents' supporters, such as migrants, Blacks, minorities, and Jews. They thus turn strategic victimhood into hijacked victimhood by rhetorically reversing positions with victimized groups and thereby targeting their political opponents.

Table 1 presents a summary of our findings from the selected speeches in terms of relations and identities of victims and victimizers (including direct and indirect targeting); purported moral orders and usable pasts; and the main

Table 1
Hijacked Victimhood in Hungary and the United States

	Viktor Orbán	Donald Trump
Victims (in-group)	Ethnic Christian Hungarians (in and outside Hungary), silenced Hungarians, Hungary, Viktor Orbán	White Christian Americans, American workers, and small business owners, Donald J. Trump, [white] America
Direct victimizers (out-group)	Brussels, liberals, the Left, western and liberal media, "Soros-," "globalists," Great Powers, the liberal political and economic elite	"Washington elite," Biden, Democrats, BLM, the Left, foreigners, socialists, economic elites, judges
Direct but at times indirect victimizers	Immigrants, refugees, Muslims, LGBTQIA+ movement	Immigrants, refugees, Muslims, secular culture, Blacks
Moral order	Morally righteous ethnic, white, Christian Hungarians under threat of national dispossession and geographic, religious, and political displacement	Morally righteous white Christian Americans under threat of political, national, and economic dispossession, economic harm, and violence
"Usable past" projections to the future	Historical battles, 1920 Trianon Treaty, communism, 1989	1776, founding fathers, US Constitution

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targets of hijacking. We also analyze how the two leaders stylize themselves into victims to shore up support, which suggests why victimhood narratives function so effectively.

Relational Aspects of Hijacked Victimhood: Group Relations, Identity and Dominance

The overarching relational aspects of Orbán's and Trump's victimhood narratives are of key importance. In Hungary, the imagined nation is presented entirely in terms of favored, dominant identity groups; that is, Hungarian-born, conservative, family-focused Christians who are allegedly under threat. Orbán—who is ever present in Hungarian media, which he fully controls— repeatedly tells a story that Hungary is a structural victim of oppressive global elites (who are also implied to be Jewish; see Subotic 2022) and is maltreated in current European affairs, mainly by Brussels. The country is targeted by a western liberal conspiracy of "Brussels bureaucrats," "Soros-run" universities, and western financial institutions (such as the International Monetary Fund and World Bank) that constitute the "global elite." He portrays these as predators—often using implied antisemitic tropes—who are trying to bring down Hungary and its (traditional) way of life. Such victimizers are at times presented as protected by Orbán's political opposition. Following Orbán's fourth reelection in April 2022 when Fidesz faced a unified opposition that threatened its political domination, he listed the enemies he defeated: "the Hungarian left and the international left on all sides; the Brussels bureaucrats; all the money and every organization in the Soros empire; the international mainstream media; and, towards the end, even the President of Ukraine [note: he is also Jewish]. We've never faced so many opponents at once" (VO2).[4]

This particular enemy list is driven by political competition, but there is also continuity among those threats. Since the mid-1990s Fidesz's main competition has been "the Left" and, later, liberals supported by western allies and entities such as the European Commission—which is also one of Orbán's primary targets given its continuous criticism of his government. Consider a variation on the same theme from Orbán's oath-swearing ceremony in 2022: "The Hungarian left and their international allies, politicians, financiers, and the media all rallied against us. Let us make it clear: Brussels and George Soros were also playing to ensure our downfall" (VO1). That said, the political context does add some nuance to Orbán's narrative. He is careful not to attack the idea of the European Union, given that he was one of the main advocates of Hungary joining the EU. His strategic narrative is that the EU is now in a state of crisis and is treating Hungary unfairly, which is causing its financial troubles. Rather than the EU, Orbán talks of an implied fifth column in "Brussels," "Brussels bureaucrats," or "Brusselites" as the victimizers who are attacking Hungary through policies (e.g., migration quotas) and withdrawals of funding. In a speech to the Hungarian parliament in 2018, Orbán railed against the alleged attacks his government faced, interlacing a conspiracy theory about population replacement following the migration crisis of 2015: "In European politics not a day goes by without someone biting at our ankles: …we are being attacked by the global elite, which have so artfully and thoroughly devised a plan for European population replacement, in the hope that they can thereby weaken nation states and parties based on Christian foundations, and then take control of the European Union—and with it the nations of Europe" (VO3).

In addition to Brussels, Orbán has continuously blamed the Jewish financier George Soros for most of the economic and reputational ills that have befallen Hungary. Entwined with antisemitism, Soros has become shorthand for all evil and a sponsor of a fifth column in Hungary (Vachudova 2020): "We are up against media outlets maintained by foreign concerns and domestic oligarchs, professional hired activists, troublemaking protest organizers, and a chain of NGOs financed by an international speculator, summed up by and embodied in the name 'George Soros,'" he warned in 2018 (VO4). To Orbán, Soros "is undoubtedly the world's most corrupt man: a financial speculator, even though his makeup artists have given him the face of a philanthropist" (VO5). He has increasingly started using Soros as an adjective, such as "Soros-type" to delegitimize civil society, "Soros report" to devalue European Commission reports, and "Soros-run" to belittle western entities such as the Central European University that was forced out of Budapest by his regime (cf. VO6). It is no exaggeration to suggest that "Soros" as an adjective has also become implied antisemitism (cf. Subotić 2022).

Whereas Orbán returned to power in 2010 on the heels of domestic public outrage, Trump emerged victorious in 2016 with a concerted racist campaign that also had at its heart the questioning of former President Obama's birthplace and US citizenship (Pham 2015). Trump thrived by advancing express racial appeals to whites as a dominant group in a white-dominant Republican Party (Jardina and Mickey 2022). These racial appeals also feature in other elite discourses in the party, as revealed by organized efforts to challenge critical race theory and the "1619 Project" (the *New York Times* project to center slavery and race in narratives of the country's founding; Miller and Livingston 2023). In Trump's narratives, whiteness is the often implied baseline for all the other identity groups he appeals to, including those based on religion, class, and gender.[5] His rhetoric casts whites as fighting for their "rightful place" in the country in which the primary causes of threats to their status—and even their downfall—are Democrats, Washington DC elites, the media, judges, immigrants, Black people, and the Left in general. He

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advances a set of appeals to whites that portray immigrants and progressive cultural policies as threats to a [white] American way of life and culture and what it means to be an American. The out-groups are consistently found across his speeches as part of his constructed identity work, as are his in-groups [whites]— although the identities of the latter are constructed on multiple levels including religion and class.

One of the more striking victimizer groups in the Trump moral universe is the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, which started in 2013. In Trump's narratives, there are a range of victims of the protests coordinated by BLM, from those represented by the contemporary Republican coalition such as middle-class whites to Black people themselves. In particular, Trump focused on the harms from BLM to [white] small business owners and the police. On August 17, 2020, Trump stated, "I've traveled to Minnesota to meet with small-business owners who were victims of the violence, mayhem, [and] destruction on the streets of Minneapolis [after the murder of George Floyd]. And for these brave patriots—right over here…. what they've been through is incredible" (DT4).

Trump also casts the police as victims of BLM, again hijacking victimhood and diminishing the movement's legitimacy and potency. He accused BLM activists of using dehumanizing rhetoric, including calls for violence and even death. During one presidential debate, held on October 22, 2020, Trump stated, "Well, you have to understand, the first time I ever heard of Black Lives Matter, they were chanting pigs in a blanket, talking about police, pigs, pigs, talking about our police! Pigs in a blanket, fry 'em like bacon. I said that's a horrible thing and they were marching down the street, and that was my first glimpse of Black Lives Matter" (DT5). In his rhetoric, the Black community itself is a victim of BLM. In an attempt to fracture the Democratic Party's coalition, especially its solid bloc of Black supporters, Trump blames the Left in general for the movement. This is important, because it shows how social groups are used in hijacked victimhood to harm a political opposition (in a similar way as migrants are used in Hungary). At various points, Trump argued that BLM wanted to destroy families, encourage mob rule, abolish police and prisons, implement open borders and socialism, require attendance at public schools, and promote abortions to kill unborn Black children. In a long speech on September 25, 2020, for example, Trump suggested that BLM threatens the American rule of law:

> We can never allow mob rule. To have safety, to have prosperity, to have everything that you want to have, we must always ensure the rule of law…. Many of those who are spreading violence in our cities are supporters of an organization called the Black Lives Matter or BLM. The stated goal of BLM organization people is to achieve the destruction of the nuclear family, abolish the police, abolish prisons, abolish border security, abolish capitalism, and abolish school choice…. This is not the agenda of the black community. This is the agenda of an extreme socialist, or worse, you know what the other word is.… Joe Biden and the Democrats say that black lives matter but they do not protect the most vulnerable black lives of all: unborn children (DT6).

More broadly, Trump articulated the cultural and political threat posed to whites in the United States not only by BLM but also by the work of scholars, activists, and journalists pursuing racial equity. Although masked in an appeal to people of all races and ethnicities, Trump's narratives about the dangers of the 1619 Project and critical race theory are articulated to absolve whites of guilt, to craft an American center on dominant-group terms, and to convey the threat of national dispossession for dominant white Christians. In a speech on September 17, 2020, he declared,

> The left has warped, distorted, and defiled the American story with deceptions, falsehoods, and lies. There is no better example than the *New York Times*' totally discredited 1619 Project. This project rewrites American history to teach our children that we were founded on the principle of oppression, not freedom. Nothing could be further from the truth…. The narratives about America being pushed by the far-left and being chanted in the streets bear a striking resemblance to the anti-American propaganda of our adversaries—because both groups want to see America weakened, derided, and totally diminished (DT7).

The identitarian work that Trump performs is clear—namely, this is about a set of appeals to important coalitions within the Republican Party and his base while specifically condemning Democrats and the ideological Left as a broad coalition. Trump hijacks the victimhood of historically oppressed groups to reinforce the positions of the white majority.

Moral Orders: Innocence of the Righteous against Outsiders

The relational dynamics in terms of victims–victimizers and dominant–nondominant groups are reflected in a larger moral order that upholds the righteousness of dominant groups. For example, Orbán constructs dominant-group righteousness through the threat posed by nonrighteous groups, especially migrants and refugees during migration crises (Toth 2020). In the process, he hijacks their suffering and casts them as tools of Brussels' politics. The constructed moral order in Hungary is that of righteous Hungarians (read as the Fidesz base) who are fighting a long-running battle to save Europe and defend their national sovereignty. Orbán posits ethnic Hungarians as historical (though defiant) victims, hijacking the positions of the actual historical, structural victims in the country: Jews and Hungarian ethnic and social minorities (Pető 2021). Especially since the 2015 migration crisis, Orbán speaks of the danger to the righteous people posed by immigrants, as in this 2018 speech to mark a historic

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anniversary: "Europe and Hungary stand at the epicenter of a civilizational struggle. We are confronted with a mass population movement which is an imminent danger to the order and way of life that we have known throughout our lives up until now" (VO4). Orbán presents Hungary as a heroic fighter protecting the original "Western way of life" against an "internationalist Left" and western forces from Brussels such as gender equality, racial justice, open borders, and "rainbow" policies that threaten dominant groups at the center of the nation. In an infamous speech in 2022, Orbán noted,

> The internationalist left employs a feint, an ideological ruse: the claim—their claim—that Europe by its very nature is populated by peoples of mixed race. This is a historical and semantic sleight of hand, because it conflates two different things. There is a world in which European peoples are mixed together with those arriving from outside Europe. Now that is a mixed-race world. And there is our world, where people from within Europe mix with one another, move around, work, and relocate. So, for example, in the Carpathian Basin [historical Hungary] we are not mixed-race: we are simply a mixture of peoples living in our own European homeland (VO7).

Orbán has long argued that being Hungarian means being Christian but that this identity is now in peril. He both constructs and preys on demographic anxieties (given that Hungarian birth rates are dropping) that are, at their core, an expression of racism and nativist attitudes. He hijacks the discourse of suffering by crafting narratives in which Hungarians are falling prey to left-wing policies that lead to "floods" of non-Christian (primarily Muslim) migrants; at times he blames migrants for their fates or presents them as dangerous pawns of local and global liberals who are leading European Christian culture into a dark abyss.

The combination of the 2015 refugee crisis and the actual demographic decline of white Hungarians has provided fertile ground for Orbán's endorsement of the conspiratorial Great Replacement Theory (GRT)—a prevalent conspiracy narrative that centers on [white] children being replaced by nonwhites (Obaidi et al. 2021). The GRT was also espoused by groups at the attempted U.S. Capitol coup on January 6, 2021 (Armaly, Buckley, and Enders 2022). Orbán is flexible in his hijacking. At times, he presents migration politics as a conspiratorial enterprise developed by political elites in Brussels, the "international left," and Soros with the aim of weakening Hungary and its white Christian allies such as Poland. When he tries to be more conciliatory, he stresses that liberal politicians in Europe are "blind" and that their acceptance of immigration is due to a lack of foresight. He strategically switches between these two positions depending on his aims and audiences. For example, when railing against the domestic political opposition before elections, he uses the conspiratorial mode. When trying to present himself as a prescient connoisseur of world affairs, he casts his enemies as clueless. In all situations, victimhood claims by refugees and migrants are hollow against the backdrop of the alleged national threats.

There are clear resonances in Trump's embrace of similar themes about the moral order of racial and religious groups in the context of immigration. He especially cites economic threats to dominant groups, however. Trump constructs a clear moral order of contending groups, while narratively situating his own coalition as being unjustly dispossessed of its livelihood, status, and nation. For example, Trump and his supporters have long claimed being "deplorable"—Hillary Clinton's characterization of racist, anti-immigrant Trump supporters during the 2016 election—as a badge of honor and victimhood. In speeches, Trump rhetorically constructed "deplorable" whites as the true Americans who were being exploited; they were deserving people being kept in relations of dependence and poverty (including through immigration). By so doing, he obfuscated reasons for economic precarity by characterizing it as the result of intentional structural harms by the Democrats. In Trump's rhetoric, Washington's political class, media, and political elites, as well as Democrats more broadly, loom large as the victimizers—while the "deplorables" are the victims facing economic and social harms (including to their status) and cultural ones (including to their values). This narrative reclaims the idea of a "deplorable" in a way that elevates this group to be a pure victim of unjust and even "evil" actions; it maps this identity clearly onto Trump's electoral (and social) coalition—made easier by Clinton's remark—all the while blunting claims of structural discrimination against minorities in the United States. For example, on February 19, 2020, Trump claimed,

> I'm a deplorable. Only this way can we save the America we love and drain the Washington swamp, which is vicious, horrible, ugly and evil, much worse than I thought. But we're getting there and not pleasant, a bunch of really bad people, very dishonest people. With your help, we will lift millions more of our citizens from welfare to work from dependence to independence and from poverty to prosperity (DT8).

Representing a distinctly nativist strand of Republican politics, Trump propagated narratives that political and social elites embrace open borders and seek to displace [white, Christian] Americans from their historic seats of power in the nation, for both cultural (on the Left) and economic (on the Right) reasons. Although there have been waves of immigration throughout the history of the United States, there have also long been nativist sentiments and white backlash (cf. Norris and Inglehart 2019) that were especially aligned with an anti-immigrant faction in the Republican Party over the past five decades (Hajnal 2021). When Trump focuses his narratives on immigrants, he constructs both a historical sense of the country (as white and Christian) and specific instances of victimhood, such as "stolen" borders, lives, livelihoods, elections, and even governmental services. Across these

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disparate claims, there is a similar construction of malicious agents (Democrats and elites on the Left who facilitate immigrant entry and represent them) and victims (whites, white Christians, etc.). In this narrative, the elites have long outsourced jobs to other countries or, even worse in Trump's eyes, invited outsiders in to take [white] American jobs so that they can enrich themselves: "For the last half-century, Joe Biden's been outsourcing your jobs right here in Pennsylvania. You were one of the biggest victims of it" (DT2). Trump's rhetoric was even starker on another occasion:

> For five decades, Joe Biden shipped away your jobs, shut down your factories, threw open your borders and ravaged our cities while sacrificing American blood and treasure in endless foreign wars, and you know, they're all coming back.… Our great soldiers. Countries you'd never even heard about. He's the embodiment of the political class that enriched itself while draining economic life and soul out of our country (DT3).

The threatened displacement common to both Hungary and the United States is the marginalization of Christianity. On April 18, 2020, Trump argued, "I am somebody that believes in faith … but the Christian faith is treated much differently than it was. And I think it's treated very unfairly" (DT9). On June 22, 2020, Trump went on to claim, "If you have a radical left group of judges, religion, I think, will be almost wiped out in America."[6] This dovetails with a conservative legal strategy that has turned from a pluralistic, state neutrality with respect to religion toward an express embrace of the state protecting and even advancing Christianity. As Epstein and Posner (2022, 344) write, "In just the last half-century, Christian conservatism has been transformed from the mainstream ideology of the country [the US] into the agenda of a minority group, which claims to need and deserve protection under the Constitution."

Transnationally, these themes about white Christian victims sit alongside a broader set of narratives about immigrants displacing, and replacing, white people from their rightful place as inheritors of the nation (Norris and Inglehart 2019). Most saliently, Trump's steady narrative drumbeat throughout the 2020 election was that his supporters and Republicans were victims of a stolen election that immigrants allegedly participated in. On December 5, 2020, Trump stated,

> I used to say, "Without borders, we don't have a country." I can say also, "Without an honest voting system, without an electoral process that works and that's honest and fair, we don't have a country either."… But the system will be fixed when these people get in. They'll get in, and we'll fix the system. Because we're all victims. Everybody here, all these thousands of people here tonight, they're all victims, every one of you (DT11).

This speech is part of a long chain of claims about immigrants voting illegally and thus acting as criminals —and being allowed to act as criminals. Trump stated in 2020, "Last night Joe Biden vowed that his immigration policy will be catch and release, he thinks it's great. You catch a criminal, murderer, rapist, you catch the criminal, and you release the criminal into our country. And you say in four years you have to be back for a court case, right? But they never came back" (DT12). Trump blames first those who let immigrants in and then immigrants themselves as responsible for a broad range of social harms, such as taxing government services: "When we have people that hate us, or when we have countries that hate us, they come out of regions that are a disaster. We don't want them in our country, we don't want them.… They [Democrats] wanna allow virtually unlimited access into our country, they wanna—Healthcare, education" (DT13). Rather than focusing on the causes of migration or human-rights abuses of migrants themselves, Trump hijacks their positions to wield them against his opponents—casting US citizens as the real victims of immigrant crime and the burdens placed on social services.

Past Victimization Leads to Future Harms

Strategic victimhood links past and present suffering. Hijacked victimhood narratives can feature the teleological projection of past harms into the future to create the only logical conclusion, which is to engage in the current battle and support the crafter of the message. Here we see several parallels and transational resonance between the two cases, especially regarding Great Replacement Theory. In Hungary, the racism and Islamophobia inherent in narratives of GRT are entwined with, and justified through, historical narratives of Ottomans as invaders, the 1920 Trianon trauma[7] of assimilated Hungarians, and ideologies of the traditional family that also have a transnational resonance. In 2022 Orbán argued that "Muslim adults are [not] a good substitute for Christian children who aren't being born" (VO8) and criticized the "rainbow politics" (VO9) of gender equality and education as part of a liberal conspiracy to undermine both Christian values and the biological reproduction of whites in general. Indeed, he often portrays education on different gender identities and LGBTQIA+ more broadly as part of a concerted effort to push the number of Hungarian births to even lower levels. In this narrative, this is a situation of life and death: Orbán argues that Hungary and Central Europe cannot let themselves become victims again. He links the present day with past defeats and the future so Hungarians comprehend the gravity of the situation: "Here at the border of Latin and Orthodox spirituality, at the frontier of the Western and Russian worlds, at the fault line of Christian and Muslim civilizations, here life is more serious, the stakes are always higher, the self-image of peoples and nations is always more contoured" (VO10). In the same speech from 2021, he deemed Hungary as under attack: "Their [the opposition] task is to win power and implement the grand plan: to break Hungary, which

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stands in the path of immigrants; and first to settle thousands, then tens upon tens of thousands of immigrants in Hungary within a few years. These numbers are no exaggeration. Europe is now under invasion" (VO10).

Orbán frames this "struggle" as familiar to Hungarians who (in his discourse) have always acted as the prime resistors in European history; for example, protecting Europe from the Ottomans until the twentieth century or as resisting, for a while, the efforts of Nazi Germany to transport Hungary's Jews during World War II to extermination camps (Jews started being transported from Hungary in 1944, but with Hungarian participation; see Pető 2022). This skilful rhetoric brings in usable pasts and the widely recognized symbol of battle to construct the political consequences if Hungary falls prey once again to foreign powers (cf. Kovács and Trencsényi 2020): "There will be a battle. We now have three major battles to fight in Brussels: one of them is this gender madness; the second is the issue of migration; and the third is about who should foot the bill for environmental degradation," he warned in his regular radio broadcast (VO11).

In Orbán's telling, history is a unidirectional course of events from the foundation of the Hungarian state a thousand years ago through occupations by the Ottomans and submission to the "Great Powers" (including the USSR) that have resulted in Hungarian sacrifices and losses of population. The agents of this misery are not only domestic traitors but especially outsiders, the foreign malevolent "invaders." He uses simplistic Manichean terms with references to actual historical battles, such as the Battle of Mohács in 1526 against the Ottomans that led to the partition of Hungarian territory, the 1920 Trianon Treaty, and the crushed Hungarian revolt in 1956 that Orbán increasingly blames on Ukrainians (Takacsy 2023). As he noted in 2021 during a ceremony opening a highway, "It is clear that this was a prosperous region until it was torn apart by the Great Powers after the First World War" (VO12). In 2022, he added that it is "our generation's mission to try to stitch back together what outsiders and the Great Powers tore apart" (VO1), suggesting that unless Hungary learns and fights, it will fall prey to the Great Powers once again. This is where Orbán sees his role as the one who will lead a heroic fight in the name of all Hungarians against the victimizers, essentially turning a passive suffering victimhood narrative into an active heroic-defiant victimhood (cf. Barna and Knap 2023). The direct victims of Hungary's historical defeats—such as Jews and religious and ethnic minorities—are often sidelined or erased in the national story (Pető 2021). This hijacked victimhood narrative is recognizable, fairly linear, simplistic, and unidirectional and supports Orbán's political objective of stylizing himself as the savior of Hungarians and his various political oppositions as the perpetrators.

Trump speaks in less grandiose terms but like Orbán sketches a story wherein white dominant groups are at risk of becoming victims of a set of forces seeking to displace their rightful inheritance of the nation—or, alternatively, they are already victims of these forces. He casts his base as facing an existential crisis. These claims rest on an invocation of the historical status of white Christianity and the achievements (greatness) of the [white] American nation (that are allegedly at peril), as well as the construction of present-day threats from the Left, especially those who would center the understanding of race in American history. To provide an example, in an extraordinary July 3, 2020, Independence Day speech at Mount Rushmore (which provided a backdrop of presidents carved into a granite mountainside), Trump narratively outlined American values and history and told a story about the social and cultural bonds of attachment that historically animated the country. All of this is under assault, however, by those who plot to destroy America's history and sense of self:

> Those who seek to erase our heritage want Americans to forget our pride and our great dignity, so that we can no longer understand ourselves or America's destiny. In toppling the heroes of 1776, they seek to dissolve the bonds of love and loyalty that we feel for our country, and that we feel for each other. Their goal is not a better America; their goal is the end of America (DT14).

In this excerpt are cited a host of cultural harms propagated by out-groups (e.g., "those," "they," "their"), including the displacement of [white] American historical narratives of exceptionalism and virtue (seemingly in favor of a more nuanced—and honest—analysis of America's racial history.) Trump refers to universally understood symbols (such as 1776) as a usable past to mark America's greatness, whereas the (unnamed) oppressors should be understood against the backdrop of political contests over the teaching of America's racial history, which includes the fact that many of America's founders were slave owners. As such, the implied in-group in this speech are whites and white Christians, and the implied out-groups are those who support Democrats: the Left, Black people, immigrants, and a "woke" elite that has advanced calls for a racial reckoning.

The Political Leader as a Victim-Savior

Finally, the teleological aspect of victimhood is key to understanding why leaders need to style themselves as victims, a feature that emerged from our empirical analysis. Although in different forms and despite their common appeals to greatness, both Orbán and Trump fashioned themselves into prototypes of victims—in essence, stand-ins who represent the suffering of the identity groups they politically claim to defend (Kreiss, Lawrence, and McGregor 2020). At the same time, they are the keys to saving or redeeming "their" people.

The overall aim of Orbán's narratives is to portray himself as a wise and protective father of the nation (playing on the imperial history of Austria-Hungary),

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who means well and only acts in the interest of his "compatriots." Orbán's language regarding his own victimization is one of "dissidence": he stands in defiance of political and media hegemonies and is the only brave dissenter to voice his opinion, for which he suffers. He stylizes himself as a muzzled politician who is vilified by the European mainstream media. He hijacks the arguments of liberals in Hungary whose voices have *actually* been silenced through Fidesz's full control of the media (Magyar and Madlovics 2022) and claims that he needs to publish "samizdat" to be heard. A familiar term in the postcommunist world, "samizdat" is used intentionally—given Orbán's previous anticommunist activism—to allow him to use a label that in the past was granted to genuine fighters for freedom and democracy against communist regimes, such as Václav Havel or György Konrád. Indeed, Orbán takes pride in the international attacks on his politics, which he takes to be proof that he remains the only true voice against leftist hegemony: "The liberals have gained a huge advantage in the media, in universities, in public administration, in the courts; they've built up a position of what I call 'hegemony of opinion'" (VO13). This way Orbán can claim a position of moral superiority.

Trump espouses the language of being a direct victim of his enemies, the system, and state judicial institutions, using terms such as "witch-hunt" (see Isom et al. 2022). Yet, he is also a victim who will undoubtedly triumph. For example, there are Trump's repeated and recurrent victimhood claims that took shape around the result of the allegedly "stolen" 2020 election (which was also "stolen" from his supporters) and his ongoing legal investigations (e.g., Dowd 2022). Like Orbán, Trump focuses on his supposed silencing through "cancel culture" and the presumptive (non-empirically validated) closing off of [white] conservative expression. In this, Trump's rhetoric is aligned with the Right in the United States more generally, which has hijacked victimhood by claiming censorship—while simultaneously maintaining media power and intervening in state-sponsored education curricula and libraries to foreclose teaching racial history—and weaponizing calls for free speech to secure platforms against their political opponents. In a set of speeches, for instance, Trump cast himself as a prototype of conservative victimhood from a leftist media environment that forecloses right-wing political expression. In doing so, Trump is tapping into a white, conservative aggrievement about "political correctness" or, more contemporaneously, "wokeness" (Berry and Sobieraj 2013; Hochschild 2016):

> Today's Left tolerates no challenge and allows no dissent.… You can do horrible things, or you can do nothing wrong, and they'll put in phony stories. I'm actually a victim of the opposite. I'm just thinking of that while I'm talking to you. They do phony stories that are totally false, and they'll put 'em up and there's nothing you can do.… If you disagree with them, they try to humiliate you, smear you, and cancel you. Cancel culture, right? (DT15)

There is clearly palpable transnational learning on the Right that is suggested by these (and other cases), as leaders stylize themselves as global outcasts in their fight for the true cause. After all, Budapest has increasingly become a hub for right-wing traditionalist conservatives who endorse the victimhood narratives presented there, including some from the United States, building what some call a "global radical right" (Abrahamsen and Williams 2023). For Trump and Orbán, victim identification is important to showcase that they themselves are willing to get involved in the struggle and sacrifice themselves for the greater good. This makes them not only victims but also saviors.

CONCLUSION

Much of the current political analysis focuses on the decline of democracies and the rise of authoritarian and populist leaders. With Donald Trump's election as president in 2016, populist and nativist discourse emerged victorious in a country that prides itself on democratic traditions, proving that the appeal of such rhetoric is not simply the prerogative of countries with histories of dictatorships. By comparing Trump's rhetoric with that of the leading authoritarian populist in Europe, Viktor Orbán in Hungary, we aimed both to showcase the wealth of links and similarities in victimhood discourse and to highlight contextual differences.[8] We analyzed the strategic hijacking of victimhood by leaders representing dominant groups through a political communication perspective. We showed how in these leaders' narratives, dominant groups are presented as victims or would-be victims of a set of political opponents: shadowy elites (often implied as Jewish), international bodies, immigrants, and historically marginalized racial and ethnic groups. In the process, the (actual) victimhood claims of such groups are relativized or even delegitimized while the positions of dominant groups are symbolically reinforced. Although historically linked to passivity, weakness, and marginalization, claiming the position of a victim in the twenty-first century comes with moral gravitas, existential threat, righteousness, and therefore mobilizational power—which is clear from all the strategic uses of victimhood. Yet hijacking victimhood is the even more dangerous face of strategic uses of victimhood. It not only mobilizes one's electoral base and delegitimizes opponents but it also blunts the agendas of rights-based movements and elevates political stakes to existential levels—which for dominant groups means the defense of their unequal power and privilege.

Hijacked victimhood strategies are conditioned by the countries and political contexts these leaders must navigate. Both Orbán and Trump use a combination of victimhood tropes to shore up their political coalitions, but these narratives clearly unfold differently. Orbán tells a story about an ongoing Hungarian struggle for civilizational survival, where the national unit needs to fend for itself, where Christianity is under attack, and where the true

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national population of Hungarians represents a lone truthful voice. For Trump, hijacked victimhood came in the context of affirming and reaffirming the perceived grievances of whites and Christian whites, especially in economic, political, and cultural terms. In the process of narrating stories of white Christian victimhood, Trump clearly conveys the moral status of this social identity group. White Christians are not the historic progenitors of chattel slavery, Indigenous genocide, or white one-party states in much of the United States through the 1960s; instead they are the inheritors of a noble, morally righteous past.

Yet, the way Orbán and Trump hijack victimhood is similar. Their main targets are domestic and international opposition (which is especially acute in the Hungarian case because of its EU membership). Hijacking the victimhood positions of marginalized and subaltern groups that often support the opposition (and the EU as a rights-based organization) allows these targets to come into view as their immoral defenders. Black Americans, Muslims, and immigrants at times serve as proxy victimizers to the main culprits: the liberals, the Left, and Democratic elites. Such constructions work overtime to reinforce the identities and statuses of the dominant groups and in ways that absolve guilt and responsibility and thus shape the "autobiography" of a state (Ejdus 2020; Kinnvall 2004; cf. Steele 2008).

Certainly, hijacking victimhood is part of the communicative manifestation of grievance politics, or the "fueling and funnelling of negative emotions and various blame-based political strategies" (Flinders and Hinterleitner 2022) and the "politics of fear," as Wodak (2021) put it. Yet it is also an exercise designed to shore up the ontological security of dominant groups with clear mobilizational power because it implies a set of threats that can be averted or overcome. That is the work of hijacked victimhood over longer time scales—the ways that it serves not only to keep leaders proximately in power but also to shape the very definitions and understandings of the status and rightful place of dominant groups in their nations, as well as in the international system: weakening and delegitimizing claims of actual victims, demoralizing communities of out-groups, and desensitizing majority populations to sources of human suffering. Unlike strategic victimhood that is widespread across the political spectrum, hijacked victimhood forms a central part of nationalist, populist, and far-right political discourse. It is a dangerous communicative tool that presents a harmed group and guilty party against the backdrop of relations of dominance—and in the case of Orbán and Trump—legitimates the illiberal protectors of an unequal social order.

We leave much for further research. For one, after identifying a broader theme in the literature around strategic victimhood as a communicative phenomenon, we focus specifically on a subset of claims of hijacked victimhood. We believe that there are other subcategories of strategic victimhood, including when relations between various groups are not known or unclear or as they play out among comparatively equal social groups. Although we have empirically demonstrated the presence of hijacked victimhood and suggested scholarship that points to the existence of victimhood claims among other leaders in countries such as Russia, Brazil, Turkey, and Poland, we leave the systematic application of this framework to others. One intriguing aspect to explore is to determine if, when, and how leaders learn from each other, as hijacked victimhood circulates across contexts and borders as tools for reinforcing dominant power.

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Notes

1 We rely on Jacoby (2015) who distinguishes victimhood as identity and victimization as the experience of victims.
2 For a critical assessment see David 2020; Vollhardt 2020.
3 We appreciate that in many cases unlawfulness is assessed retrospectively; however, an exercise of clearly identifying a universe of victims will always be stricken with disputes of this sort.
4 Orbán directly mentioned Ukraine during the second month of the Russian invasion to justify his refusal to support the country alongside the EU/NATO alliance.
5 See, for instance, Butler (2021) for a discussion of why scholars need to recognize that evangelicalism is raced, and clearly delineate white evangelicalism and its history of racial exclusion.
6 This came in the context of a Supreme Court ruling protecting LGBTQIA+ civil rights, and immediately after this quote, Trump references the pro-life movement. See DT10.
7 The 1920 peace treaty signed in Trianon led to a loss of two-thirds of the territory and nearly three-fourths of the population of prewar Hungary (Toomey 2018). See also Barna and Knap (2023).
8 For a different angle comparing the two, see Madlovics and Magyar (2022).

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Annex 1. List of Cited Speeches

Viktor Orbán speeches (retrieved November 2022)

Label	Description	Date	Link
VO1	Speech given by PM Viktor Orbán after swearing his prime ministerial oath	May 16, 2022	https://abouthungary.hu/speeches-and-remarks/speech-given-by-prime-minister-viktor-orban-after-swearing-his-prime-ministerial-oath
VO2	Speech by PM Viktor Orbán after the election victory of Fidesz-KDNP	April 3, 2022	https://abouthungary.hu/speeches-and-remarks/speech-by-prime-minister-viktor-orban-following-the-election-victory-of-fidesz-kdnp
VO3	Viktor Orbán's speech in parliament before the start of daily business	September 17, 2018	https://abouthungary.hu/speeches-and-remarks/prime-minister-viktor-orbans-speech-in-parliament-before-the-start-of-daily-business
VO4	Viktor Orbán's ceremonial speech on the 170th anniversary of the Hungarian Revolution of 1848	March 15, 2018	https://abouthungary.hu/speeches-and-remarks/orban-viktors-ceremonial-speech-on-the-170th-anniversary-of-the-hungarian-revolution-of-1848
VO5	Prime Minister Viktor Orbán on the Kossuth Radio program, *Good Morning Hungary*	December 18, 2020	https://abouthungary.hu/speeches-and-remarks/prime-minister-viktor-orban-on-the-kossuth-radio-programme-good-morning-hungary
VO6	Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's speech at the annual meeting of the Hungarian Seniors' Council	October 1, 2019	https://abouthungary.hu/speeches-and-remarks/prime-minister-viktor-orbans-speech-at-the-annual-meeting-of-the-hungarian-seniors-council
VO7	Speech by Prime Minister Viktor Orbán at the 31st Bálványos Summer Free University and Student Camp	July 23, 2022	https://abouthungary.hu/prime-minister/prime-minister-viktor-orbans-speech-at-the-29th-balvanyos-summer-open-university-and-student-camp
VO8	Prime Minister Viktor Orbán on the Kossuth Radio program, *Good Morning Hungary*	January 21, 2022	https://abouthungary.hu/speeches-and-remarks/prime-minister-viktor-orban-on-the-kossuth-radio-programme-good-morning-hungary-61eeac07e1628
VO9	Samizdat 11	June 28, 2021	https://abouthungary.hu/speeches-and-remarks/samizdat-no-11
VO10	Samizdat 12	September 13, 2021	https://abouthungary.hu/speeches-and-remarks/samizdat-no-12
VO11	Prime Minister Viktor Orbán on the Kossuth Radio, program *Sunday News*	August 24, 2021	https://abouthungary.hu/speeches-and-remarks/prime-minister-viktor-orban-on-the-kossuth-radio-programme-sunday-news-6124aa853e1cb
VO12	Speech by Prime Minister Viktor Orbán at the opening ceremony for the section of the M30 motorway linking Miskolc and Tornyosnémeti	October 21, 2021	https://abouthungary.hu/speeches-and-remarks/speech-by-prime-minister-viktor-orban-at-the-opening-ceremony-for-the-section-of-the-m30-motorway-linking-miskolc-and-tornyosnemeti
VO13	Samizdat 10	June 17, 2021	https://abouthungary.hu/speeches-and-remarks/samizdat-no-10

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Donald Trump Speeches (retrieved November 2022)

Label	Description	Date	Link
DT1	Donald Trump's inaugural address	January 20, 2017	https://factba.se/topic/inauguration
DT2	Donald Trump rally speech transcript, Allentown, PA	October 26, 2020	https://factba.se/transcript/donald-trump-speech-campaign-rally-allentown-pennsylvania-october-26-2020
DT3	Donald Trump campaign rally, Greenville, NC	October 15, 2020	https://factba.se/transcript/donald-trump-speech-campaign-rally-greenville-north-carolina-october-15-2020
DT4	Remarks to supporters in Minneapolis	August 17, 2020	https://factba.se/transcript/donald-trump-speech-minneapolis-airport-august-17-2020
DT5	Presidential debate at Belmont University in Nashville	October 22, 2020	https://factba.se/transcript/donald-trump-second-debate-nashville-trump-biden-october-22-2020
DT6	Remarks at a "Black Voices for Trump" rally in Atlanta	September 25, 2020	https://factba.se/transcript/donald-trump-remarks-black-economic-empowerment-atlanta-georgia-september-25-2020
DT7	Remarks by President Trump at the White House Conference on American History	September 17, 2020	https://factba.se/transcript/donald-trump-remarks-white-house-american-history-september-17-2020
DT8	Remarks by President Trump at a "Keep America Great" rally in Phoenix	February 19, 2020	https://factba.se/transcript/donald-trump-speech-kag-rally-phoenix-arizona-february-19-2020
DT9	Remarks by President Trump and members of the Coronavirus Task Force in press briefing	April 18, 2020	https://factba.se/transcript/donald-trump-press-conference-coronavirus-briefing-april-18-2020
DT10	David Brody of CBN News interviews Donald Trump at the White House	June 22, 2020	https://factba.se/transcript/donald-trump-interview-david-brody-cbn-news-june-22-2020
DT11	Donald Trump holds a political rally in Valdosta, GA	December 5, 2020	https://factba.se/transcript/donald-trump-speech-campaign-rally-valdosta-georgia-december-5-2020
DT12	Donald Trump holds a campaign rally in Pensacola, FL	October 23, 2020	https://factba.se/transcript/donald-trump-speech-campaign-rally-pensacola-florida-october-23-2020
DT13	Donald Trump holds a campaign rally in Macomb County, Michigan	November 1, 2020	https://factba.se/transcript/donald-trump-speech-campaign-rally-macomb-county-michigan-november-1-2020
DT14	Remarks by President Trump at South Dakota's 2020 Mount Rushmore Fireworks Celebration, Keystone, SD	July 3, 2020	https://factba.se/transcript/donald-trump-speech-mount-rushmore-independence-day-july-3-2020
DT15	Trump holds a rally in Reading, PA	October 31, 2020	https://factba.se/transcript/donald-trump-speech-campaign-rally-montoursville-pennsylvania-october-31-2020

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