

# [***'Words matter': Titles, Trump and what to call a former president***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6BYY-49W1-JC5B-G2XF-00000-00&context=1516831)

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**Body**

WASHINGTON — He's a criminal defendant, a businessman and a politician. But to his most loyal supporters, Donald Trump will always be Mr. President. As for the guy currently serving in the White House, they call him Biden, or maybe just Joe.

That's the conclusion from research that did a deep dive into political ads on Facebook and Instagram that found a sharp divide in how Americans refer to the two contenders for the White House. In pro-Trump ads, Trump is still “President Trump," even though he left the White House [*three years ago*](https://apnews.com/article/donald-trump-leaves-white-house-ad718c0048c341d0044c4709fb23c8dd).

When it comes to signaling our political loyalties, language can be just as telling as a [*MAGA cap*](https://apnews.com/general-news-events-united-states-presidential-election-f4c578713bf941b69473464267b60cf5), offering a simple by subtle reminder of the false election claims that continue to reverberate online, as well as the polarization that has gripped our ***politics*** and [*divided our people*](https://apnews.com/article/poll-misinformation-polarization-coronavirus-media-d56a25fd8dfd9abe1389b56d7e82b873).

“Words matter,” said Jennifer Stromer-Galley, the Syracuse University professor who led the research. Giving Trump the title of president, she said, is a way of signaling that “We share your ideology and we understand — nudge nudge — that Donald Trump is the rightful president.”

Stromer-Galley's analysis underscores that division, finding that the ads referring to Trump as “President Trump” were right-leaning, whereas left-leaning ads were more likely to refer to him simply as “Trump.” To Stromer-Galley, it shows that the people buying online ads know their audience, and have cracked the code for appealing to Trump's supporters. By calling him “president,” the ads are saying to the viewer that they're on the same side, she said, and that they agree that the [*2020 election was rigged*](https://apnews.com/article/trump-2020-election-lies-debunked-4fc26546b07962fdbf9d66e739fbb50d).

Stromer-Galley analyzed more than 24,000 political ad buys on Instagram and Facebook that were placed by 1,800 organizations from Sept. 2023 through February. Overall, the ads cost $15 million and were displayed nearly 870 million times. The findings were published Tuesday by the ElectionGraph Project at Syracuse University’s [*Institute for Democracy, Journalism & Citizenship*](https://idjc.syracuse.edu/) through a partnership with the data science firm Neo4j.

In the United States, the title of president is [*reserved for the current occupant*](https://emilypost.com/advice/addressing-a-former-president-of-the-united-states) of the White House, and [*federal law*](https://www.archives.gov/about/laws/former-presidents.html) uses the term “former president” to refer to previous office holders.

Despite that, Trump's own attorneys have used the honorific to [*refer to their client*](https://apnews.com/article/trump-trial-hush-money-new-york-takeaways-ce0e061811e33a6cfa06e02ef3387cd8) in his criminal hush-money trial in New York. “We will call him ‘President Trump’ out of respect for the office that he held," lawyer Todd Blanche said. Prosecutors have chosen to refer to Trump as "the defendant.”

Americans have withheld honorifics for presidents they disliked in the past, evidenced by cries of “not my president!” from critics of Barack Obama, George W. Bush and [*Trump*](https://apnews.com/general-news-united-states-government-e401f1f7900d48b7ad8c360a4150d94c). But the trend seen among Trump supporters is different, noted University of Kansas professor Robert Rowland, who for decades has tracked the rhetoric that surrounds the presidency. For one, those past protests weren’t based on false allegations of vote rigging.

“Trump supporters feel disrespected, and they seek someone who can be their defender. Trump is their defender, and they want to show respect and loyalty,” said Rowland, who was not involved in the research. “I thought we were incredibly divided when George W. Bush was in office, but we are so much more divided now. Sometimes you can see that division even in the words we use.”

Even though the title of president is reserved for the current office holder, Americans have increasingly applied the term to former presidents as well in recent decades, according to etiquette expert Daniel Post Senning, co-president of the Emily Post Institute and the great-great grandson of the woman whose name is synonymous with good manners. He said he started hearing informal references to “President Clinton” and “President Bush” not long after both men left office.

Senning said he understands that many of those using the term incorrectly to refer to a former president are doing so as a way to show respect.

“Technically that’s not correct,” Senning said. "It’s one office held by one person and the office has the title, not the person.

Trump is regularly referred to as “the president” by loyal supporters, some of whom have taken their praise to [*divine levels*](https://apnews.com/article/donald-trump-arraignment-jesus-christ-conspiracy-theory-670c45bd71b3466dcd6e8e188badcd1d). Fan clubs on some platforms bear names, like a “Trump is My President” group on X that has nearly 5,000 members.

“I call him President Trump, the best President in my life time,” wrote Mark Allan Oliver on X. Reached by phone, the retired Oklahoma man told The Associated Press that while he doesn't accept all of Trump's vote-rigging claims, he believes Trump has been unfairly persecuted by the media and the political establishment.

“They’ve been on him since that day he came down the escalator. I don’t think Trump is any kind of saint, but I think his policies are great for this country,” Oliver said.

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