

Becoming More Conservative: Reimagining the American Dream in Contemporary America

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Abstract

This paper explores the recent change toward conservative values in the United States by reinterpreting the idea of the American Dream in both literature and contemporary politics. It focuses on how this cultural change reflects desires for individual success, stability, and identity. The study begins by analyzing the American Dream as portrayed in F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* and Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*. These characters are driven by ambition and a belief in self-made success, a pattern echoed in the real-life story of Donald Trump. As a businessman-turned-president, Trump mirrors these literary figures, emphasizing personal ambition, wealth, and the promise of success. His "Make America Great Again" slogan redefines the American Dream through a conservative lens, highlighting economic independence, traditional values, and national pride. The paper also examines how Trump's message reaches rural and working-class voters who feel left behind by globalization and cultural change. By combining literary analysis with political and sociological perspectives, this study shows how Trumpism reimagines the American Dream and reveals the enduring power of self-made myths in shaping American identity.

Keywords

Trumpism
American identity
Political transformation
American Dream

Cite as: Demir, S. (2025). Becoming More Conservative: Reimagining the American Dream in Contemporary America. *Manisa Celal Bayar University International Journal of English Language Studies*, 4(2), 1-5.
<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.16637338>

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Introduction

In recent years, American society has witnessed a noticeable change toward conservatism. From the rise of populist movements to the widespread support for figures like Donald Trump, millions of Americans increasingly embrace traditional and right-leaning values. This change cannot be explained only by partisanship; it reflects sentiments about national identity, personal liberty, and the foundational American promise of the “pursuit of happiness.” These ideals, particularly the notion of self-determination and the American Dream, have long been central not only to American political rhetoric but also to its literary canon. The American Dream refers to the idea that individuals, regardless of their origins, can achieve success and improve their social standing through hard work and perseverance (Adams, 1931). Works such as F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* and Arthur Miller’s *Death of a Salesman* have interrogated the promises and failures of this dream, portraying characters whose quests for happiness and success often end in disappointment. In the contemporary cultural context, Donald Trump’s presidency, especially during his first 100 days, offers a real-world manifestation of these themes. His conservative policies and populist messaging revived the narrative of individual achievement, economic freedom, and national restoration, echoing literary portrayals of the American Dream reimagined through a political lens.

The “Pursuit of Happiness” in Trump’s Practical Conservatism and American Literary Tradition

The Declaration of Independence prioritizes the right to pursue happiness as a fundamental principle. For many Americans, conservatism represents the most direct path to achieving that happiness through economic freedom, strong national borders, and the protection of traditional values. Donald Trump’s early days in office embodied this approach. His tax reforms aimed at boosting middle-class prosperity, reducing regulations on small businesses, and prioritizing American workers aligned with a conservative interpretation of happiness: the freedom to thrive independently.

Trump’s controversial policy ideas, including discussions about acquiring Greenland or establishing economic development zones in Gaza as part of the peace efforts, reflect his business-first, pragmatic approach mindset. While criticized internationally, these ideas were viewed domestically as bold moves to secure American influence and opportunity as a reassertion of the U.S. as a global leader. His image as a successful businessman-turned-politician also appealed to those who believed in the core of the American Dream.

In literature, the American dream is often seen as both inspiring and hard to achieve. For instance, in *The Great Gatsby*, F. Scott Fitzgerald presents Jay Gatsby as a tragic embodiment of the American Dream, an individual whose pursuit of wealth and love ultimately ends in disillusionment (Fitzgerald, 1925). Similarly, Arthur Miller’s *Death of a Salesman* critiques the false promises of success in postwar America, as Willy Loman’s belief in personal charisma over hard work leads to his downfall (Miller, 1949). These literary works expose contradictions within the pursuit of happiness, particularly when tied to materialism. Like Gatsby, Trump projects an image of self-made success and wealth, which appeals to the dream of reinvention and personal achievement. At the same time, his message centered on economic freedom, job creation, and American pride mirrors Willy Loman’s desperate belief in the Dream’s accessibility, even as that dream slips further from reach for many. Trumpism, much like these literary characters, presents a compelling yet ultimately conflicted vision of the American

Dream: one that promises fulfilment but often conceals inequality and disillusionment (Hochschild, 2016).

Trumpism as a Cultural Narrative

Trumpism is more than just a political idea; it is also a cultural story shaped by American beliefs in individualism and the idea of being self-made. Trump's public image comes from his work in real estate and reality TV. It fits the idea of the "self-made man," a common character in American stories and culture (Levy, 2016). This figure is known for breaking traditional norms, paving his own way, and reaching success through hard work. These traits are found in characters like Howard Roark from Ayn Rand's work and the heroes in Horatio Alger's stories. In addition to the contradictions exposed in literature, Trumpism also reflects the rise of post-truth politics, where emotions and personal beliefs take precedence over objective facts. This political climate enables leaders to shape narratives based on what people feel to be true rather than what is factually accurate.

"Make America Great Again" and National Identity

Trump's slogan, "Make America Great Again," turned into more than just a campaign phrase; it became a symbol of cultural and political identity. For many conservatives, it symbolized a wish to go back to traditional values, economic independence, and gaining respect from the world. During Trump's administration, the focus was on reducing regulations, enforcing strict border policies, and boosting domestic industries. These actions matched conservative values, which support limited government and national sovereignty.

Donald Trump often appealed to emotional truths like fear of decline, nostalgia for a "greater" past, and distrust of elites instead of using evidence-based arguments. His slogans like "Make America Great Again" function more as emotional appeals than concrete policy proposals. This reflects what scholars define as the post-truth era, in which public discourse prioritizes subjective perception over shared reality.

The slogan is a political reply to the perceived decline of the traditional American economic system. It shows worries about losing manufacturing jobs because of globalization, China's growth as an economic rival, and offshoring of labor. This economic turmoil has mainly impacted the white working and middle classes, who feel left behind by technological progress and changing global forces.

Regional and Demographic Patterns of Trump Support

A closer look at the regional and demographic distribution of Trump's supporters reveals notable trends. Much of his strongest backing has come from rural and post-industrial areas in states such as Ohio, Pennsylvania, West Virginia, and parts of the South and Midwest. These regions have faced economic stagnation, factory closures, and a sense of cultural displacement in the face of globalization and rapid social change. Many of Trump's voters identify with his populist messaging and feel that their concerns have been overlooked by the political elite and mainstream media.

Sociological studies and media interviews suggest that a significant portion of Trump supporters come from working-class backgrounds and may not have completed higher education. (Cramer, 2016; Lee, 2017). While college-educated urban elites often lean liberal, many working-class voters are drawn to Trump's direct communication style, his focus on jobs, and his nationalist rhetoric. His appeal lies in his ability to connect with those who feel

alienated by conventional politics and excluded from the perceived benefits of globalization and progressivism. (Hochschild, 2016).

Beyond political figures and economic policies, the conservative shift in American society can also be attributed to psychological and sociological tendencies. Research in political psychology suggests that individuals often become more conservative as they age, seeking stability, tradition, and security in a rapidly changing world (Jost et al., 2003). Sociologically, rural and suburban communities tend to place greater emphasis on family, faith, and national pride—values that align more closely with conservative ideology. These communities often view liberalism as disruptive to long-standing cultural norms, whereas conservatism is seen as a protective force against moral and societal decay.

Echoes of Working-Class Disillusionment in Literature

The emotional landscape of Trump supporters, particularly those from rural and post-industrial communities, echoes long-standing literary depictions of economic disillusionment. Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* portrays the fragility of working-class dreams during the Great Depression, while Miller's *Death of a Salesman* reveals the psychological toll of failing to meet capitalist expectations. Many Trump voters feel frustrated and abandoned by globalization and cultural liberalism. This sentiment reflects a common experience among them (Hochschild, 2016; Cramer, 2016). In her book, Hochschild (2016) shows that people's emotions, more than economic facts, influence their political choices. The idea of the betrayed worker has found new life in Trumpism, where the leader represents recognition and hope for change.

As Kakutani (2018) argues, this era marks "an assault on truth that is both deliberate and systematic," eroding public trust in traditional sources of information. Similarly, McIntyre (2018) identifies post-truth as a rejection of objectivity in favor of personal conviction, which he links directly to rising authoritarian tendencies. Within this framework, the American Dream becomes less of a shared national goal and more of a subjective myth, manipulated to serve political interests. Just as characters like Gatsby and Willy construct idealized realities that betray them, post-truth rhetoric allows modern political figures to construct and sell illusions and frequently control the collective truth.

Cultural Mythologies and Political Reality

American political rhetoric draws on mythic narratives such as Manifest Destiny, the frontier spirit, and the notion of the "City upon a Hill." These concepts are deeply embedded in American literature and culture, offering a moral and exceptionalist identity (Slotkin, 1992). Trump's slogan "Make America Great Again" leverages this legacy by invoking a nostalgic vision of national strength, cultural homogeneity, and economic self-sufficiency. As Lakoff (2002) notes, political language that taps into deep metaphorical frames such as the strict father model of conservatism can have a powerful cognitive effect. Trump's populist nationalism echoes these frames, especially for those who perceive American identity as threatened. His emphasis on border control, traditional values, and national sovereignty aligns with long-standing mythologies that contrast order with chaos, civilization with decline. These mythic dimensions help explain why Trump's message resonates so deeply, even when disconnected from policy outcomes.

Discussion and Conclusion

The growing conservatism among Americans is not merely a fleeting political trend but a manifestation of cultural and psychological currents rooted in identity, liberty, and the enduring pursuit of personal fulfilment. Donald Trump's rise to prominence symbolized more than policy preferences; it embodied a cultural narrative deeply intertwined with the American Dream—a narrative long explored and critiqued in the nation's literature. As works like *The Great Gatsby* and *Death of a Salesman* reveal, the quest for happiness and success remains fraught with contradictions and challenges. However, Trumpism's appeal reflects a renewed desire to reclaim agency and dignity amid social and economic uncertainty. As long as these values of individualism and national identity continue to shape the American consciousness, the conservative wave is poised to remain a defining force in the country's political and cultural landscape.

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