

“Utopia shut up shop”: Hopeless Futures, Populism, and the American Dream

Abstract

This article considers the political implications of temporal orientations, building on Reinhart Koselleck’s conceptual histories of “progress” and “utopia”. A computational analysis of survey data from the 2016 US election provides a snapshot of the breakdown of the American Dream for some respondents, and its continued relevance for others. Rather than progress from past to future, data shows negative perceptions of the past or present associated with negative expectations for the future, a link especially pronounced among white respondents and those who subscribe to “America first” beliefs. At the same time, to the extent that racial privilege is inversely related to expectations of future progress, the findings suggest that utopian narratives of progress can help smooth over injustice or inequality with view to a better future. Expectations of progress are thus tightly woven into perceptions of injustice or marginalization.

Keywords: American Dream; America first; future orientations; progress.

WRITING AFTER THE 1929 stock market collapse, economist Stuart Chase declared the end of utopia. In the same work, called *A New Deal*, he also elaborated tools for improving the economy—indeed the book provided the name (and many ideas) for Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s reform agenda. However, the end of utopia was not portrayed in terms of past economic woes, but rather how these problems linked to a closure of future possibilities: after declaring that “Utopia shut up shop,”

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he noted that “[t]he realization that our future is not boundless is only now thrusting home” [Chase 1932: 67].

A similar argument has been made more recently with reference to the American Dream, namely the expectation of progress putatively available to all Americans through their own hard work [Hochschild 1995; 2016]. In her recent *British Journal of Sociology* Annual Lecture, Michèle Lamont [2019] pronounced the American Dream defective, with growing inequality rendering it less achievable for more people [see also Case and Deaton 2020; Chetty *et al.* 2017]. The result, Lamont [2019: 660] argued, is widespread hopelessness as the American Dream loses its effectiveness as a “collective myth”. Similar to Stuart Chase, this newer argument about the breakdown of the American Dream also thinks through a future that is “not boundless” [Chase 1932: 67]. It is significant, however, for explicitly linking closed futures to deeply felt political consequences [e.g., Hochschild 2016; Lamont 2019]. In particular, hopelessness is said to underpin the current political moment in the United States, part of the rise of populist, anti-establishment politics [Dodd, Lamont and Savage 2017; Hochschild 2016; Lamont 2019].

Meanwhile, a separate and influential strand of research has considered the *benefits* of future orientations. Sociological research has long shown that more hopeful views of the future are a powerful resource for individuals across the life course [Frye 2012; Hitlin and Johnson 2015; Parsons 1948; Schafer, Ferraro and Mustillo 2011; Sewell, Haller and Portes 1969; Vaisey 2010]. Future orientations have even been theorized as an important part of agency—as it is constituted between past, present, and future—and of action rooted in the past and oriented to a particular future [Emirbayer and Mische 1998; Hitlin and Elder 2007; Mische 2009; Tavory 2018; for a review, see Beckert and Suckert 2021]. These two strands of research are therefore complementary, one pointing to the utility of hopeful future orientations, and another to the negative effects of a breakdown in hopefulness. At the same time, the links between populist politics and the breakdown of the American Dream point to the political implications of future orientations [see also Appadurai 2013; Beckert 2016]. This is my focus in what follows, looking first to conceptualize and operationalize narratives of progress or its breakdown, and second to elaborate the links between progress narratives and perceptions of injustice—and in the process more thoroughly uncover the political implications of future orientations.

Drawing on Reinhart Koselleck’s conceptual histories of ‘progress’ and ‘utopia’ [2000; 2002; 2004], I locate progress in the process of narratively bridging between experience and expectations to maintain belief in a

progressively better future [on utopia, see also Levitas 2010; Mannheim 2013; Ricoeur 1986]. Belief in progress is belief that the future will be better than the present or the past. The breakdown of progress, meanwhile, involves expectations of repetition, that the future will be much the same as the present or the past. Progress, in turn, is tightly woven into perceptions of injustice or marginalization, and this, I argue, is central to the political implications of future orientations. As a utopian narrative of progress, the American Dream helps smooth over injustice or marginality with view to a better future [Koselleck 2000, 2002, 2004], serving this purpose both historically [Grandin 2019] and for marginalized minorities [Lamont 2000]. Conversely, the breakdown of a narrative of progress like the American Dream brings to the fore feelings of deep injustice such as those elaborated through the “America first” and ‘make America great again’ movement [see for instance Hochschild 2016]; this can render populism an adaptation to anomie of the sort Merton [1938] wrote about many decades ago when also taking on the breakdown of the American Dream [see also Levi, Sendroiu, and Hagan 2020].

Using survey data from the 2016 US election, which coalesced around a putative breakdown of the American Dream, and the need to put ‘America first’ so as to make America ‘great again’ [Dodd, Lamont and Savage 2017; Lamont 2019], the findings are a snapshot of the breakdown of the American Dream among white respondents, particularly those who subscribe to ‘America first’ beliefs. For them, contra ideas of progress towards a better future, models show that negative perceptions of the past are predictive of negative expectations for the future. Conversely, respondents from minority communities, particularly those identifying as African American or Latinx, were considerably more hopeful about the future, evincing continued belief in the American Dream *despite* their relative marginalization.

By bringing together research on the benefits of hopeful futures [e.g., Emirbayer and Mische 1998; Frye 2012; Hitlin and Johnson 2015; Schafer, Ferraro and Mustillo 2011; Tavory 2018] with considerations of the breakdown of the American Dream [e.g., Case and Deaton 2020; Chetty *et al.* 2017; Hochschild 2016; Lamont 2019], this article contributes to better conceptualizing the temporal dimensions—past, present, and future—of a utopian narrative of progress like the American Dream, while taking into account its political effects as either a powerful motivator smoothing over inequality and injustice, or conversely dredging up grievance politics in the face of the putative breakdown of progress. Feelings of injustice emerge when “utopia shut[s] up shop” [Chase 1932: 67], and this can have important political implications.

Future orientations

Future orientations, while under-explored as a field of study, have long been incorporated in prominent models of culture [see also Adam 1994; Bergmann 1992; for an overview, see Beckert and Suckert 2021]. Early Parsonian action theory explicitly involved future orientations, with Parsons [1948] highlighting the teleology of action which orients to a future that will only exist if the action itself takes place. While later iterations of Parsonian thought moved away from action and towards a systemic, structural functionalism, other research traditions took up the mantle of future orientations. Rational choice theory posited future orientations as post-hoc rationalizations of what has already taken place. Later, practice theorists such as Bourdieu [1990; 2000] and Giddens [2013] focused on how future orientations emerge within contexts replete with pre-existing experiences, dispositions and social structures. And researchers have built on these insights to highlight how groups' shared orientations to the future—and time itself—come to be constructed in iterative interactions [Tavory and Eliasoph 2013; Thévenot 2006; Zerubavel 1999].

Future orientations also play a central role in sociology's long quest to define agency [Abbott 2001; Emirbayer and Mische 1998; Hitlin and Elder 2007; Mische 2009]. Emirbayer and Mische [1998] argue that as part of a richer definition of agency, future imaginaries orienting action can be neither teleological (as per Parsons), nor purposeful goal-seeking (as in rational choice theory), nor routinized and taken-for-granted practices (as in the practice theories of Bourdieu or Giddens). Temporality thus proves to be a crucial aspect of agency as it emerges and is constituted by past, present and future (a view that echoes Dewey's concept of reflective intelligence). Emirbayer and Mische [1998: 963] "reconceptualize human agency as a temporally embedded process of social engagement, informed by the past (in its habitual aspect), but also oriented toward the future (as a capacity to imagine alternative possibilities) and toward the present (as a capacity to contextualize past habits and future projects within the contingencies of the moment)." The future—that is, a view of the future rooted in present contexts and past knowledge and experiences—proves central to human action [Mische 2009, 2014; Tavory 2018].

And the future is not only implicated in theoretical conceptions of action and agency. In fact, sociological research has long shown that more hopeful views of the future are a powerful resource for individuals in the

face of adversity [Frye 2012; Hitlin and Johnson 2015; Parsons 1948; Sewell, Haller and Portes 1969; Sewell, Haller and Ohlendorf 1970; Vaisey 2010]. In work on educational aspirations among young Malawian women, Frye [2012: 1570] shows that “aspirations both motivate decisions, such as which courses to take in school, and enable particular strategies of action, such as avoiding early marriage.” And being hopeful about the future is empowering across the life course, with effects on attainment, health, and well-being [Hitlin and Johnson 2015; Johnson and Hitlin 2017; Schafer, Ferraro and Mustillo 2011; though see Sendroiu, Upenieks and Schafer 2021].

Taken together, then, we see that looking to the future shapes agency, action, and attainment. Future orientations are, for individuals, a crucial and powerful resource. But—precisely because they are a powerful individual resource for resilience and action—future orientations are also political, deriving from collective narratives that lead individuals to have particular expectations for their futures [on this, see also Appadurai 2013; Beckert 2016; Tavory and Eliasoph 2013; Thévenot 2006; Zerubavel 1999]. To investigate this further, I turn to one well-known temporal political trope, namely the American Dream.

From the American Dream to populism

The American Dream – an expectation of future (economic) success achievable through hard work, and available to all [Hochschild 1995] – has long been unachievable, and increasingly so in an era of deindustrialization and globalization [Case and Deaton 2020; Chetty *et al.* 2017; Silva 2019]. Yet despite the evidence, the American Dream is a powerful and deeply compelling cultural narrative, such that many have believed, and continue to believe in it [Lamont 2000, 2019]. In her classic work on the subject, Jennifer Hochschild [1995] posited the American Dream as a great—though fraying—unifier.

Along similar lines, Lamont [2000] documented how American workers maintain dignity, and even continue believing in the American Dream despite a limited ability to live it. For white, working class men, the American Dream is recast as moral boundaries against non-whites and the poor, elaborated using neoliberal scripts of the disciplined self [Lamont 2000]. Meanwhile, Black workers, while less likely to elaborate individual explanations of poverty, are especially committed to the American Dream. Indeed, Lamont [2000: 119] argues that a result of

the deepening marginality of African American communities is that “the American Dream has a particularly mythic power for them. A middle class lifestyle looms large on their horizons of hope...”

Increasingly, however, the American Dream has become “less effective as a collective myth,” replacing hope with hopelessness [Lamont 2019: 661]. And this hopelessness, combined with growing inequality, works to deepen individualism in the US, heightening the salience of exclusionary boundaries and an accompanying sense of threat already primed by stigmatizing narratives deployed against immigrants and others [Lamont 2019]. Thus, with deindustrialization and globalization creating fewer realistic options of achieving the American Dream [Chetty *et al.* 2017], the resulting pessimism and anger lead individuals who feel marginalized to right-wing populism [Gest 2016; Lamont 2019]. In particular, the election of Donald Trump in the United States and the Brexit vote in the UK have been widely seen as heralding a new era of politics, one where political establishments on two continents were resonantly found wanting, replacing political predictability with contention borne of deepening hopelessness [Dodd, Lamont and Savage 2017].¹

In the United States, the current populist moment feeds on the pessimism and anger resulting from the breakdown of the American Dream. In her work on the Tea Party, Arlie Hochschild [2016] shows that an unachievable American Dream is central to populism, contributing to “anger and mourning on the American right”. Hochschild paints a picture of individuals left behind by globalization elaborating this frustration through Tea Party politics. Her respondents’ “deep story” of self focuses on the American Dream always retreating further out of reach, a process exacerbated by federal government favoritism of non-whites even further behind in line for the Dream.

The putative need to “make America great again” espoused by Donald Trump is thus predicated on expectations for a better future (i.e., the American Dream) being replaced with a sense of loss felt about a better past. In their study of Donald Trump’s speeches, Lamont, Park and Ayala-Hurtado [2017] show how Donald Trump aligns himself with a virtuous, white working class united in suffering the negative effects of globalization. At the same time, they find that these speeches draw strong

¹ Populism, however, remains an ill-defined and much debated phenomenon [BONIKOWSKI 2017; MUDDÉ 2007; see BERMAN 2021 for a review]. Though beyond the scope of this article, much of the debate centers around what populism is a case of, ranging from political mobilization to an

ideology or frame [BONIKOWSKI and GIDRON 2016b]. Bart Bonikowski [2017], for instance, elaborates populism as a mutable political strategy that can be used by political actors across a variety of contexts and ideologies [see also BONIKOWSKI and GIDRON 2016a].

moral boundaries against a variety of groups, especially undocumented immigrants, refugees, and Muslims. This is a pattern that holds with a long history of populist styles in American politics, which on the right end of the political spectrum are elaborated through anti-globalist nationalism [Bonikowski and Gidron 2016a; see also Brubaker 2017].

The phrase ‘America first’ has a long history, originating with the America First Committee founded in 1940 in opposition to American involvement in World War Two. A notably anti-Semitic movement, it was disbanded after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor [Calamur 2017]. For Donald Trump, meanwhile, America first seems to be a combination of the themes described by Lamont, Park and Ayala-Hurtado [2017], hearkening back to a presumed better past while opposing globalization and a variety of groups perceived to be threatening the American people. Thus, in *The New York Times* interview where he first mentioned the concept, the working definition seems to be as follows: “[s]o America first, yes, we will not be ripped off anymore. We’re going to be friendly with everybody, but we’re not going to be taken advantage of by anybody” [Makela 2016]. The new version of “America first” is therefore predicated on the breakdown of the American Dream—from a glorious past to a depleted present and a hopeless future—just as this breakdown is subverted by being blamed on others, “a mystification that simultaneously recognizes and refuses limits” [Grandin 2019: 273].

Existing sociological research on populism and the American Dream therefore operationalizes the breakdown of the Dream through individual hopelessness, the loss of personal expectations for a better future. While a national trope or “collective myth” [Lamont 2019: 661], the American Dream is ultimately an expectation of *individual* success, one that has long been an empowering, national unifier [Hochschild 1995; Lamont 2000; Silva 2019]. The Dream is therefore the basis for beneficial future orientations in line with research on the utility of hopeful individual futures [Frye 2012; Hitlin and Johnson 2015; Parsons 1948; Schafer, Ferraro and Mustello 2011; Sewell, Haller and Portes 1969; Sewell, Haller and Ohlendorf 1970; Vaisey 2010], but one that is particular for its political valence and scope [Beckert 2016; see also Tavory and Eliasoph 2013 on the relationship between individual and collective temporal frameworks]. This political scope also means that the breakdown of the American Dream has had deeply felt political consequences, especially populism [Dodd, Lamont and Savage 2017; Lamont 2019; though see Silva 2019 on this breakdown leading individuals *away* from political action].

Research has linked right-wing populism to a wide range of factors, top-down and bottom-up [see Berman 2021 for a review], but when it comes to demand-side explanations, scholars emphasize either economic or sociocultural factors. Economic explanations center rising inequality over the past century [Piketty 2014; Reeves 2018] which, scholars argue, has created deep cleavages between elites and everyone else, experienced as a rural-urban divide, an education gap, a wealth gap, and so on [Cramer 2016; Iversen and Soskice 2020; Judis 2016, 2018]. Sociocultural explanations, meanwhile, focus on grievances regarding minorities—particularly among white men—and notably exacerbated with the election of Barack Obama [see, for instance, Gest 2016]. Recently, the two explanations have been considered together, towards “a politics of collective status-threat” [Bonikowski 2017: 202]², and this is what I build on here, together with sociological research that links populism to the breakdown of the American Dream [Dodd, Lamont and Savage 2017; Hochschild 2016; Lamont 2019]. This, to some extent, focuses the analysis on more economic matters, since the American Dream is primarily elaborated in economic terms, as Hochschild [1995] notes in her classic work on the subject. Yet the breakdown of the American Dream is also a sociocultural explanation—indeed primarily a sociocultural account of populism. The works of Lamont [2000, 2019] or Hochschild [2016] described above remind us that populism is not—or not solely—an economic process. While it is animated by hardship, what ultimately matter are perceptions (or framings) of hardship, with economic anxiety heightening receptivity to populist politics [Noury and Roland 2020]. This is indeed the thrust of the conceptual model elaborated in the next section, which links expectations of progress to perceptions of injustice.

Progress and its breakdown

I thus elaborate a conceptual model of the American Dream as it could be captured in individuals’ temporal beliefs. Focusing in particular on ideas of cyclical repetition versus temporal progress, I propose a model of the American Dream that can help make sense of individuals’ experiences

² This is particularly the case since, as Berman [2021] cogently summarizes, economic explanations work at a macro level but not when dealing with individual preferences

or voting behaviors. Meanwhile, sociocultural explanations function well at the micro level but less so at the macro.

both when they believe in the Dream and when it breaks down. Drawing on Reinhart Koselleck's work—specifically his conceptual histories of 'progress' and 'utopia'—I argue that narratives of progress require that we consider the interplay between experience and expectations, rather than solely focusing on expectations for the future. I therefore propose a conceptualization and operationalization of the American Dream at the intersection between expectations for the future and perceptions of the "present past" [Koselleck 2004: 259; on "present past" see also Luhmann 1991]. This can, in turn, be applied to understand both progress and repetition—and therefore both continued belief in, or conversely the breakdown of the American Dream—while also providing insight into the complex ways deprivation and marginalization function across the two conditions.

Reinhart Koselleck elaborated progress as the employment of a specific sort of temporal experience, one that links past and future: whether "person-specific or interpersonal," expectations are for a future *better* than past or present experience [Koselleck 2004: 259]. From this, I propose that continued belief in the American Dream can be conceptualized and operationalized as expectations that the future will be better than the past.³ Put differently, experience is only meaningfully related to expectations through progress: *my future will be different, and better, than my present and my past*. Hochschild [2016: 140–141] describes precisely this sense of a certain future with reference to the American Dream: "[a]s an ideal, the American Dream proposes a right way of feeling. You should feel hopeful, energetic, focused, mobilized. Progress—its core idea—didn't go with feeling confused or mournful." Meanwhile, the alternative to progress is a sense of cyclical repetition from past to future, that *if I have done poorly in the past, this can also happen in the future*. We can therefore conceptualize and measure a breakdown of the American Dream when the gap between experience and expectation can no longer be bridged. Rather than progress from the present past to a better future, individuals instead perceive a repetitive continuity between the two. They come to believe that the future will look much like the present and the past.

³ Reinhart Koselleck [2002] describes narratives of progress with reference to the Enlightenment. Jens Beckert [2016], meanwhile, argues that narratives of future growth are central to the rise of capitalism and its continued relevance [see also BOURDIEU

1977]. Here I apply a similar logic to the American Dream, flipping the lens to look at the breakdown of narratives of progress while also accounting for concomitant continued belief in progress.

For Koselleck, expectations of progress could be utopian, inasmuch as they established a (linear) philosophy of history, a narrative of progress “without and free from resistance” [Koselleck 2002: 91; Roitman 2014]. Koselleck thus argued that future utopias are presented as reality rather than hope, such that “[w]hat is desired is presented as declarations about reality” [Koselleck 2002: 88]. A utopia is an especially compelling narrative of a future that ought to be *and* will come to be. The result is that utopian constructs are especially powerful political mechanisms, smoothing over a discouraging present with view to a considerably better future [Koselleck 2002, see also Koselleck 2000, 2004]. Indeed, Koselleck [2000, 2002] argued that utopias can bracket off the present to such a degree that they erase the relevance of present political action, the logic being that the present matters little when the utopian future will anyway come to pass. Utopia means that progress and decline are no longer “oppositional concept[s]”; rather, progress is general and eternal, while decline is temporary, a momentary blip in an otherwise smooth, upward-trending line [Koselleck 2002: 227; see also Koselleck 2004].

Understanding the American Dream as a specifically utopian narrative of progress therefore provides purchase on how experiences of marginalization or beliefs about injustice fit within this narrative. Progress, put simply, can both justify and conceal hardship—whether the ‘hustle’ attributed to the American Dream or more systemic injustice—with view to a better future. When it comes to the American Dream, this is the case for those perpetuating injustices in the name American progress [Grandin 2019], but also for those experiencing marginalization who nonetheless believe in this progress. For instance, from her interviews in the mid-1990s, Lamont [2000] concluded that the American Dream was especially compelling for Black respondents precisely as they were facing greater threats to their dignity. The expectation of progress implicated in the American Dream was, for them, a source of resilience as they experienced substantive and deepening limits to their wellbeing [*Ibid.*].

Conversely, the breakdown of utopian narratives of progress—and their replacement with expectations of continuity between from present past to future—engenders feelings of injustice. For those caught in the bind of less hopeful futures—the breakdown of progress, replaced by alignment between future and present past—the result is that “[y]ou are a stranger in your own land” [Hochschild 2016: 144]. The temporal utopia of the American Dream makes it so that “to feel honored you have to feel—and feel seen as—moving forward” [*Ibid.*]. The absence of this expected progress is disorienting and painful. It engenders a sense of

injustice that making America 'great again' is precisely an effort to fix, by putting 'America first' and therefore restoring to their rightful place the putatively marginalized 'strangers in their own land.' And this political effort is especially compelling for those keenly feeling the breakdown of utopia, and seeking to sustain this philosophy of history—indeed, Koselleck [2004: 272] argues that it is specifically "the task of political action to bridge this difference [between experience and expectations]."

In what follows, I consider empirically this relationship between future expectations and views of the present past. In so doing, analyses show both expectations of progress and its breakdown, with attendant implications for experiences or perceptions of marginalization. Thus, whites surveyed around the 2016 election—particularly those who subscribe to "America first" beliefs—have negative expectations for the future, evincing a breakdown of belief in progress combined with a sense of injustice elaborated as "America first". Conversely, members of marginalized minorities are considerably more hopeful about the future, suggesting continued belief in the American Dream, a belief that can be protective in the face of marginality [Lamont 2000].

Data and methods

Data come from the American National Election Studies (ANES) Time Series Study [ANES 2016]. Here, I use the complete version of the dataset, which was re-released in 2018. The sample size is 4270, including a combination of individuals interviewed face-to-face ($N=1180$) and through the internet ($N=3090$). Both face-to-face and internet interviews are from independently drawn probability samples for the majority of the United States.⁴ The analyses are based on the full sample including both modes, and interview questions from both before and after the election.

The analysis was done using prediction rule ensembles (PREs), a statistical learning method based on the RuleFit algorithm from Friedman and Popescu [2008]. The algorithm learns linear models and

⁴ They involve roughly the same population. As detailed in the 2016 ANES Time-series guidebook, "[t]he target population for the face-to-face mode was 222.6 million U.S. citizens age 18 or older living in the 48 contiguous states of the USA or the District of Columbia, and the target population for the

Internet mode was 224.1 million U.S. citizens age 18 or older living in the 50 US states or the District of Columbia" [ANES 2016: 4]. In particular, the face-to-face mode does not include respondents from Alaska or Hawaii, while the internet mode does.

includes interaction effects in the form of decision rules that are generated from an ensemble of decision trees meant to predict a particular outcome. Put differently, each path through a tree is transformed into a decision rule that then becomes a feature in a sparse (lasso) linear regression model. RuleFit uses the weights of the regression model to identify both the terms and the rules that are most important for predicting a particular outcome. The algorithm has close to the predictive performance of random forests or boosted tree ensembles, while producing more easily interpretable results [Fokkema and Strobl 2019; Friedman and Popescu 2008; Shimokawa *et al.* 2014]. PREs are thus an attempt to combine the interpretability of a single tree with the accuracy of random forests, through the use of prediction rules [Friedman and Popescu 2008; Meinshausen 2010; Dembczynski, Kotlowski and Słowiński 2010].

The benefit of PREs is that they automatically consider and introduce feature interactions to linear models, and do this in a highly interpretable format [Molnar 2019]. In particular, PREs work well for this particular analysis, one where there is a wealth of research on the topic, but where the specific interplays among various variables are nonetheless unclear. The PRE therefore functions as a quantitative version of grounded analysis, an approach also known as computational grounded theorizing [Nelson 2020; Karell and Freedman 2019]. Rather than starting from assumptions about the structure of the data or potential findings, the PRE allows for a grounded analysis of these patterns, without the risk of over-saturation or indeed data mining, a particular concern in a case such as this one, where interactions are unclear (and indeed interactions could be defensibly considered across any of the variables of interest). This sort of analysis therefore allows for a thicker, more comprehensive mapping out of the patterns found in quantitative data, an analytical strategy that would likely cause over-saturation—a ‘kitchen sink’ approach—when employing frequentist statistics.

Here, the analysis was done using the *pre* package in R and its dependencies [Fokkema 2017; see also Fokkema and Strobl 2019], fitting trees to a maximum depth of three, meaning a maximum of three conditions per rule. Parts of the model were also implemented using *caret* [Kuhn 2008]. In particular, *caret* was used to implement k-nearest neighbors imputation⁵ (using the standard $k = 5$), leading to an analytic sample of 2983.

⁵ the *knnImpute* method in *caret* automatically centers and scales all numeric variables. After imputing, I un-centered and un-scaled

the variables in order to allow for easier interpretation.

Temporal orientations

The dependent variable is a respondent's financial expectation of the near future, measured through the question: "Now looking ahead, do you think that a year from now [you /you and your family living here] will be [much better off financially, somewhat better off, about the same, somewhat worse off, or much worse off] than now?" This was coded such that a higher score is associated with more positive expectations. Further details on this and all other variables in the model can be found in Appendix 1 (Table A1).

At the same time, a Koselleck-inspired operationalization of progress includes not only a measure of the future, but also of the past. The American Dream utopia, in this sense, rests on the belief that the future is better than the past. It is therefore necessary to model the relationship between perceptions of the future and what has come before. To this end, the analysis includes a measure analogous to the dependent variable, but focused on the past year: "We are interested in how people are getting along financially these days. Would you say that [you/you and your family living here] are [much better off financially, somewhat better off, about the same, somewhat worse off, or much worse off] than you were a year ago?"

A different way to measure perceptions of progress is to ask about long-term trends, and so this was added as a further control. While this measure does not capture a sense of the future, it can nonetheless add context to more specific past or future orientations. The analyses thus include a measure of long-term economic mobility trends. Respondents were asked, "When it comes to people trying to improve their financial well-being, do you think it is now easier, harder, or the same as it was 20 years ago?" This was coded 1-7, from "a great deal harder" to "a great deal easier".

"America first" attitudes

The models also include political attitudes specific to the populist moment, in order to look at whether utopian narratives of progress are associated with populist discontent. These are derived from Levi, Sendoriu, and Hagan [2020], who built on past conceptual models of populism to develop three indexes getting at different aspects of populist attitudes for the specific America first moment. The models presented here use two of these indexes.

One is “America first” populism, and is specific to the constellation of attitudes brought together during the “America first” moment, namely vilification of globalization and strong moral boundaries against immigrants, refugees, and Muslims [Lamont, Park and Ayala-Hurtado 2017]. The index therefore includes three variables getting at negative perceptions of immigrants⁶, another variable getting at negative views of refugees (and specifically whether respondents favored Syrian refugees coming to the United States), and a further variable getting at perceptions of Muslims (using a feeling thermometer of perceptions of Muslims). Meanwhile, to get at negative perceptions of globalization and American involvement in international affairs, there are three variables: a respondent’s feelings on international trade⁷, her desire for isolationism from world affairs⁸, and agreement (1-5) with the view that “[t]he world would be a better place if people from other countries were more like Americans.” This “America first” index therefore includes eight variables incorporating respondents’ feelings about immigrants, refugees, Muslims, and globalization.

The second populism index is less specific to the current political moment, and instead gets at the feelings of political (in)efficacy implied in identifying with a virtuous people who have no say in the political projects of elites. Following Levi, Sendroiu, and Hagan [2020], I call this ‘no say’ populism, and so included measures of the respondents’ beliefs that they have no say in the political process. The measures in this index therefore ask respondents how strongly they agree (1-5) with the following three statements: “[p]ublic officials don’t care much what people like me think,” “[p]eople like me don’t have any say about what the government does,” and “[m]ost politicians do not care about the people.”

Additional measures

The model also includes a number of standard demographics such as gender (female=1), years of education, race (white=1; non-white=0),

⁶ For these questions, respondents were asked about their level of agreement with the following statements: “[i]mmigrants increase crime rates in the United States,” “America’s culture is generally harmed by immigrants,” and “[i]mmigrants are generally good for America’s economy.” These were all coded such that higher values capture more negative perceptions of immigrants.

⁷ Respondents were asked “[h]ave increasing amounts of trade with other

countries been good for the United States, bad for the United States, or neither good nor bad?” Responses were coded such that higher values denoted more negative views of trade.

⁸ This was measured through level of agreement (1-5) with the following statement: [t]his country would be better off if we just stayed home and did not concern ourselves with problems in other parts of the world.”

employment status (employed=1; all else=0) and age. I also included income in the analysis. Since it was not available as raw figures but instead as a set of income ranges, I coded each individual at the middle of the income range to which they belong (except for the bottom category, “under 5000”, which was coded as 5000, and the top category, “over 250,000” which was coded as 250,000), and then recoded to tens of thousands of dollars.

The model includes a number of additional variables. In line with the ‘deep story’ of self elaborated by Arlie Hochschild’s Tea Party respondents [Hochschild 2016], the model considers Black self-help ranging from 1 (the government should help Blacks) to 7 (Blacks should help help themselves) as well as an item on whether the federal government treats Blacks or whites better (1=treat whites better, 2=treat both the same, 3=treat Blacks better). Models also incorporate whether a respondent voted for Donald Trump.

Finally, in order to track whether a respondent’s expectations of the future were shaped by contextual conditions, the PRE includes a number of variables. Proximate to the individual, the model includes a contextual measure of job threat: respondents were asked whether any individual close to them (“family or close personal friend”) lost their job in the past year (yes=1; no=0). Less proximate to the individual were state level variables, with values assigned to each individual according to the state where they live. These include whether the state voted Republican in 2016 (1=Republican; 0=Democrat), and three variables from the US Census Bureau: the percentage of the state that identifies as non-white, the three year average (2014-2016) of the percent of the state’s population living in poverty, and the percentage of a state’s population that is foreign born.

Findings

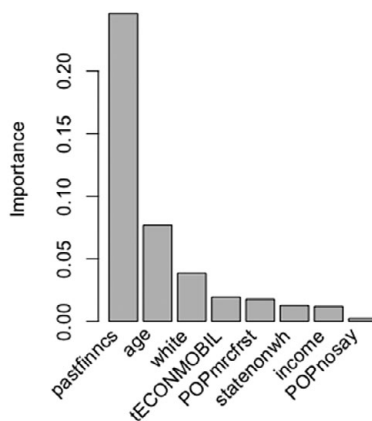
Variable importance: which variables predict future expectations

The PRE model was run on an imputed dataset that included all of the variables listed above. Of these variables, only some contributed to predicting future expectations. [Figure 1](#) displays these variables according to the importance of each of these features for predicting future expectations. We can therefore see that perceptions of the past are strongly predictive of future expectations, as are a respondent’s

perceptions of longer-term trends in economic mobility. Both measures of populism also contribute to the model, ‘America first’ beliefs more so than “no say” populism. Age, race, and income also contribute to the model, as does the non-white proportion of the state where each respondent resides.

The shape of these relationships will be discussed in subsequent sections, but it should first be noted that variables with importance equal to 0 are not plotted, and so in Figure 1, we see some key omissions. Put differently, these variables did not contribute to predicting expectations when included in a model that also accounts for the high-importance variables mapped out in Figure 1. When it comes to SES variables, we therefore see that education, gender, and employment status do not contribute to predicting future expectations, and neither do voting behavior in 2016 or family/friends losing jobs. The two measures of racial bias (preferential federal treatment and Black self-help) similarly do not contribute to predicting future expectations in this model, and neither do most of the contextual, state-level variables (i.e., state voting Republican in 2016, state poverty levels, percent of state foreign born). It should be emphasized, however, that this is not proof of a lack of correlation among expectations and any of the variables with importance=0. Rather, among this configuration of variables, others proved to be more important.

FIGURE 1
Variable importance



A note on model interpretation

The fitted PRE for predicting personal expectations is presented in [Table 1](#). This is made up of rules associated with a specific change in future expectations, which are listed in order of importance (importance is a measure which takes into account coefficients, standard deviations, and the contribution of each particular variable to the rules within which it appears [further details in Friedman and Popescu 2008 or Fokkema and Strobl 2019]). Put differently, each rule is a linear regression coefficient representing the expected increase in the response variable—in this case, future expectations—associated with each rule, holding all else equal. The rules are also presented visually as decision trees in [Figure 2b](#), [c](#), and [d](#), shown in the same order according to importance, from most to least important.

The PRE shown here involves 20 rules. [Table 1](#) lists these according to importance rank, which is denoted in the first column of the table. The second column lists the computer-generated name associated with each rule, names which can also be found in [Figure 2](#). The third column provides the coefficient associated with each rule (i.e., the predicted increase in future expectations associated with each rule), and the final column provides a description of each rule. Appendix [Table A1](#) connects the shorter variable names to their full description.

Rules can have different depth, meaning that they can involve one or more variables which, taken together in their specific configuration, are associated with a predicted change in the outcome variable. These can be interpreted as a regular regression, except that instead of one variable, there are specific thresholds of multiple variables that together combine to predict a particular coefficient change in the dependent variable, holding all else constant. To illustrate, we can look to the first and last rules listed in [Table 1](#). The first is called “pastfinances” (importance rank = 1) and points to a linear, positive relationship between past and future expectations, with a coefficient of 0.1135. This relationship is unmediated by other variables: increases in perceptions of the past are associated with increases in expectations. Conversely, the last rule, called “rule167” (importance rank=20) involves three variables. It predicts more negative future expectations (coefficient=-0.0001) for respondents (i) with relatively negative perceptions of their past finances (past finances <=3), (ii) who are white, and (iii) who ascribe more strongly to America first beliefs (POPamericafirst>2.5). To aid in interpretation, the second-most important base learner is reproduced below with added labels pointing out the different aspects of the visualization ([Figure 2a](#)).

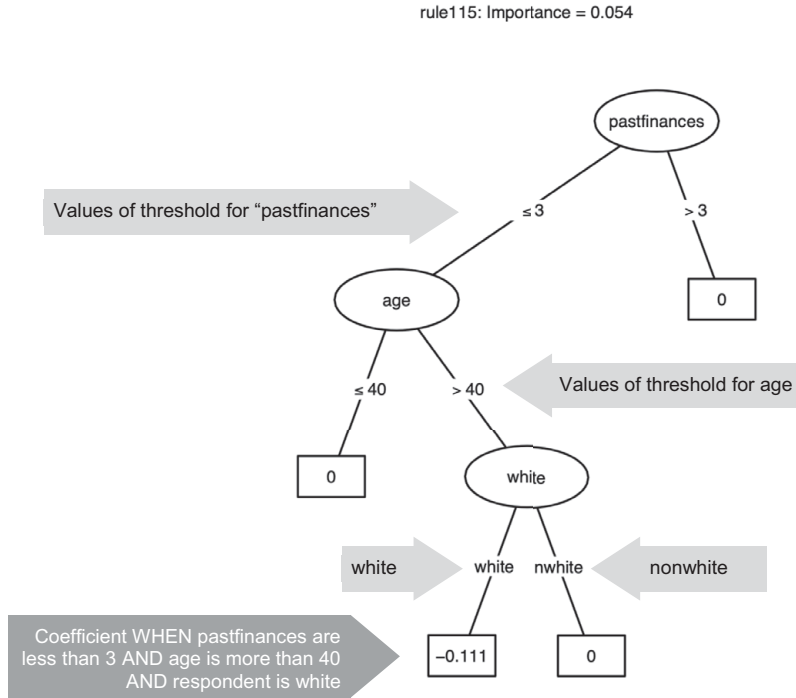
TABLE I
Terms predicting financial expectations with estimated coefficients, in order of importance, ANES 2016, N=2983

Importance	Rule #	Coefficient	Description
	(Intercept)	3.0803	
1	pastfinances	0.1135	1 <= pastfinances <= 5
2	rule115	-0.1107	pastfinances <= 3 & age > 40 & white
3	rule263	-0.0806	pastfinances <= 3 & trendECONMOBILITY <= 4
4	rule43	-0.0703	pastfinances <= 3 & white
5	rule517	-0.0638	pastfinances <= 3 & POPamericafirst > 2.4286
6	rule179	0.0591	pastfinances > 3 & statenonwh > 21.1
7	rule299	0.0554	pastfinances > 2 & age <= 63
8	rule3	-0.0430	pastfinances <= 3 & age > 42
9	rule77	-0.0356	pastfinances <= 3 & age > 40
10	rule544	0.0316	age <= 58 & income <= 9.5
11	rule468	0.0263	pastfinances > 2 & age <= 47 & income <= 13.75
12	rule27	-0.0168	pastfinances <= 3 & age > 41
13	rule101	-0.0113	pastfinances <= 3 & age > 47 & POPamericafirst > 1.625
14	rule311	0.0105	pastfinances > 2 & age <= 52
15	rule448	-0.0101	pastfinances <= 3 & POPnosay > 3.5
16	rule381	-0.0091	age > 41 & white
17	rule11	-0.0049	pastfinances <= 3 & age > 52
18	rule559	-0.0029	age > 40 & white
19	rule406	0.0027	pastfinances > 2 & age <= 58
20	rule167	-0.0001	pastfinances <= 3 & white & POPamericafirst > 2.5

Temporal orientations

The PRE demonstrates a consistent correlation between past and future orientations. Perceptions of the past represent the most important variable in terms of contributions to the model, and the most important rule, as discussed above, denotes a linear relationship between the two temporal orientations. Past perceptions are also implicated in the majority of the other rules, indicating that they consistently mediate the effects of the other variables. While these rules will be discussed in more detail in what follows, we should nonetheless note this highly consistent, positive, linear relationship between experience and expectations, to borrow Koselleck's terms.

FIGURE 2 A
Second-most important base learner, interpretation aid

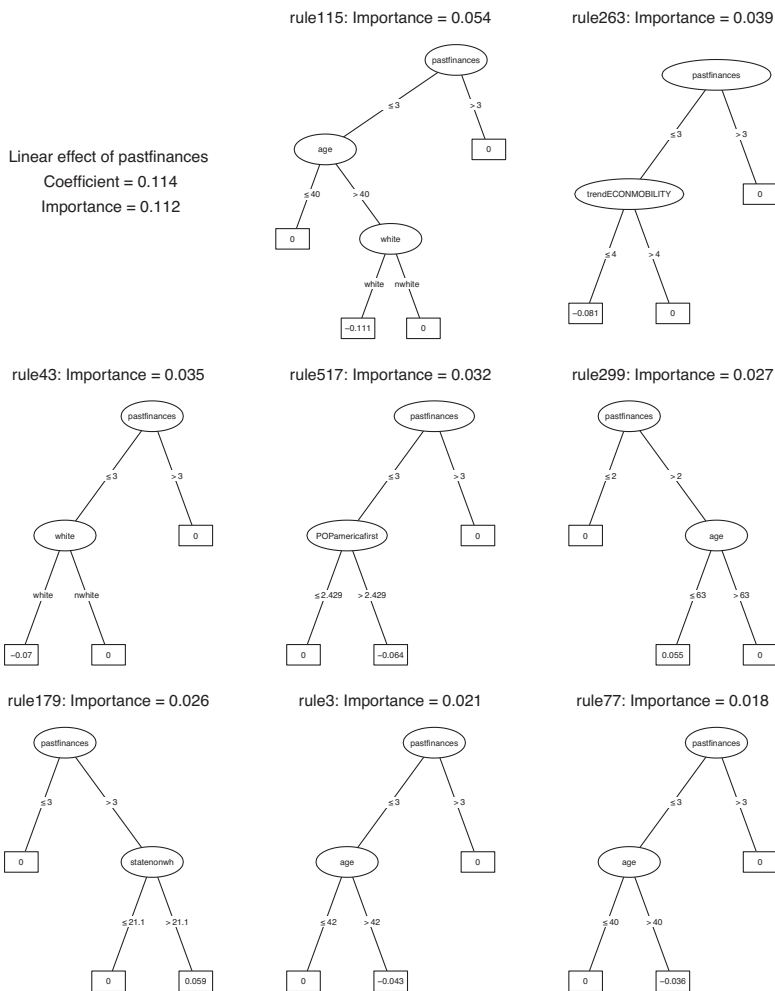


A utopian, progress-inspired, American Dream understanding of time would be marked by a disjuncture between past/present and future, such that the future should be better than what has come before. Here, instead, we see the reverse, with the two being highly correlated: a bad past predictive of a negative future. We can visualize this relationship in Figure 3, which is a partial dependence plot (PDP) of the predicted effect of past perceptions on future expectations. Thus, higher scores on past perceptions (x-axis) are associated with more positive future expectations (y-axis).

America first attitudes

Both measures of populism are related to future expectations, connected to more negative expectations, and this is particularly the case for

FIGURE 2B
PRE results visualization, 9 most important base learners

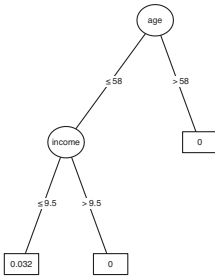


America first attitudes. The 5th most important rule predicts lower expectations in terms of more negative past perceptions and stronger America first beliefs (rule517=-0.064). The 13th most important rule is similar, but also includes higher age as a predictor of diminished expectations (rule101=-0.011). Meanwhile, the 20th most important rule

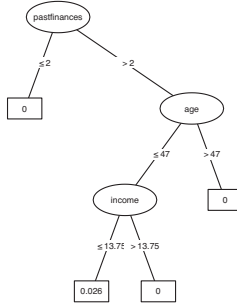
FIGURE 2 C

PRE results visualization, 10th to 18th most important base learners

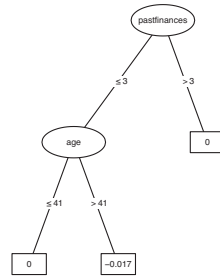
rule544: Importance = 0.016



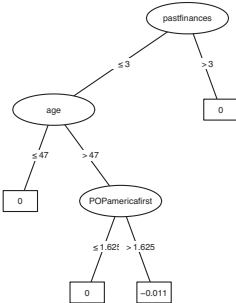
rule468: Importance = 0.012



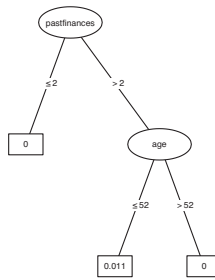
rule27: Importance = 0.008



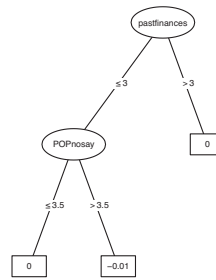
rule101: Importance = 0.006



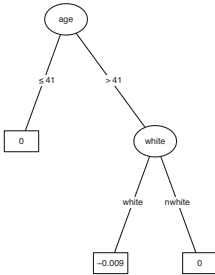
rule311: Importance = 0.005



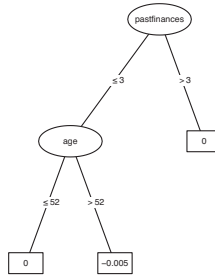
rule448: Importance = 0.005



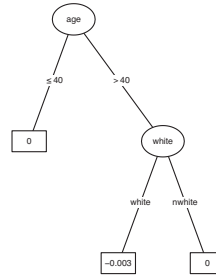
rule381: Importance = 0.005



rule11: Importance = 0.002



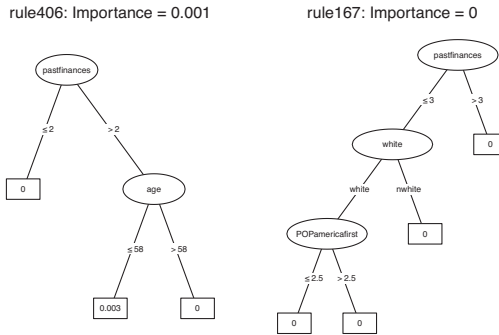
rule559: Importance = 0.001



includes race—being white—rather than age (rule167=-0.001). ‘No say’ populism is implicated in only one rule, the 15th most important. Here, stronger ‘no say’ attitudes, in conjunction with more negative past

FIGURE 2 D

PRE results visualization, 19th and 20th most important base learners



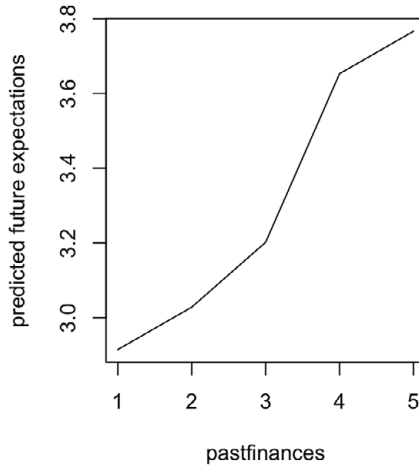
perceptions, are associated with more negative future expectations (rule448=-0.01).

Taken together, these findings contribute to an emerging picture of those who are pessimists about the future, as exhibiting a combination of negative past perceptions and populism, especially America first attitudes. Above, we saw that negative past perceptions are directly associated with pessimistic views of the future. Here, we see that these effects also function in conjunction with populist beliefs. While a causal argument is beyond the scope of this cross-sectional analysis—and so nothing definitive can be specified about whether pessimism *causes* populism or vice-versa—the co-occurrence of these variables certainly points to negative expectations being primed *alongside* the combination of negative past perceptions and populist, America first beliefs.

Race

Race is also an important contributor to the PRE. The main model elaborated above (see also Table 1 and Figure 2) includes race as a binary measure, white versus non-white. Specified as such, being white contributes to lower future expectations, though only in conjunction with other variables. This includes lower past perceptions (rule43=-0.07, importance=4), as well as lower past perceptions and age (rule115=-0.011, importance=2). Race also works in conjunction with age, such that older white respondents see lower predicted expectations (rule381=-0.009, importance=16; rule559=-0.003, importance=18), and this is especially

FIGURE 3
PDP of past perceptions

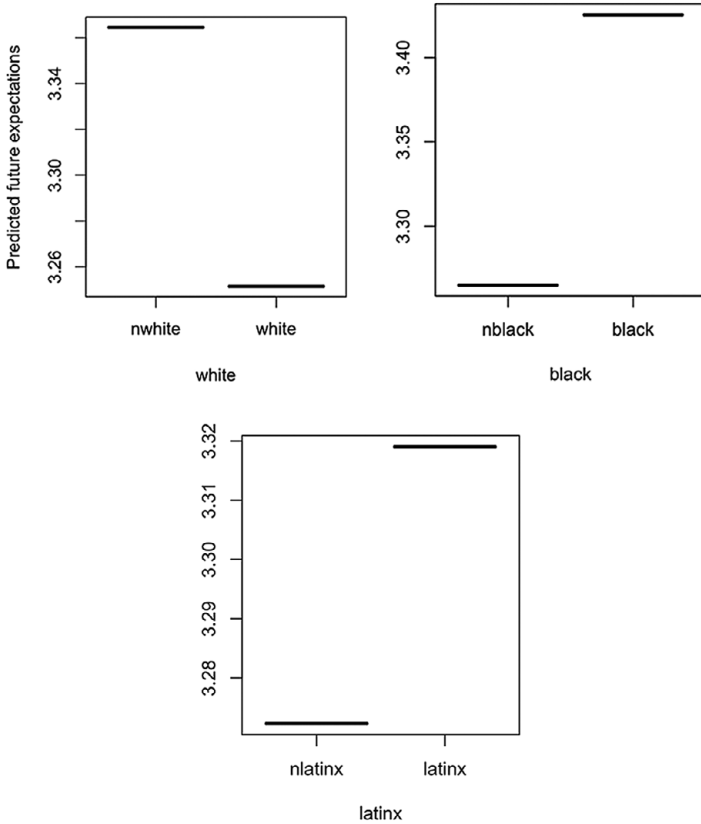


the case among these respondents who also subscribe to America first beliefs (rule167=-0.001, importance=20).

These race findings should not be overstated. More specifically, all predictor variables are also included in the initial ensemble as linear terms, so if race was a main effect unmediated by other variables, it would show up as such. And while a PDP can point us in the direction of a general race effect, both univariate and bivariate PDPs are calculated over the marginal joint distribution of the predictor variables not included in the plot. As a result, interactions are averaged over, meaning that PDPs are only a partial representation of the larger PRE [Molnar 2019; see also Fokkema and Strobl 2019].

PDPs of race are nonetheless instructive. As seen in Figure 4, whites will generally see lower future expectations than non-whites. Further PRE models (available upon request) also considered other race configurations, and PDPs from these are presented below. Figure 4 therefore also shows that Blacks generally have higher expectations than non-Blacks, and the same is the case for Latinx respondents. These further substantiate the findings from the main model presented above, that being white—in conjunction with other variables such as past

FIGURE 4
PDPs of race



perceptions, age, or America first beliefs—is associated with more negative future expectations.⁹

Taking into account race—in addition to negative past perceptions and America first beliefs—we can further flesh out the constellation of variables that together correlate with pessimism about the future. Simply put, being white *contributes* to pessimism about the future. The

⁹ The only model that did not find race differences in future expectations focused on the category of ‘race other,’ which in ANES 2016 includes a wide range of ethnic and racial

groups, from Asian to Native American. Future research should certainly disaggregate across these groups, ideally with samples including more respondents from each group.

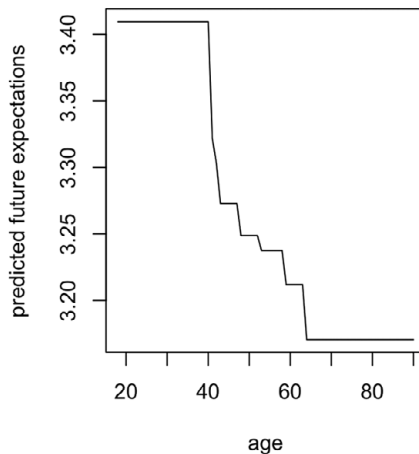
implications of this finding for the conception of utopia being elaborated in this article will be further elaborated in the conclusion, but it certainly points to a sense of pessimism that exists *despite racial privilege*. Indeed, pessimism among whites seems to function at both the individual and group level: living in a state with a larger non-white population—in conjunction with more positive past perceptions—is associated with more positive future expectations (rule179=0.06, importance=6).

Age

Age is a strong predictor of future expectations. Being younger typically contributes to more positive future expectations. This general trend can be seen in the PDP of age from Figure 5. But there are exceptions depending on the combination of variables that contribute to particular rules—in particular, whether rules take into account race in addition to age—further demonstrating the need to consider rules holistically, rather than focusing solely on the general trends depicted in partial dependence plots.

Age most frequently predicts future expectations in conjunction with past perceptions. Thus, higher past perceptions and being younger are associated with more positive future expectations (rule299=0.06, importance=7; rule311=0.01, importance=14; rule406=0.001, importance=19).

FIGURE 5
PDP of age



Conversely, lower past perceptions and being older are associated with lower expectations (rule3=-0.04, importance=8; rule77=-0.04, importance=9; rule27=-0.02, importance=12; rule11=-0.001, importance=17), and this is particularly the case among those who subscribe to America first beliefs (rule101=-0.01, importance=13).

The positive effects of being younger can also be tracked in another set of rules, where being younger even contributes to compensating for lower income. Thus, we see that being younger and having lower income is in fact associated with more positive future expectations (rule544=0.03, importance=10), and this is particularly the case among respondents with more positive past perceptions (rule468=0.03, importance=11).

However, being younger is also implicated in *lower* future expectations through other rule configurations which take into account race. We therefore see that younger whites have lower predicted future expectations (rule381=-0.01, importance=16; rule559=-0.001, importance=18), and this is particularly the case among those who also have more negative past perceptions (rule115=-0.11, importance=2).

Conclusion

Survey data from the 2016 US election captures a snapshot of the American Dream as a “collective myth” [Lamont 2019: 660], both its breakdown for some and its continued relevance for others. White respondents were more likely to believe that the future will be worse than the present, and this was especially the case for those who subscribe to “America first” beliefs. This was not the case, however, for respondents from marginalized communities.

Taken together, this substantiates the links between narratives of progress and perceptions of justice elaborated above. Building on Koselleck [2000, 2002, 2004], I have conceptualized the American Dream as an expectation of progress, and its breakdown as an expectation of repetition, with a future similar to the past and the present. This conceptual model centers marginalization and more specifically perceptions of injustice: belief in progress can conceal and even justify injustice with view towards a better future—as indeed the American Dream has done for a long time [Grandin 2019; 2000]. Meanwhile, the breakdown of expectations of progress is associated with feelings of injustice such as those elaborated through ‘America first’ or ‘make America great again’—with predominantly impoverished, rural whites feeling like ‘strangers in

their own land' at the expense of women, racial minorities, or even other countries [Gest 2016; Hochschild 2016].

Through its connection to feelings of injustice, the breakdown of expectations of progress can therefore be politically generative, towards movements that help to elaborate and focus these feelings. Inasmuch as individuals have goals that are not achievable, this has echoes in the phenomenon of anomie [Durkheim 1997], with alienation recently operationalized as futurelessness [Skotnicki and Nielsen 2021]. Merton [1938], for instance, wrote specifically of the American Dream, which he argued both encouraged individuals to pursue economic success, and also guaranteed to them that they would achieve this success through their own hard work. When this does not, in fact, take place, individuals employ a variety of adaptations to deal with their dashed hopes, crime among them [*Ibid.*]. Previous work has, indeed, linked 'America first' beliefs to lifetime criminal justice contact [Levi, Sendroiu, and Hagan 2020]. While the focus here is not criminality, we can nonetheless see a similar link between newly found hopelessness and relatively anomic adaptations.

At the same time, the findings suggest that continued belief in progress can have equally important political implications, but towards an entirely different end. Just as utopian beliefs in progress can conceal crisis (a point to which I return below), we see here that those who believe in progress continue to do so *despite* injustice. This bears important similarities to the palliative effects of just world beliefs: a well-documented finding in psychology that if individuals believe the world is fair (i.e., that individuals get what they deserve and deserve what they get), they are less likely to challenge existing political and social structures [Jost and Hunyady 2005; Upenieks *et al.* 2021]. Seeing the world as just therefore serves as a palliative belief, since it prevents individuals from acting in ways that in fact make their world better.

The breakdown of the American dream

Rather than utopian temporal progress—an assumption that the future will be better than the past or the present—for some respondents, we see that negative perceptions of the past are consistently predictive of negative perceptions of the future. And particular individual characteristics are implicated in this dynamic, especially being white and subscribing to populist beliefs. We therefore see evidence that populist beliefs are implicated in the breakdown of the American Dream, here operationalized, building on Koselleck [2000, 2002, 2004], as temporal progress

between past, present, and future. Populists are pessimistic about the past *and* the future, even while making America ‘great again’ is predicated on the construction of a purportedly better future, and so the narrative is itself a temporal progress utopia analogous to the American Dream. Indeed, making America ‘great again’ could very well be about the re-establishment of the American Dream as a functioning collective myth, even as it blames any past breakdown of the Dream on racial or national others [Brubaker 2017; Bonikowski and Gidron 2016a; Grandin 2019; Lamont, Park and Ayala-Hurtado 2017]. At the center of the breakdown of expectations of progress, then, is a powerful sense of injustice. When progress can no longer be expected, individuals feel themselves to have been disadvantaged and marginalized, and this can have important political significance.

This dynamic can certainly lead us to better consider the repercussions of the breakdown of cultural scaffoldings for action. While shifts in socio-cultural scaffoldings can engender both uncertainty and a creative rethinking of strategies for action [Bourdieu 1990, 2000; Lizardo and Strand 2010; Sendroiu 2022a, 2022b, 2023; Swidler 1986, 2004], here we see that the loss of the American Dream as a collective temporal scaffolding for action can have deeply felt political effects. Political narratives such as “America first” effectively fill the gap as individuals struggle to orient action in the absence of cultural scaffoldings such as the American Dream. In this way, politics still fulfills the function predicted by Koselleck [2004], bridging the difference between experience and expectations. Put differently, the gap between experience and expectations is highly political, and increasingly so as the gap widens.

Focusing on temporal narratives—and particularly expectations of progress—we therefore uncover the political implications of future expectations writ large [on this, see also Appadurai 2013; Beckert 2016]. Future orientations, as components of agency and action, as well as resources for resilience over the life course [Emirbayer and Mische 1998; Frye 2012; Hitlin and Elder 2007; Hitlin and Johnson 2015; Mische 2009; Tavory 2018] can be employed as part of evocative political narratives [see also Beckert 2020]. These narratives, as argued here and in previous work on the American Dream [Hochschild 2016; Lamont 2019] are deeply felt, especially inasmuch as they imply and underpin individual expectations for future progress [see also Koselleck 2004 who similarly conceptualizes experience and expectations as both individual and collective]. In turn, the loss of these expectations is at once

collective and highly personal, which is likely what makes the breakdown of the American Dream so consequential: in addition to a diffuse and collective sense of loss, individuals feel themselves to be 'strangers in their own land'.

Progress and injustice

The findings, however, also point to a peculiar resilience of the American Dream, especially when it pertains to race. While whites are especially likely to report pessimistic futures, Black and Latinx respondents are comparatively more hopeful, suggesting a dissociation between hopefulness and racial privilege. But this dissociation may simply underscore the political potential of utopian narratives of progress such as the American Dream, progress that in practice has always been difficult to achieve [Lamont 2000, 2019; Hochschild 1995]. Indeed, for Koselleck, one of the most important functions of utopia is the concealment of crisis [Roitman 2014]. Koselleck thus argues that utopian ideas of progress take away agency by establishing a philosophy of history: "[t]he empirical agent of actions is exonerated; he consummates a deed whose origin and sense is attributed to progress" [Koselleck 2002: 219; see also Koselleck 2000]. In this way, the concealment of crisis reveals the true political potential of utopias: a sense that whatever happens would have happened anyway, so the agent is irrelevant. Even decline can be explained away through this sort of logic, inasmuch as the decline is merely a blip in a larger pattern of progress that will happen despite all else [Koselleck 2000, 2002].

Substantively, then, this sort of concealment of crisis helps explain the continued appeal of the Dream even among those least likely to achieve it, namely the Black and Latinx respondents captured through ANES 2016. Indeed, precisely through this sort of logic, the American Dream has long hidden racial injustice. Writing about the American trope of an infinite, limitless frontier, historian Greg Grandin argues that "[i]t not only conveyed the idea that the country was moving forward but promised that the brutality involved in moving forward would be transformed into something noble... There was no problem caused by expansion that couldn't be solved by more expansion" [2019: 269-270]. Continuing to believe in this expansive, open future becomes both an act of faith and an end-in-itself, a way of both concealing and perhaps even justifying racial injustice through faith in a putatively better future.

Directions for future research

The findings presented here are therefore deeply evocative of both the political implications of narratives of progress and, relatedly, the traumatic effects of their breakdown—all through these narratives' potential to either conceal or focus attention to injustice. The modeling, however, has limitations that suggest a number of fruitful directions for future research. First, the absence of longitudinal data precludes an assessment of whether populist attitudes depreciate expectations of progress, or vice-versa. The analysis therefore pinpoints an evocative moment in time—the 2016 election—rather than being able to track the process through which this moment came to be. Future work using longitudinal data would be better able to disentangle this matter, and take on the question of changes over time.

Second, both measures of temporal orientations are narrowly focused on financial outcomes and limited to one year in the future or the past. While this specificity likely improves the interpretability of these questions and so makes respondents' answers more reliable, research could also look to temporal orientations across a multiplicity of domains and timelines. The American Dream is primarily elaborated in terms of economic outcomes [Hochschild 1995]—and populism as a whole is a phenomenon with both economic and cultural implications [see for instance Berman 2021 for a review]. Nonetheless, this could very well extend to other areas of life. Hitlin and Johnson [2015], for instance, look to long-term expectations that are not domain-specific in their assessment of agency over the life course.

Temporal orientations could also be considered more collectively. One key aim of this article is to explore the political implications of individual expectations, which past research has more frequently discussed in terms of agency, action, and resilience over the life course [Emirbayer and Mische 1998; Frye 2012; Hitlin and Elder 2007; Hitlin and Johnson 2015; Mische 2009; Sendroiu *et al.* 2021; Tavory 2018]. This conceptual and modeling strategy is analogous to previous conceptions of the breakdown of the American Dream [Lamont 2019; Hochschild 2016], which similarly conceive of hopelessness as an individual phenomenon rooted in the deterioration of the collective narrative of the Dream. And indeed the models presented here do control for respondents' perceptions of long-term trends in social mobility. Future research should nonetheless better consider collective temporal orientations, which could even involve looking beyond survey questions regarding collective futures towards understandings of political action based on

collective solidarity.¹⁰ Indeed, the study of futures may sometimes be poorly suited to quantitative analysis [Beckert and Suckert 2021]. Individuals and groups build complex and yet potentially momentary ideas of the future [Tavory and Eliasoph 2013] which survey data can simplify or even fail to capture. Both qualitative and computational text analysis approaches could be better suited to capturing this complexity. Mische [2014], for instance, operationalizes the future in terms of “projective grammars,” and assesses how *narratives* of the future are constructed.

Finally, the American Dream is only one narrative of progress. Through their tight relationship to perceptions of injustice, the findings and conceptual model presented here point to the important political implications of expectations of progress writ large [see also Appadurai 2013; Beckert 2016, 2020]. This political potential, in turn, suggests the need for a broad-based interrogation of the futures elaborated by elites and governments, alongside how these narratives are received, rejected, deteriorated, improved, or modified, all to great political effect. Of course the American Dream is an example, but these expectations of progress can likely be found everywhere, whether we look to communist utopias [Wright 2010], or the ways in which collective “capacities to aspire” [Appadurai 2004] may produce economic growth.

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¹⁰ I thank an EJS reviewer for this suggestion.

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UTOPIA SHUT UP SHOP

TABLE A I
Description of variables, ANES 2016 (N observations=4271)

Variable	Variable code	Range	Mean	SD
<i>Individual variables</i>				
White	white	0–1	0.72	0.45
Female	female	0–1	0.53	0.49
Income (tens of thousands)	income	0.5–25	7.21	6.02
Age	age	18–90	49.58	17.58
Employment status	employed	0–1	0.6	0.49
Family/friends recently lost job	lostjob	0–1	0.43	0.5
Voted for Trump in 2016	trumpvote	0–1	0.27	0.45
Black self-help	blackselfhelp	1–7	4.45	1.91
Federal government favoritism	fedtreatment	1–3	1.81	0.73
<i>State variables</i>				
Percentage of state population that is non-white	statenonwh	6.6–78.2	37.76	15.14
Percentage of state population living in poverty	statepov	6.9–20.8	13.64	2.72
Percentage of state population born outside the United States	stateforborn	1.7–27.2	12.47	7.57
State voted Republican (2016 elections)	republicanstate	0–1	0.61	0.49
<i>Temporal orientations</i>				
DV: Expectation of personal financial outcomes (next yr)	futurefinances	1–5	3.27	0.89
Perception of personal financial outcomes (past yr)	pastfinances	1–5	3.03	0.98
Perception of trends in economic mobility (past 20 yrs)	teconmobility	1–7	2.51	1.67
<i>Populism indexes</i>				
No say' populism	POPnosay	1–5	3.37	0.91
America first' populism	POPamericafirst	1–5	2.73	0.89