

Nationalism Meets Entrepreneurship: Rise of Buy American Movement and Ideological Recategorization of “Proudly Made in USA,” 2000–2023

Abstract

Nationalism has reemerged as a defining force of the twenty-first century. We examine how a grassroots nationalist movement transformed the “Made in USA” label from a simple marker of manufacturing origin into a broad ideological category that unified diverse products under a nationalist banner. Drawing on a historical analysis of the Buy American movement (2000–2023), we develop a process model of *ideological recategorization* to explain how grassroots entrepreneurs redefined a market category and reshaped the nationalism that animated it. The process began with grievance-driven entrepreneurs who mobilized economic nationalism to frame domestic production as moral resistance to globalization. Their success turned the movement into a symbolic resource for political elites, who co-opted its narratives and attracted new ideological joiners, redirecting its meaning toward exclusionary partisan nationalism increasingly detached from its material base in manufacturing. By tracing this cycle of legitimization and co-optation, we show how nationalism, as a “thin-centered” ideology, becomes a category-transforming force through its semantic flexibility and emotional resonance. These insights advance research on organizational nationalism, market categories, and grassroots entrepreneurship by showing how markets become arenas where nationalist sentiments are forged and transformed.

Introduction

When Mark Andol declared war on globalization from a repurposed Chevrolet dealership in Elma, New York, in 2010, he was not just selling American-made goods. In the cavernous showroom, he lined shelves with baseball bats carved from Pennsylvania ash, underwear sewn in North Carolina mills, and kitchen knives forged in upstate foundries. For him, this was more than just retail; it was retaliation. After his earlier business collapsed under Chinese competition, Andol cast his new venture as a patriotic mission to revive American manufacturing “for country, soldier, American worker, and our children of tomorrow.”¹ Other entrepreneurs struck the same chord. “We care about our country and the people in it,” and that “We will NOT trade USA jobs for foreign profits” (All American Clothing, 2012). In Maine, Peter Roberts took up the cause with his sporting goods company, Origin USA, describing it as a “reclamation project”² after American livelihoods had been “sold to the lowest bidder... China.”³ For Roberts, the fight was existential: “You could call it a dream, you could call it a revolution. I call it a war ... It’s time to show the world that... [i]t’s a movement of the people.”⁴ These entrepreneurs, and many others like them, came to define what became known as the contemporary Buy American movement.

That grassroots entrepreneurs would position their businesses as acts of war is striking. It signals how deeply they tapped into a broader force—nationalism. Nationalism consists of the belief that people who share a common culture and history form a distinct community whose interests should take precedence over those of others (Bonikowski, 2016). It fosters solidarity—“bounding and binding together those individuals who share a sense of large-scale political solidarity” (Mylonas and Tudor, 2021, 110)—yet also fuels exclusion and conflict

¹Made in America Store website, the August 10th, 2012 version of the “About Us” page. <https://web.archive.org/web/20121209143633/http://www.madeinamericastore.com/about/>

²Origin USA website, Nov 26, 2022 version, web.archive.org/web/20221126215456/https://originmaine.com/

³Origin USA website, Nov 27, 2023 version of the “About Us” page, web.archive.org/web/20231127154845/https://originusa.com/pages/discover

⁴“The Origin War Machine” video on the company’s official YouTube channel, published on June 27, 2018. www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y2KX1M-tZLY

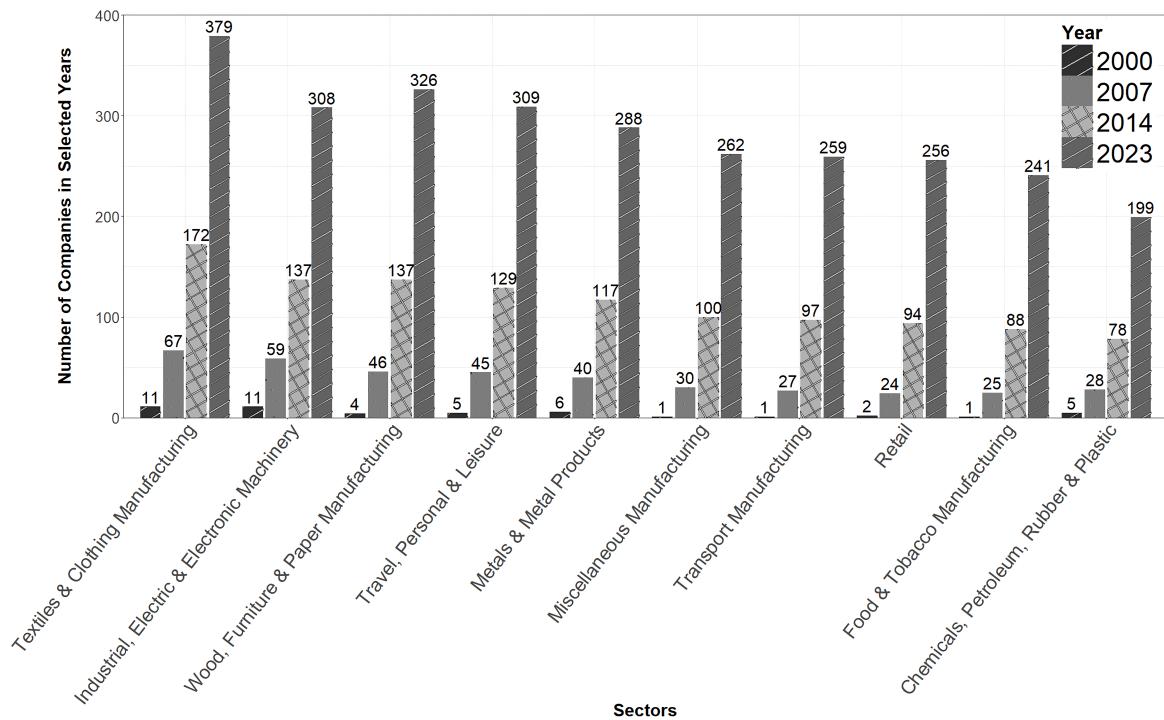
(Hechter, 2000). Long a driver of nation-building and decolonization (Chatterjee, 1986; Bendix, 1996), nationalism is also today's most powerful political current (Mounk, 2018; Walt, 2019), shaping movements from Brexit to the “Make America Great Again” (MAGA) movement. The Buy American movement exemplifies how nationalism extends into the marketplace, where entrepreneurs harness nationalist narratives to build ventures and mobilize followers.

This fusion of entrepreneurship and nationalism poses a puzzle for organizational theory. Broader social science research on nationalism has focused primarily on the state or the individual (Smith, 2001; Mylonas and Tudor, 2021), leaving market actors in a missing middle (Koveshnikov et al., 2025). Much of the macro literature emphasizes how states construct and disseminate nationalist projects (Brubaker, 1996; Wimmer and Min, 2006; Fox and Bloemraad, 2015), while micro-level work highlights individuals' nationalist attitudes and behaviors (Kosterman and Feshbach, 1989; Huddy and Khatib, 2007; Bonikowski, 2016). Organizational scholarship, in turn, has treated nationalism largely as an external constraint. Studies emphasize the “liability of foreignness” faced by multinationals (Zaheer, 1995; Nachum, 2010; Arikant and Shenkar, 2013; Ertug et al., 2024) or the influence of state policy (Dobbin, 1994; Evans, 1995; Kalev et al., 2008). These perspectives cast firms as passive responders to political forces and miss how they can actively mobilize nationalist sentiment in their domestic markets. Only recently has the emerging concept of organizational nationalism—“multifaceted efforts [by firms] to adopt, embody, and promote nationalistic beliefs, symbols, and values in their discourses and activities” (Yue and Takeda, 2025, 3)—repositioned firms as promoters of nationalism. Yet even here, we know little about how grassroots entrepreneurs catalyze such movements from the bottom up.

The Buy American movement unfolded through the transformation of the “Made in USA” label. Once a mundane marker of manufacturing location, it became a platform for entrepreneurs to mobilize nationalist grievances and build a broad meta-category. The label gained prominence and came to encompass everything from tools and textiles to coffee shops and financial firms (see Figure 1)—a scope that far exceeded the boundaries of a single

product market. In category terms, this was a goal-derived meta-category (Barsalou, 1983; Durand and Paoella, 2013): a category organized not by shared product attributes but by a unifying ideological purpose, linking otherwise disparate products under a common nationalist banner. What makes it a meta-category, however, is its ability to cut across industries and carry ideological meaning, giving it both breadth and symbolic weight. Prior work has explained the creation of such categories as top-down processes, where governments or other macro-actors define the unifying goal (Boghossian and David, 2021). This view cannot account for a bottom-up transformation in which entrepreneurs supplied the ideological goal.

Figure 1: Top Ten Sectors for Companies Promoting Made-in-USA Products (2000–2023)



Source: Sector classification from Orbis Global Database, hand-matched to companies' website product descriptions. See p. 9 for details.

These two bodies of work thus present mirror-image blind spots. Nationalism research identifies its ideological force but overlooks how entrepreneurs mobilize it in markets. Category research explains how goal-derived categories emerge, but rarely considers how sociopolitical ideologies like nationalism can transform an attribute-based category into a goal-derived

meta-category through the work of grassroots entrepreneurs. Therefore, we ask: How does a nationalistic meta-category come into existence? How do grassroots entrepreneurs mobilize nationalism to turn a basic origin label into an ideologically infused meta-category, and with what consequences for its symbolic and material boundaries?

To answer these questions, we conducted a historical analysis of the Buy American movement from 2000 to 2023 (Kipping et al., 2014; Hargadon and Wadhwani, 2023). We assembled a near-complete population of over five thousand firms identified by nationalistic consumers as being “Proudly Made in the USA”, and tracked their website content across monthly snapshots, supplemented by media coverage, consumer-generated lists, government documents, and presidential records. To analyze this vast archive, we combined computational text analysis with in-depth qualitative coding, enabling us to identify and interpret nationalistic narratives at scale while preserving contextual nuance. This multi-method design allowed us to capture both the broad sweep of the movement’s growth and the fine-grained detail of how entrepreneurs framed their grievances, redefined the category, and linked their ventures to nationalist projects.

Our study shows how an otherwise mundane descriptor—“Made in USA”—grew nearly thirtyfold in two decades as its meaning was transformed into a symbol of economic and later partisan nationalism. After 9/11, entrepreneurs reframed the label as a symbol of broad civic patriotism, turning purchases into gestures of national loyalty. The 2008 financial crisis then spurred a shift toward a more combative economic nationalism, as displaced entrepreneurs channeled their losses into grievance-based claims against foreign competition. Finally, in the mid-2010s, political elites co-opted these narratives, rearticulating them as the basis for an exclusionary partisan nationalism, making it appealing for more partisanship-driven “ideological joiners” who further intensified the nationalist narratives. We conceptualize this transformation as *ideological re-categorization*, in which an attribute-based classification is redefined around a shifting nationalistic narratives. This process unfolded through a cycle of symbolic legitimization and political co-optation, showing how a thin-centered ideology like

nationalism can animate a market category with enduring political significance. This speaks to why nationalism become category-transforming forces: their semantic flexibility enables continuous redefinition, while their emotional resonance—rooted in in-group/out-group “us versus them” social identity narratives—mobilizes actors and unites disparate products and sociopolitical concerns (e.g., Searle-White, 2001).

These insights allow us to make several contributions. First, we advance the emergent theory of organizational nationalism (Yue and Takeda, 2025; Koveshnikov et al., 2025) by unpacking a dynamic, bottom-up pathway that fills a key “missing middle” between macro state action and micro individual attitudes. We specify how this pathway is initiated by grievance-driven grassroots entrepreneurs and later amplified by more partisan-motivated joiners. Crucially, this process reveals the marketplace as an active crucible where the very valence of nationalism is transformed—from an inclusive civic patriotism into an exclusionary partisan force. This insight links to our contribution to research on market categories (Negro et al., 2010; Durand and Paolella, 2013) by theorizing how categories can become goal-derived meta-categories, carrying ideological overtones that allow otherwise disparate product categories to seemingly cohere. Thirdly, we contribute to scholarship on markets and social movements (Hiatt et al., 2009; King and Pearce, 2010) by identifying the cycle of symbolic legitimization and political co-optation as a mechanism that transforms localized, individual entrepreneurial initiatives into partisan contestation at the national level. Finally, we join the rapidly expanding scholarship on de-globalization and geopolitical risks (Witt, 2019; Meyer and Li, 2022; Teece, 2022; Saittakari et al., 2023; Beugelsdijk and Luo, 2024; Luo, 2024; McCaffrey et al., 2024; Jandhyala, 2025). While this literature often focuses on foreign host markets, we articulate a domestic-focused, bottom-up, and long-term process of U.S. sociopolitical change and entrepreneurial initiatives, which were initially shaped by globalization and can now reverberate abroad with significant global consequences.

Theoretical Foundations: Nationalism, Entrepreneurship, and Market Categories

We build on and integrate two largely disconnected scholarly conversations: one concerning the role of nationalism in business and economic life, and another focused on the dynamics of market categories. The first conversation identifies nationalism as one of the most powerful sociopolitical forces of the modern era, but has historically overlooked the intermediary role of businesses—particularly entrepreneurs—in mobilizing a nationalist movement from within the marketplace. The second conversation examines how markets are structured and transformed through categories, but has yet to fully theorize how a potent sociopolitical ideology like nationalism can serve as a bottom-up driver for creating broad, goal-derived meta-categories. Placing these two literatures in dialogue exposes a critical set of questions about how the marketplace is becoming a primary arena for socio-political struggle.

Nationalism and Entrepreneurship: A Missing Middle

Nationalism remains one of the most powerful sociopolitical forces of the modern era. It has catalyzed nation-building (Bendix, 1996; Wimmer, 2018), anti-imperial decolonization (Chatterjee, 1986; Hobsbawm, 1990), and revolutionary projects that established constitutional democracies. It has also been a source of division and violence (Mann, 2005) and the exclusion of minorities (Brubaker, 1996). Although often defined in popular terms as “an ideology that elevates one nation above all others” (Merriam-Webster, 2025), nationalism differs from “thicker” ideologies such as socialism or liberalism. It lacks a fixed set of principles or a coherent doctrine. Freedon (1998, 751) characterizes it as a “thin-centered” ideology, one whose “conceptual structure is incapable of providing on its own a solution to questions of social justice, distribution of resources, and conflict management, which mainstream ideologies address.” Its force lies not in a stable program but in its capacity to foster loyalty and allegiance to an “imagined community” (Anderson, 1983; Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1983; Gellner, 1983; Smith, 1991). As Searle-White (2001, 3) observes, nationalism at its core is “simply a sense of identification with a group of people who share a common history, language,

territory, culture, or some combination of these.”

Nationalism in social sciences. Within the general social sciences, scholarship on nationalism has primarily developed along two levels of analysis. At the macro level, research views the state as the primary architect and disseminator of nationalist ideology and national identity. Drawing on theories of state-making (e.g., Tilly, 1990), this work shows how political elites use state power to construct and spread national narratives to legitimize authority or mobilize populations (Wimmer and Min, 2006). Examples include economic nationalism, which protects domestic industries through tariffs and subsidies; techno-nationalism, which frames technological dominance as a national security issue (Luo, 2022); and immigration policies that reinforce cultural or demographic boundaries (Brubaker, 1996; Zolberg, 2006; Fox and Bloemraad, 2015). At the micro level, scholars examine how individuals express nationalist attitudes and behaviors toward their own nation and foreigners (Kosterman and Feshbach, 1989). Drawing on political psychology and cultural sociology, this research explores how national identity shapes civic engagement (Huddy and Khatib, 2007), consumer choices (Kong and Rao, 2021), and broader social attitudes.

In general, social science research on nationalism has focused on different forms of nationalism (Smith, 1991; Brubaker, 1996; Mylonas, 2012). Scholarship has long distinguished between civic nationalism, which defines national belonging through shared political values and institutions, and more exclusionary forms like ethnic or cultural nationalism, which ground belonging in shared heritage, language, or identity, often in opposition to an “other.” This distinction is crucial, as the form of nationalism entrepreneurs mobilize—whether it is an inclusive call for civic pride or an exclusionary, grievance-based campaign—has profound implications for how a market category’s boundaries are drawn and contested.

Nationalism in organizational research. Organizational research has typically treated nationalism as an external condition that firms must adapt to. Within institutional theory, scholars have long examined how the state and its national priorities shape organizational activity. Government policies, industrial regulations, and political pressures act as external

constraints and enablers, influencing organizational forms and strategies (Dobbin, 1994; Evans, 1995; Marquis and Qiao, 2018). Firms aligning with state-defined agendas often gain access to resources and legitimacy, while those that diverge face significant barriers (Ingram and Simons, 2000). In Israel, for example, Kalev et al. (2008) show how state leaders framed productivity as a moral imperative—essential to national survival—and used this discourse to disseminate specific managerial practices.

In international business research, nationalism is linked to the “liability of foreignness” (Zaheer, 1995)—a geopolitical risk that increases the costs and complexity of cross-border operations. Trade disputes (Choudhury et al., 2021), legitimacy struggles in host countries (Lubinski and Wadhwani, 2020), human resource strategies (Glennon, 2024), and technonationalist agendas (Luo, 2022) exemplify such pressures. Nationalism can also reignite consumer animosity and historical grievances so as to disrupt global strategies (Arikan and Shenkar, 2013; Ertug et al., 2024). Multinationals face policy uncertainty and contractual risks in host countries where national priorities dominate (Bucheli et al., 2023). It can also reshape firms internally by influencing employee dynamics (Edman et al., 2024).

Organizational nationalism. A nascent yet growing body of work on organizational nationalism has repositioned firms as active agents in promoting nationalist narratives and practices (Yue and Takeda, 2025). Organizational nationalism refers to firms’ efforts to adopt, embody, and promote nationalistic beliefs, symbols, and values in their discourses and activities. These efforts take both instrumental forms, where nationalism is deployed to secure legitimacy, resources, and audience support (Yue et al., 2024a), and embedded forms, where nationalist ideals guide organizational priorities, routines, and decisions over time (Takeda, 2025). This perspective departs from viewing nationalism only as an external constraint (e.g., state policy or liability of foreignness). It shows that organizations can function as vehicles of nationalist mobilization in markets (e.g., Dacin, 1997).

Yet much remains undertheorized. Prior work has focused on established corporations, often working in concert with the state or other elites (Yue et al., 2024a,b). What has received

far less attention are the grassroots origins of organizational nationalism: how entrepreneurial actors, often marginalized or displaced by globalization, shape nationalist movements from the bottom up. Yue and Takeda (2025, 9) note that this “entrepreneurial form of nationalism” has “gone largely unnoticed so far.” The result is a “missing middle” (16) between macro-level analyses of nationalism as state action and micro-level accounts of individual identity and behavior (Koveshnikov et al., 2025).

Equally underexplored are the mechanisms by which nationalism becomes institutionalized in markets and the unintended consequences that follow. Prior work has shown that organizations can appropriate national symbols or discourses, but less is known about how these symbolic efforts transform market categories or how they become vulnerable to appropriation by political actors. These questions are critical because they shift organizational nationalism from a descriptive observation—firms sometimes mobilize nationalism—to an explanatory framework: under what conditions, through what mechanisms, and with what consequences does nationalism take hold in business life?

Goal-derived Market Categories: The Puzzle of Bottom-Up Transformation

Markets are organized through categories—social classifications that help actors interpret, evaluate, and transact with organizations and their offerings (Douglas, 1986; Carruthers and Stinchcombe, 191999). Categories serve as “cognitive infrastructures” (Schneiberg and Berk, 2010, 257), enabling producers to identify rivals (Porac et al., 1989), consumers to compare products, and audiences to ascribe meaning and value (Kennedy, 2008; Durand and Paoletta, 2013). The dominant view in organizational research adopts a prototype-based lens: Categories cohere around typical members that embody core attributes (Rosa et al., 1999; Hannan et al., 2007; Vergne and Wry, 2014), and membership depends on “family resemblances” (Rosch and Mervis, 1975). This creates a “categorical imperative” (Zuckerman, 1999), whereby audiences reward firms that fit cleanly within a category and penalize hybrids that span multiple ones (Hsu et al., 2009). Hybrids generate ambiguity, misalign expectations, and may “overwhelm the monitoring capacities of critics” (Zuckerman, 1999). Craft brewers,

for example, gained traction by contrasting themselves with the prototype of industrial beer, establishing symbolic boundaries for consumers (Carroll and Swaminathan, 2000).

The prototype-based view, however, struggles to explain categories at higher levels of abstraction, where subcategories share few attributes (Loken and Ward, 1990). To address this, scholars developed a goal-derived view of categorization (Barsalou, 1983, 1985; Durand and Paoletta, 2013). Here, categories cohere not around shared features but around a common purpose. Membership depends on whether an item advances a particular goal, producing “ad hoc categories” such as “foods to eat on a diet” (Barsalou, 1985). This logic explains umbrella categories like “Quebec terroir products” in artisanal foods (Boghossian and David, 2021) or “cleantech” in environmental technologies (Sine and Lee, 2009), where coherence stems from a unifying goal rather than shared attributes.

The contemporary Buy American movement offers an extreme and puzzling case. An attribute-based category—products’ manufacturing origin—was recast as a broad meta-category infused with nationalist ideology. Unlike umbrella categories such as “Quebec terroir products,” which remain anchored in one domain, the “Made in USA” category spans apparel, sporting goods, coffee, and even financial services. Its coherence derives primarily from a nationalist goal: expressing loyalty to the nation and resisting foreign influence.

While prior research shows that cultural codes such as authenticity, tradition, or heritage can shape markets (Rao et al., 2003; Weber et al., 2008; Delmestri and Greenwood, 2016), they typically portray sociopolitical ideology as symbolic resources that enhance product appeal. In contrast, nationalism in our study is not simply a means to make products more marketable, but the defining end in itself—giving rise to a goal-driven category organized around nationalistic social agenda. Whereas prior studies focus on national loyalty in a single or a handful of specific product categories, our case highlights how nationalism—a historically contingent “thin-centered” ideology with unusual semantic flexibility and emotional resonance (Freeden, 1998; Searle-White, 2001)—can operate at a higher level, providing the ideological purpose that holds together a broad cross-industry category. Furthermore, prior work on

goal-derived categorization highlights top-down processes, where macro-level actors define the goal. Legislators created “alternative energy” by linking technologies to national security (Sine and David, 2003); regional governments defined “Quebec terroir products” (Boghossian and David, 2021) and *ji-biru* (local beer) in Japan (Edman and Ahmadjian, 2017). These accounts show how powerful elites construct categories but offer little insight into bottom-up processes where grassroots entrepreneurs themselves supply the ideological goal.

Framing and Entrepreneurial Mobilization of Nationalism

The two puzzles we identified—the missing entrepreneurial mechanism in nationalism research and the missing bottom-up ideological driver in goal-derived categorization—are two sides of the same coin. Both hinge on entrepreneurs’ role as framers of nationalist collective meaning. To bridge them, we draw on social movement theory, particularly its insights on framing and the “meaning work” entrepreneurs perform (Snow and Benford, 1988; Sine and Lee, 2009; King and Pearce, 2010). Social movements are constructed by “signifying agents” who craft “action-oriented sets of beliefs and meanings,” or collective action frames, that diagnose problems, propose solutions, and mobilize action (Benford and Snow, 2000, 613). Entrepreneurs often take up this role in markets, using normative frames to secure the sociopolitical legitimacy essential for new ventures (Aldrich and Fiol, 1994). For instance, advocates of grass-fed meat invoked cultural codes such as “authenticity vs. manipulation” to build a moral alternative to industrial agriculture (Weber et al., 2008).

Some frames travel especially broadly. These “master frames” function as broad interpretive schemes that “color and constrain the orientations and activities of other movements” (Benford and Snow, 2000, 618-619). The “rights” frame, for example, has been adapted across civil rights, women’s, and LGBTQ struggles, while “environmental justice” unites environmental and civil rights campaigns. Entrepreneurs can appropriate such frames to bring coherence to otherwise unrelated products under a shared ideological banner.

We theorize that nationalism operates as a powerful master frame for entrepreneurial work because of its character as a “thin-centered ideology” (Freeden, 1998). Unlike thicker

ideologies with fixed doctrines, nationalism's flexibility and emotional resonance allow it to attach to diverse grievances and commercial products, creating a metacategory derived from a common goal. This provides a crucial link between the two bodies of literature. Entrepreneurs, the missing actors in nationalism research, can appropriate nationalism as a master frame, thus supplying the ideological goal that prior research on goal-derived categories has largely attributed to top-down actors. In doing so, they transform a market category into a vehicle for sociopolitical mobilization. Furthermore, this framing perspective also surfaces a new complication. Once entrepreneurs succeed in legitimizing a nationalist frame, their symbolic work becomes attractive to more powerful actors who may appropriate and redirect it. This possibility, largely overlooked in both the nationalism and category literature, raises the central questions that animate our study: Through what processes do entrepreneurs mobilize nationalism to redefine a market category from the bottom up? And how does it reshape the category's symbolic and material boundaries? We seek to answer these questions through a historical analysis of the Buy American movement.

Methodology

We followed a “history-to-theory” approach (Kipping et al., 2014; Argyres et al., 2020), tracing the development of the contemporary Buy American movement to theorize how a product category evolves into an ideologically infused meta-category. Three features of the phenomenon made this approach necessary. First, market categories typically emerge and change over long periods of time (Hsu and Grodal, 2021; Boghossian and David, 2021; Munir et al., 2021). Second, nationalism is a multi-context phenomenon, shaped by macro-level sociopolitical forces and market-level dynamics (Smith, 2001). Capturing this required attention to the “historical embeddedness” of actors (Vaara and Lamberg, 2016). Third, historical approaches allowed us to flexibly synthesize primary and secondary sources, which was necessary given the multi-contextual nature of nationalism (Yue and Takeda, 2025).

Calls to prioritize American-made products have recurred throughout American history since the 18th century (Frank, 1999). In the early 2000s, the movement reemerged to transform

the “Made in USA” label into a moralized identity claim, laying the groundwork for the more xenophobic nationalist narratives that would surge after the 2008–09 financial crisis. Since the mid-2010s, right-wing political currents—most prominently the “Make America Great Again” (MAGA) campaign—have co-opted these appeals to domestic production. President Trump’s “America First” policies, framed as efforts to rebuild U.S. industries, create jobs, reduce imports, and enhance national security, further accelerated this alignment.

This contemporary Buy American movement represents an extreme manifestation (Eisenhardt, 1989) of nationalism that redefines the social meaning of a market category. While other cases exist across geographies and time, this case provides a particularly illustrative context in which macro-political, economic, and market dynamics are visible (Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007; Yin, 2017). Furthermore, a distinctive feature of the 21st-century Buy American movement is that its development has been amplified by the internet and digital platforms. Our methodological design enabled us to capture the movement empirically and laid the foundation for theorizing ideological re-categorization, a process linking entrepreneurial nationalism to the transformation of market categories.

Source Collection

Primary sources included consumer-made lists of “Proudly Made in USA” and “Buy American” firms and products, company websites, news articles, corporate YouTube channels, and Facebook fan groups, as well as scholarly and journalistic publications and media coverage related to globalization. Secondary sources encompassed scholarly and practitioner analyses of political and public discourses on globalization and historical accounts of globalization and nationalism in the United States during the study period. Table 1 provides a list of our primary sources. Most “Made in USA” firms included in our consumer lists are grassroots operations with limited official documentation, which prompted us to devote substantial effort to cataloging this phenomenon. Given the scope and volume of these sources, we have made bibliographic information, including URLs to online materials and all Online Appendices, in

an Open Science Framework (OSF) repository.⁵

In summer 2023, we conducted a comprehensive search of major search engines for consumer-made lists (e.g., “Buy American,” “Proudly Made in USA”) and identified 633 unique lists, after which no additional lists appeared. Curated by nationalist content creators and activist shoppers, these lists signal which firms consumers view as part of the movement. Most appeared as forum threads or niche websites that share tips on U.S.-based products. We extracted each company’s name and URL from these lists; when either was missing, we visited the site and recorded the information manually.

From the 633 consumer lists, we extracted 5,355 firms and identified their website URLs. Using these URLs, we trained three research assistants to hand-code the firms’ representative sectors from website content and assign the corresponding sector classification from the Orbis database. The URLs enabled us to utilize the Internet Archive’s Wayback Machine to collect monthly archives of each site, selecting the most recent capture when multiple versions were available within the month. Our analyses focused on three types of web pages. First are homepages, which carry the core branding message. Second, pages such as “About Us,” “Our Mission,” or “Our History” are featured by over half of the companies to detail their core value propositions. Third, dedicated “Made in USA” pages, maintained by less than a quarter of firms, specifically to articulate their commitment to domestic manufacturing. This focus allowed us to capture claims related to the organization’s missions, values, and identities (Baldi et al., 2016). Consequently, we excluded individual product pages where a product’s origin is listed as a simple factual detail. After cleaning, the dataset contained 258,374 site versions, tracked monthly from July 1997 to December 2023.⁶ We coded each firm’s headquarters and industry with Orbis and PitchBook. When ownership was unclear, we relied on the USPTO trademark database; otherwise, we entered locations by hand. Financial and operating data were rarely available for these grassroots firms.

⁵https://osf.io/4qzkb/?view_only=186775362743470488ac813b1dd59b1e

⁶To enhance data efficiency, we have dropped duplicate versions by keeping the first version of the update. The original raw dataset included over 1.5 million website updates.

Table 1: Overview of Data Sources

Source Type	Source Description
Corporate Website Record (website updates N = 258,374)	Accounts of companies' website front page content, and content on the “about us” page. The “about us” page can take other names, such as “our story” and “company mission”. We access the latest website version for each month for 1997 to 2023.
Company Produced Content (Company websites N = 5,355 unique document sets; YouTube videos N = 43 unique document sets; Press Releases N = 12)	Accounts of a company’s activities, includes videos and websites. The sources provide insight into managers’ personal accounts of running a business in the Buy American Market.
Media Coverage (N = 57 unique document sets)	News articles, editorials, and other media reports that discuss companies in the Buy American markets. Includes external viewpoints on the Buy American market.
Social Media Posts (N = 66,710)	Posts on platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram that provide insights into companies’ brands in the Buy American market.
Government Documents (N = 17)	Published works by the government (e.g., National Defense Authorization Act for FY2007), reports, regulations, statistics, etc., providing regulatory context relevant to the Buy American market.
Consumer-Made Product Lists (N = 633)	Lists gathered by consumers recognizing companies serving Buy American markets. Provide consumer opinions on Buy American brands.
Presidential Records (N = 121,861)	American Presidency Project (APP), UC Santa Barbara. All public writings and speeches from Truman (1945–1953) to Biden (2021–2024), as presidents or candidates.
Trade-Induced Unemployment Data (N = 32,712)	Trade Adjustment Assistance (TAA) program petitions (U.S. Department of Labor) for job loss certified as trade-related. Available 1994–2020. Original petitions cleaned/aggregated to county level.
Others	Miscellaneous primary sources (magazines, letters, interviews, etc.) providing additional context on the Buy American market.
Secondary Sources (Policy Briefs N = 8; Books N = 1; Videos N = 1)	Interpretations, analyses, or summaries of primary sources; e.g., books, articles, scholarly papers.

Analysis

We adopt an abductive approach that “grounds the theoretical arguments in a real-world context” (Methot and Kaul, 2024, 477), allowing empirical exploration to inform theory building (Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007). Following this abductive logic, we built our theory by moving back and forth between data and ideas (Grodal et al., 2021) in what Timmermans and Tavory (2012, 172) describe as “a continuous process of conjecturing about the world that is shaped by the solutions a researcher has ‘ready-to-hand.’”

Establishing historical context and delineating phases. Our process began by situating the macro-historical context to identify key patterns. We traced the macro-level context through secondary sources, policy reports, congressional records, and media coverage on globalization and its effects on U.S. firms, compiling a 33-page chronology of nationalism-related politics during the focal period. In parallel, we reviewed news articles, surveyed online “Made in USA” consumer lists, and observed digital communities to map the contours of the Buy American movement.⁷⁸ This initial analysis highlighted key patterns, including its grassroots origins and growing alignment with right-wing politics after the mid-2010s.

Systematic narrative analysis: identifying and tracking thematic content. We then conducted a deeper narrative analysis, extracting the themes entrepreneurs used in their accounts and tracing their evolution and prevalence. We first identified the narratives firms used. Following established approaches to narrative analysis (e.g., Navis and Glynn, 2010; Wry et al., 2011; Lockwood et al., 2023), we began with descriptive coding of company websites. Two human coders iteratively analyzed random samples, compared emerging narratives, and refined a master list until reaching theoretical saturation (Golden-Biddle, 1997; Charmaz, 2006). This process surfaced five prominent narratives, which clustered into “patriotic” narratives and more combative “anti-globalization” narratives. Table 2 presents these narratives with representative examples.

We traced their prevalence and evolution of these identified themes through our longitudinal data set of 258,374 monthly website updates. We began with a dictionary-based extraction of regular expressions (Friedl, 2006) to measure the frequency of Buy American keywords. We used a curated keyword list (see Table 3 and Appendices I and II for technical details) to track how often these terms appeared. This produced a panel data set on language intensity over time, allowing us to observe trends in the number of companies that promote ”Made in

⁷Facebook group “The Henry Family” was created by Henry USA Repeating Arms and its customers. As of July 2024, this group had over 15,000 members who discussed Henry products and supported American brands daily.

⁸Origin USA has over 155,000 YouTube subscribers and 386 videos since 2011. We transcribed all videos on this channel for analysis because many promote Made in USA. We also analyzed comments on Origin USA videos containing many comments from nationalist supporters.

USA” and the frequency of such references per company. The analysis showed modest use in the early 2000s, a rise in the late 2000s, and another sharp increase after the mid-2010s. We examined the site creation dates to rule out the possibility that this trend reflected new website creation. Many firms had launched sites during the dot-com bubble of the late 1990s, yet that earlier wave did not bring a comparable rise in Buy American narratives. The upward trend, therefore, reflects a genuine shift in how companies framed their offerings, not just an artifact of more websites coming online. We also used the company’s location information to map the intertemporal spread of the businesses using the Buy American language.

Table 2: *Patriotic* and *Anti-Globalization* Narratives in Firm Websites

Narratives	Illustrative Examples from Firm Websites
National Pride <i>(Patriotic)</i> Made-in-USA products are associated with American national pride.	<p>“We take tremendous pride in the fact that we offer our customers a hand-crafted, American-made shirt at a good price. Made in USA works for us, and works for our customers.” (<i>Mercer & Sons</i>, Mar 2012)</p> <p>“The line is 100 percent American-made... to the exacting standards of quality and workmanship worthy of an American Hero. American Made. American proud. American Joe. American Joe—because it matters. Wear with pride.” (<i>American Joe</i>, Jul 2016)</p> <p>“Just think ... this little novelty item was produced to offer you something to share the memories, feelings and pride of America with friends and family here in the United States and abroad.” (<i>Air of America</i>, Jul 2016)</p> <p>“We, as Americans, have pride in our nation and in our independence. Relying on another country’s exports is counterintuitive to our sense of being and to our national pride.” (<i>Forloh</i>, Sep 2021)</p> <p>“Made in America. Without Compromise. GEAR WITH A SOUL. CRAFTED WITH PRIDE.” (<i>Origin USA</i>, Dec 2022)</p>
Supporting Military, Veterans, and Law Enforcement <i>(Patriotic)</i> Made-in-USA products support the U.S. military, veterans, and law enforcement.	<p>“J.C. Schultz Enterprises, Inc. America’s World Class Flag & Banner Maker. God Bless America. We Support Our Troops.” (<i>J.C. Schultz Enterprises</i>, Jul 2003)</p> <p>“Supporting America’s Heroes. One Soldier At a Time. 50% of all proceeds from 9 Line Apparel go to support true American heroes who have been injured fighting for all of us back home.” (<i>Nine Line Apparel</i>, Apr 2013)</p> <p>“Made in America or not made at all. From the beaches of Normandy, the hills of Korea, the jungles of Vietnam, the sands of Iraq, and the mountains of Afghanistan, America’s servicemen and women have led the fight to preserve freedom around the world, and to keep our own country standing tall.” (<i>Henry USA</i>, Mar 2018)</p> <p>“Throughout history when Americans marched to war we marched wearing boots made by American hands and we wore uniforms that were cut and sewn in factories like this.” (<i>Origin USA</i>, Jan 2018)</p> <p>“As a company that designs and builds our products in the United States, we are proud to offer a discount to all U.S. military, law enforcement, professional firefighters and EMTs.” (<i>EXO Mountain Gear</i>, Nov 2020)</p>

Note: A single quote may contain multiple narratives related to the Buy American theme.

Narratives	Illustrative Examples from Firm Websites
Anti-Foreign (<i>Anti-Globalization</i>) Made-in-USA products reject imports from foreign countries.	<p>"In a world obsessed with hyper production and ruthlessly cheap imports, we pride ourselves in our craftsmanship. Our claim... the most durable billfolds on earth! Made in the USA — by The Buffalo Billfold Company." (<i>Buffalo Billfold Company</i>, Jan 2012)</p> <p>"We care about our country and the people in it; if we were only in it for money we would move our production overseas. We will NOT trade USA jobs for foreign profits." (<i>All American Clothing</i>, Aug 2012)</p> <p>"Made in America, Or Not Made At All!" (<i>Henry Repeating Arms</i>, Sep 2012)</p> <p>"We strive to provide the most dependable and affordable products and service with the highest available quality American craftsmanship the footwear industry has to offer ... Not Made In CHINA! Not now, Not ever, NEVER!" (<i>Allegiance Footwear</i>, Mar 2014)</p> <p>"All of our gear is designed and constructed on USA soil ... with Midwest values of integrity, patriotism, and hard work." "[Son:] Fuck China. [Father:] What? [Son:] I said, Fuck China. [Father:] I heard you the first time, I just wanted to hear it again." (<i>T&K Hunting Gear</i>, Apr 2020)</p>
National and Manufacturing Revival (<i>Anti-Globalization</i>) Made-in-USA products help restore manufacturing and national greatness.	<p>"Why not accept that manufacturing is gone from this country? Why not let the rust and weeds finish what they started? ... Through two Detroit winters, we've asked ourselves these questions. And worked not to find our answer, but to build it." (<i>Shinola Watch</i>, Dec 2013)</p> <p>"American Giant is bringing back American manufacturing. American Giant is the re-birth of American ingenuity in apparel manufacturing and retail. We were not comfortable with the fact that when you follow the thread, most clothes we love ... are made in countries that are so far away." (<i>American Giant</i>, Feb 2014)</p> <p>"OUR VISION: Play a hand in the revival of American productivity by using fashion as a vehicle and e-commerce as an engine, thereby bringing renewal to the Made in America label around the world." (<i>American Love Affair</i>, Aug 2016)</p> <p>"It starts with recognizing what's been lost, then reclaiming the knowledge that's been lost. We've got to restore the machines because they've been sold to China, the lowest bidder." (<i>Origin USA</i>, Jun 2018)</p> <p>"Founded and operated by veterans, Nine Line is determined to continue to answer the nation's call to ensure the survival of liberty and prevent the deterioration of American values. We are dedicated to reviving American manufacturing and the jobs they generate — setting the example for others to follow." (<i>Nine Line</i>, Feb 2023)</p>
Job-Loss and Re-Creation (<i>Anti-Globalization</i>) Made-in-USA products maintain or re-create American jobs.	<p>"Nate's American Made Store concept was conceived nearly 5 years ago, as I watched our factories close and jobs offshored ... When buying an American-made product you keep the jobs here." (<i>American Made Solutions</i>, Aug 2016)</p> <p>"Together, we can bring back jobs to this great country and the United States can be a leader, not a follower, in fashion manufacturing." (<i>American Alex Maine</i>, Jun 2019)</p> <p>"Our mission: Create and Save Jobs in the United States of America by increasing American manufacturing for our children's future." (<i>Made in America Store</i>, Mar 2020)</p> <p>"With my promise to always keep manufacturing and sourcing local in the United States, I hope to create new American jobs and continue supporting our local suppliers in Wilmington, Ohio (Fragrance Oils) and Middlefield, Ohio (Hardwoods). Thank you for supporting my American Dream." (<i>Arotags</i>, May 2022)</p> <p>"It started with a naive idea. A reclamation project. A wave of reshoring our jobs, machinery and rebuilding America's communities. A wave of FREEDOM. Origin is about getting back to the source. We started by taking action, by building a factory in the mountains of Maine." (<i>Origin USA</i>, Dec 2022)</p>

Note: A single quote may contain multiple narratives related to the Buy American theme.

To classify narrative themes at scale, we built a structured four-stage pipeline using a large language model (LLM), OpenAI's GPT-4.0-mini (e.g., Monarch, 2021; Bail, 2024; Do et al., 2024; Ziems et al., 2024). The pipeline involved redundancy filtering, text segmentation, semantic filtering, and LLM-based classification (see Appendix III for technical details). This approach addressed key challenges of analyzing large corpora with LLMs. Our 1.58 GB data set exceeded typical model limits and risked the "lost-in-the-middle" effect, where

performance declines with long inputs (Liu et al., 2023). We reduced the data set to 670 MB by removing duplicates by matching similarity and segmenting texts into 20-word chunks that overlap. Using sentence embeddings, we filter for chunks likely to contain relevant narratives to reduce the data passed to the final classification. The LLM classifier then evaluated these chunks with structured prompts customized to each narrative.

Research suggests that GPT models outperform many alternatives, including trained crowd workers, in text classification tasks (e.g., Gilardi et al., 2023; Zhao et al., 2023; Balkus and Yan, 2024). However, because technology is nascent, best practices are evolving (e.g., Ash and Hansen, 2023; Belal et al., 2023; Khlaif et al., 2023; Ziems et al., 2024; de Kok, 2025). Following these studies, we paid particular attention to prompt engineering (e.g., Marvin et al., 2023; Park et al., 2023; Balkus and Yan, 2024). Since GPT performance is sensitive to prompt design (Brown et al., 2020), we iteratively refined prompts using a cross-validation approach akin to established machine-learning practices (e.g., Hastie et al., 2009; King et al., 2021). We randomly selected ten companies, had GPT classify their narratives, and then asked human experts to code the same cases independently. Using the human results as benchmarks, we compared outputs and modified prompts where discrepancies arose. We repeated this process with new random samples, avoiding overfitting and improving accuracy, until GPT reached a roughly 90% agreement rate with manual coding. This procedure reduced Type I (false positive) and Type II (false negative) errors. We evaluated performance by comparing GPT’s outputs with human coding benchmarks (Krippendorff, 2013) and found that our method outperformed human coding on comparable tasks at scale (see Appendix IV). Combining these measures with our analysis of narrative prevalence, narrative content, and movement membership, we identified three phases in the Buy American movement’s evolution: Phase 1 (2000–2008), Phase 2 (2008–2015), and Phase 3 (2015–2023).

From empirical patterns to a process model. We synthesized insights from our historical immersion and narrative analyses to build a process theory. As shown in Table 4, we applied abductive reasoning to progressively—and iteratively—link historical observations

Table 3: Search Keywords for Narratives Promoting Made-in-USA

Sub-themes	Keywords
Core “Made in USA” phrases	“made in america,” “made in u.s.,” “made in us,” “american made,” “usa made,” “u.s. made,” “us made”
Buy/support appeals	“buy american,” “buy usa,” “buy america,” “support america,” “support usa,” “support u.s.”
Patriotic markers	“patriot,” “national pride,” “choose american,” “choose usa,” “choose u.s.,” “choose america”
Location	“usa based,” “america based,” “american based,” “us based,” “u.s. based”
Production & manufacturing	“usa produced,” “america produced,” “american produced,” “us produced,” “u.s. produced,” “usa manufactured,” “america manufactured,” “american manufactured,” “us manufactured,” “u.s. manufactured”
American worker & jobs	“american worker,” “american job”
Veteran ownership	“veteran owned,” “veteran founded,” “founded by veteran”
Craft & heritage claims	“handcrafted in america,” “handcrafted in usa,” “handcrafted in u.s.,” “handcrafted in us,” “crafted in america,” “crafted in u.s.,” “crafted in us,” “america heritage,” “america tradition,” “america value”
Icons & fuzzy matches	“icon of america,” “icon of usa,” “icon of u.s.,” “america manufactur,” “u.s. manufactur”

Some phrases (e.g., “made in us,” “american made”) overlap or partially match one another, so our regex-based code was designed to handle these duplications. Certain substrings (like “manufactur”) intentionally capture variations such as “manufactured,” “manufacturers,” and “manufacturing.” We included alternative renderings of U.S. references (“U.S.” vs. “us”) to account for inconsistent usage or punctuation on company websites. See Appendix II for Keywords Selection Methods.

to theoretical constructs—such as symbolic legitimization and political co-optation—that are synthesized in our process model. We also triangulated observed empirical patterns with additional sources. For example, we analyzed Buy American references in the American Presidency Project (APP) repository (Peters and Woolley, 2017), which contains presidential documents from Truman to Biden (1945–2024). Using the same regular-expression approach as in our company website analysis, we found a sharp rise in presidential references to Buy American since the mid-2010s. With this insight, we further explored partisan alignment of firms’ narratives by applying the established partisan “slant” measure from Gentzkow and Shapiro (2010), widely used to study partisan bias in online media and encyclopedias (e.g., Greenstein and Zhu, 2012; Greenstein et al., 2021; Jelveh et al., 2024). This analysis showed that the narratives on the firms’ websites became increasingly Republican-themed in Phase 3, corroborating the political co-optation of the Buy American narratives.

Table 4: Links Between Historical Observations and Theoretical Concepts

Illustrative historical observations	Descriptive labels	Conceptual grouping	Theoretical constructs
Phase 1 (2000–2008)			
After 9/11, public discourse reflects a surge in "consumer patriotism," framing domestic consumption as a civic duty.	Linking consumption to patriotism	Activating patriotism for market appeal	Symbolic legitimization through patriotism
Early-adopter firms begin to explicitly connect their products to national identity in their branding (e.g., All-Clad's shift to "American artisans").	Connecting products to civic pride	Invoking American craftsmanship	
Firms start marketing their products not just as American-made, but as the result of superior, multi-generational American skill and heritage.	Invoking American craftsmanship		
Phase 2 (2008–2015)			
A "critical pool" of entrepreneurs, personally harmed by globalization, narrate job and business loss as the moral basis for new ventures.	Narrating personal stories of economic loss	Converting private grievances into a collective moral cause	Symbolic legitimization through socio-economic grievances
Company mission statements describe purchasing their products as an act of defiance against a global system that offshored jobs.	Framing consumption as economic resistance		
Entrepreneurs use combative, anti-globalization language, describing their work as a "war" or "protest" and using anti-foreign slogans (e.g., "because China is a long drive to Work!").	Using combative, anti-foreign language		
Founders give interviews and post videos with explicit goals of rebuilding their local economies and "bringing manufacturing back" to their hometowns.	Calling for national economic revival		
Phase 3 (2015–2023)			
Political actors, particularly within the MAGA movement, explicitly absorb and amplify the movement's "Buy American" narratives for partisan purposes.	Mirroring political rhetoric and slogans	Appropriation of narratives by political actors	Political co-optation
Entrepreneurs publicly perform their political identity, appearing at political rallies or gifting products to partisan figures (e.g., Henry USA at a GOP gala).	Performing partisan allegiance	Performative display of partisan identity by entrepreneurs	
The definition of a "Made in USA" company shifts in consumer discourse to include firms based on their symbolic political alignment (e.g., Black Rifle Coffee).	Defining category membership by political identity		
Online consumer lists and forums begin to defend the inclusion of companies with foreign supply chains, arguing their political stance is more important than their material origin.	Ignoring material origin in favor of symbolic alignment	Redefining category membership around political allegiance	

We synthesized these components into a process model through an iterative effort. For example, entrepreneurs' messaging in Phase 3 increasingly mirrored partisan rhetoric, a shift central to theorizing how they were co-opted and actively captured. This insight moved us beyond a simple linear progression to a dynamic cycle of symbolic legitimization and political co-optation. Iteratively drafting, testing, and revising against the full historical record produced our final model, which specifies the conditions, processes, and outcomes of

ideological re-categorization.

Ideological Re-Categorization of “Made in USA”

Our findings trace how the “Made in USA” label was transformed from a simple marker of manufacturing origin into a potent symbol of nationalism. This transformation unfolded through a cycle of processes we term *symbolic legitimization* and *political co-optation*, driven by grassroots entrepreneurs. We trace this process across three phases (see Table 5 for an overview). In Phase 1 (2000–2008), entrepreneurs began to infuse the label with a broad civic patriotism. In Phase 2 (2008–2015), grievance-driven entrepreneurs who were harmed by globalization—channeled their personal losses into a more combative economic nationalism, promoting a moralized, anti-globalization narratives. Finally, partisan political actors co-opted these grassroots narratives in Phase 3 (2015–2023). This political capture transformed the category’s meaning into an exclusionary partisan nationalism, attracting a new wave of ideological ”joiners” and increasingly decoupling the label from its material origins.

Table 5: Historical Development of the Made-in-USA Category

	Phase 1: Linking Origin to Civic Patriotism (2000–2008)	Phase 2: Framing Grievances as Economic Nationalism (2000–2015)	Phase 3: Political Co-optation & Partisan Nationalism (2015–2023)
Macro-political trends	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Post-9/11 surge of patriotism – China’s WTO entry (2001) & lingering “China Shock” disruptions – Accelerated offshoring & global trade liberalization 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – 2008 financial crisis causing mass unemployment – Gradual economic recovery under Obama – Globalization at its zenith, yet growing social polarization 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Trump victory in 2016 & “America First” agenda – U.S.–China trade war intensifying since 2018 – De-globalization policies – COVID-19 pandemic (2020) & tumultuous presidency transition (2021)
Made-in-USA Category	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Category remains modest in size; a smaller set of firms adopt Buy American slogans and highlight U.S. craftsmanship – “Made in USA” brand begins gaining mild cultural resonance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Surge in the number of firms explicitly using “Buy American” language – Emergence of new entrepreneurial ventures aligned with domestic manufacturing, partly spurred by high unemployment – Category size and visibility grow sharply 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Continued growth in the absolute number of “Buy American” firms – Markedly increased narrative intensity and diversity of products/sectors – Category’s narratives become more partisan-leaning

	Phase 1: Linking Origin to Civic Patriotism (2000–2008)	Phase 2: Framing Grievances as Economic Nationalism (2000–2015)	Phase 3: Political Co-optation & Partisan Nationalism (2015–2023)
Key Actors & Narrative Framing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Actors: Early-stage entrepreneurs. – Framing: Civic Patriotism. Narratives link “Made in USA” to post-9/11 solidarity, pride, and national identity. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Actors: “Grievance-driven founders” take center stage. – Framing: Economic Nationalism. Entrepreneurs like Mark Andol channel direct experiences of economic loss into combative, anti-globalization narratives. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Actors: Original founders are captured; new “ideological joiners” are attracted to the partisan identity. – Framing: Partisan Nationalism. Narratives merge with right-wing politics (e.g., MAGA); partisan loyalty trumps material origin (e.g., Black Rifle Coffee).
Illustrative evidence from three entrepreneurial firms:			
<i>Henry USA</i>	The founder, Anthony Imperato, took a home equity loan to establish the firearm company in 1996. In early 2000s, the official company motto was “Made in America, and Priced Right.”	The company started to exhibit nationalist discourses for Buy American on its company website around 2013-2014. The official company motto was changed to “Made in America, Or Not Made at All.”	The founder and company became highly active in national politics through its charitable branch ”Guns for Great Causes,” National Rifle Association (NRA), and social media outreach to conservative constituents.
<i>Made in America Store</i>	Mark Andol founded General Welding & Fabric in 1989 with ten workers, which grew to over sixty workers in the early 2000s. A significant business loss was reported in 2007, and Mark Andol blamed foreign competition, currency manipulation, and imports from China.	The 2008 recession led Mark Andol to lay off half of his workers at General Welding & Fabric. In 2010, he started the Made in America store to sell various merchandise categories made in America, and to “turn one of the most painful experiences in life into a beacon of hope for America.”	Nationalist consumers and politicians praised the company’s 2016 expansion, which sparked media coverage on “American revival.” The founder said the pandemic made “our Made in America mission has never been more relevant or strong” in 2020.
<i>Origin USA</i>	The co-founder, Jacko Willink, served in the U.S. Navy SEALs for 20 years until his retirement in 2010. The other co-founder, Pete Roberts, was a Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu enthusiasts and founder of the sports website bjjweekly.com.	Co-founders established Origin USA in 2011. In 2013, they posted on YouTube how they produce sports apparel in Maine. The video went viral with nationalist consumers, and the company continues to engage with its supporters in various social media platforms.	Opening its second factory in 2017. Co-founders called the Buy American movement and company mission a “war of the people” to reclaim American greatness. The company and its customers support MAGA.

Phase 1: Linking Origin to Civic Patriotism (2000–2008)

The movement’s first phase was characterized by the mobilization of civic patriotism, as entrepreneurs linked “Made in USA” to post-September 11 national solidarity and pride. In American history, there have been repeated calls to favor American-made products. Frank (1999) traced an early instance to 1773, when the Boston Tea Party, which fought British taxation and the monopoly of the East India Company, helped galvanize support for American sovereignty (Balleisen, 2005). Similar waves resurfaced in the 19th and early 20th centuries, notably during the Great Depression, when President Herbert Hoover signed the Buy American Act of 1933. At the end of the “Golden Age” of American capitalism

after WWII, the theme reemerged in the 1970s and 1980s with United Auto Workers urging Americans to “quit buying foreign-made cars” (Frank, 1999, 161), and in the early 1990s amid NAFTA debates. Against this historical backdrop, the early 2000s marked the beginning of a new wave in which businesses began referencing “Made in USA” as a marker of patriotism.

Rise of patriotism and the “China Shock.” In the 1990s, the United States doubled down on free trade through NAFTA (1994) and the WTO (1995), deepening integration into the global economy. This context set the stage for the early 2000s, when accelerating globalization intersected with a surge in national consciousness. Two pivotal events in 2001 then pushed patriotism to the fore. First, the September 11 attacks triggered a surge of “consumer patriotism,” where buying American was recast as an act of solidarity. President George W. Bush’s exhortation to “get down to Disney World in Florida”⁹ epitomized the idea that consumption itself was a patriotic duty. According to journalist reports, “Ordinary Americans shook off their gloom and opened their wallets... consumption soared at a 6 percent annual rate.”¹⁰ Second, China’s entry into the WTO dramatically reshaped U.S. trade patterns, with Chinese exports to the U.S. tripling between 2001 and 2008. The resulting “China Shock” (Autor et al., 2016) devastated American manufacturing communities, sharpening public anxieties about globalization.

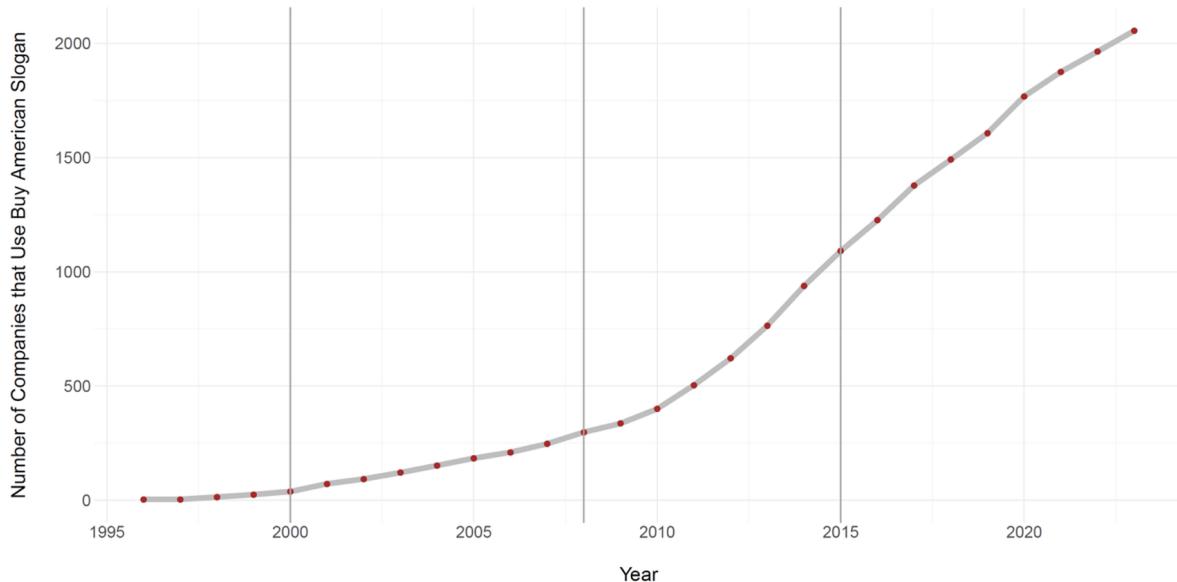
Linking product origin to patriotism. In this environment, entrepreneurs and political leaders began investing in “Made in USA” with new symbolic resonance. Presidential records from this period show rising references to Buy American themes, signaling that the label was gaining salience as a national narrative (Figure 8 later). As Figure 2 shows, the number of companies featuring Buy American narratives on their websites began a steady climb—a trend not explained simply by the proliferation of corporate websites (see Appendix V). Still, this activity remained limited in scale. Early firm narratives illustrate this first step. All-Clad,

⁹Stewart, E. (2021, September 10). *How Bush told us to go shopping after 9/11*. Vox. <https://www.vox.com/the-goods/22662889/september-11-anniversary-bush-spend-economy>

¹⁰Zuckerman, S. (2002, September 8). 9-11-01 / Impact on Business / American consumers kept economy going / Consumer spending kept economy going. *SFGATE*. <https://www.sfgate.com/business/article/9-11-01-Impact-on-Business-American-consumers-2773356.php>

for instance, shifted from a localized statement of product location—"All-Clad is made in Canonsburg, Pennsylvania"¹¹—to a declaration of identity-laden pride: "American artisans, using American-made metals."¹² Similarly, Henry USA, an entrepreneurial producer of Civil-War-era-style rifles, cast its products as defiance against global supply chain dependence, with founder Anthony Imperato insisting, "You can't make my parts in China. You can't leave me in a lurch."¹³ In both cases, American-ness was reframed as a central identity claim. These moves gave the label new symbolic weight, allowing it to function less as a technical descriptor and more as a marker of civic belonging.

Figure 2: Count of Companies Promoting Made-in-USA Products (1997–2023)



Source: Webpage updates of company websites.

Phase 2: Nationalistic Grievance Framing and Economic Nationalism (2008–2015)

Following the 2008 financial crisis, the movement shifted toward combative economic nationalism, as displaced entrepreneurs channeled their grievances into anti-globalization narratives about job loss and national revival. A larger pool of entrepreneurs and workers, devastated

¹¹<https://web.archive.org/web/20020720132024/https://www.all-clad.com/>

¹²https://web.archive.org/web/20070602123538mp_/http://www.all-clad.com/about-all-clad/Our-Craftsmanship/

¹³*Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, November 19, 2016, www.jsonline.com/story/money/business/2016/11/19/henry-repeating-arms-made-america-not-all/94070334/

by fierce foreign competition, reframed private losses as collective struggles against foreign threats. This shift occurred as the domestic manufacturing sector, already weakened by years of foreign competition, faced deeper global market integration through new trade agreements with countries like Colombia, South Korea, and Panama, and a fivefold surge in Chinese exports between 2001 and 2015. The Obama administration's championing of the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) exemplified an elite consensus on globalization that further reinforced perceptions of abandonment. In this context, producer and consumer choice was transformed into a statement of grievance and defiance.

Rise of grievance-based anti-globalization economic nationalism. The number of companies promoting Buy American narratives surged after 2009 (Figures 2 and 3). Firms increasingly differentiated themselves through national provenance; they elevated “American-made” as central central claim and framed it with an overtone of anti-foreign sentiment. The firearm company founded in 1997, Henry USA, exemplifies this shift. While its initial company motto was the pragmatic “Made in the USA and Priced Right,” by 2011-2012, it had changed to the more confrontational “Made in USA, or Not Made At All.” As Figure 4 shows, these claims grew more visible and frequent. Crucially, their content shifted. Figure 5 illustrates that by 2014, grievance-based economic nationalism grew: “anti-foreign,” “job loss and creation,” and “national revival” narratives surged ahead of civic pride.

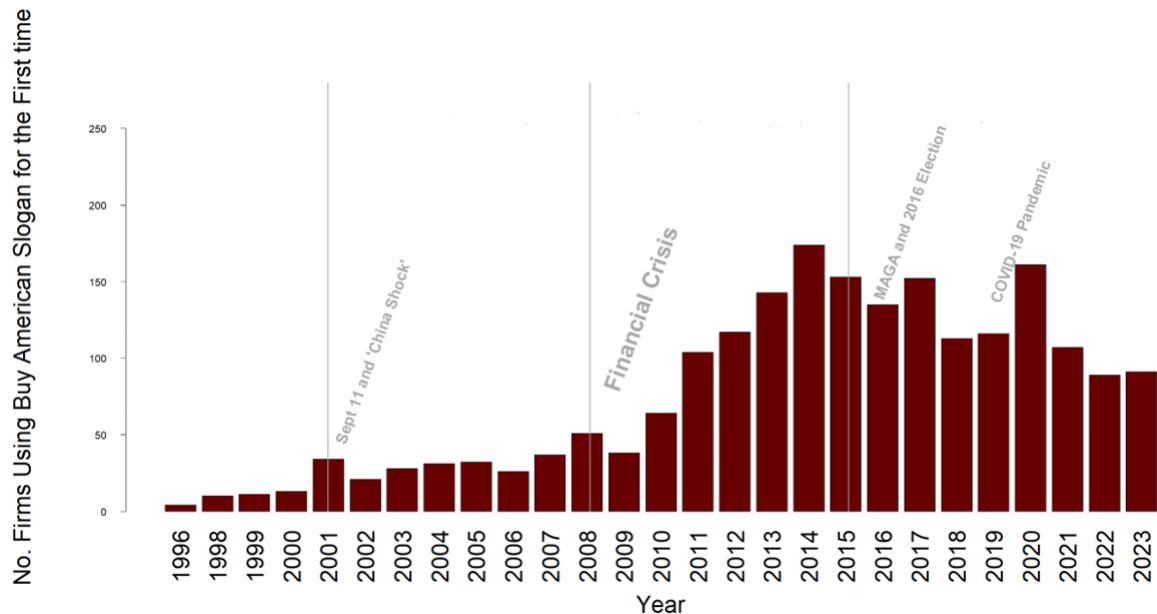
The stories of entrepreneurs like Mark Andol and Pete Roberts reveal the mechanisms driving this transformation. Andol, whose welding business collapsed under Chinese competition, founded the Made in America Store in 2010, branding it as the nation’s first retailer of “100% American Made Products.”¹⁴ He cast the venture as a “protest against ‘the recession, the trade imbalance and unfair trade practices,’” with the slogan, “because China is a long drive to Work!”¹⁵ This commitment was absolute; a journalist noted that “everything in the store, from the shelves to the price stickers, to even the glue that holds on the price stickers,

¹⁴Made in America Store website “About Us” page, 9 Dec., 2012 web.archive.org/web/20121209143633/http://www.madeinamericastore.com/about/

¹⁵Made in America Store website, the August 10th, 2012 version of the “About Us” page. web.archive.org/web/20121209143633/http://www.madeinamericastore.com/about/

is made in America.”¹⁶ Pete Roberts, founder of Origin USA in 2011, articulated a similar story of devastation: in his community, livelihoods had been “stripped from underneath them and sold to the lowest bidder… China,” leaving behind “abandoned mills, empty train yards, decaying infrastructure.” His rallying cry—“In 2011, we drew a line in the dirt”—was a clear call to national revival. Consumers responded, one declaring, “I’m sold just on you bringing manufacturing to the US. Eagerly waiting [for] the first release!”¹⁷ Roberts reinforced this by invoking the American dream, the Civil War, and past U.S. leaders: “Nobody in our industry can do that because they’re pulling products from other countries. The American people need USA-made products.”¹⁸ Consumers echoed this logic, one exclaiming: “Murica…! This is absolutely, without a doubt, a commendable endeavor.”¹⁹

Figure 3: Company Buy American Narratives Start Years (1996–2023)



Source: Webpage updates of company websites.

This grievance-driven intensification is supported by macro quantitative evidence. First,

¹⁶“Unique Store Offers 100% Made in America Goods”, February 2013, www.christinesmyczynski.com/made-in-america-store.html

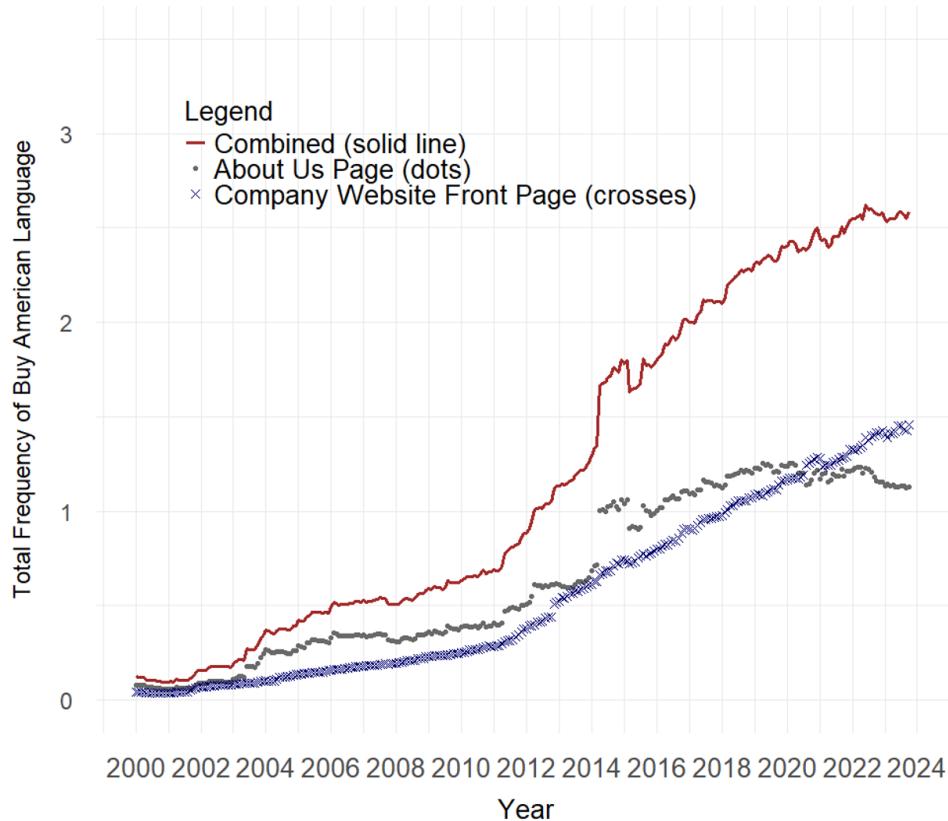
¹⁷“Origin Retreat - Manufacturing Facility.” YouTube, 11 Feb. 2013, youtube.com/watch?v=MQVf1HIS3QY

¹⁸“Inside Origin -How BJJ GIS Are Made.” YouTube, YouTube, 31 Mar. 2014, youtube.com/watch?v=hj2eSF-QmP4

¹⁹“Inside Origin -How BJJ GIS Are Made.” YouTube, YouTube, 31 Mar. 2014, youtube.com/watch?v=hj2eSF-QmP4

the shift in narratives during this period coincided with an upsurge in trade-induced job losses. Drawing on data from the Trade Adjustment Assistance (TAA) program administered by the U.S. Department of Labor, widely regarded as one of the most reliable sources on U.S. employment losses directly attributable to foreign competition (e.g., Autor et al., 2016; Kim and Pelc, 2021) - we tracked the yearly “flow” of trade-related unemployment from 1994 to 2020. As shown in Figure 6, while the offshoring and outsourcing of American jobs had long been underway, the 2009 spike in trade-induced unemployment following the financial crisis was unprecedented. This surge corresponded with increased companies promoting Made-in-USA, as shown in Figure 3, indicating that more firms joined the movement in tandem with rising economic hardship.

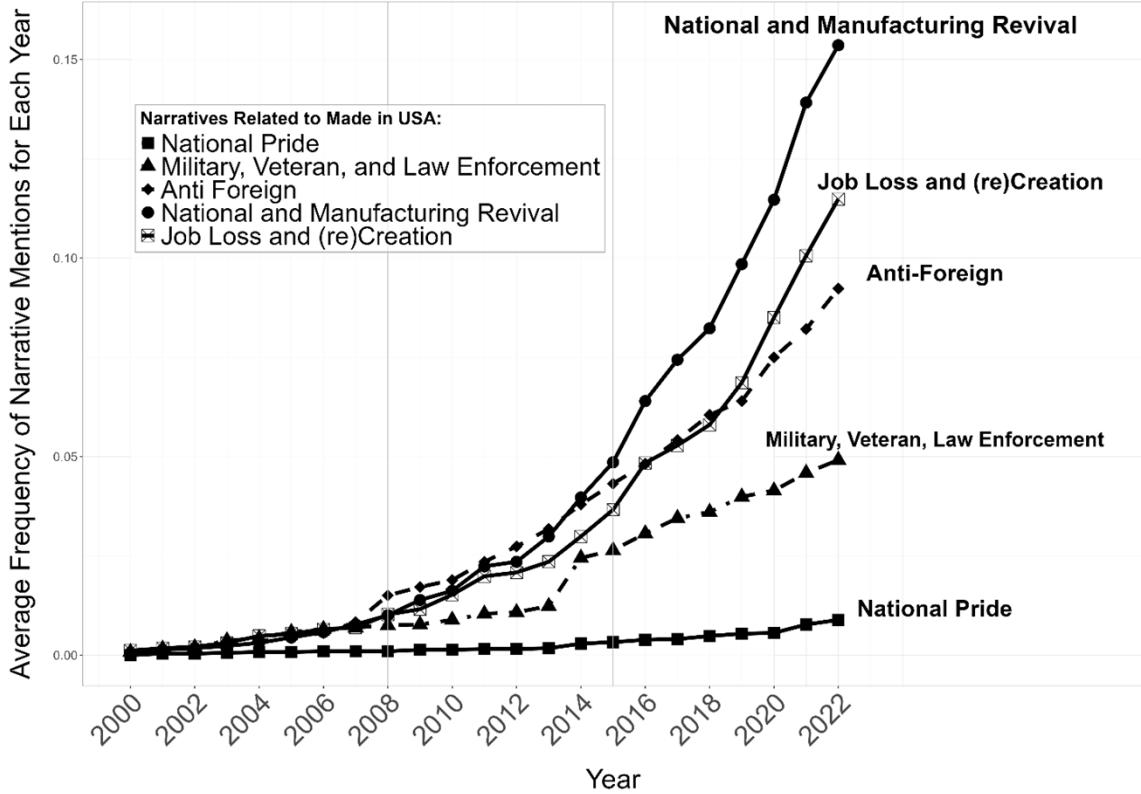
Figure 4: Average Buy American Narratives on Company Websites (1997–2023)



Source: Webpage updates of company websites.

Second, firms that adopted such narratives were disproportionately located in regions

Figure 5: Company Buy American Narratives (1996–2023)

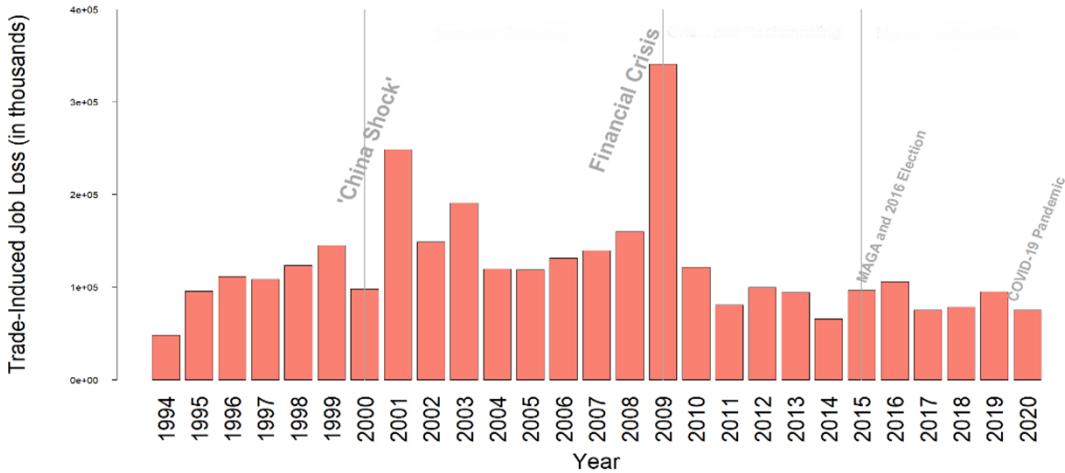


Source: Webpage updates of company websites.

hardest hit by globalization. Using TAA certifications, we mapped state-level patterns of the number of firms in our sample, normalized by population size over time, shown in Figure 7. By 2014, the density of Made in USA firms was visibly higher in the “Rust Belt” states in the Midwest (e.g., Wisconsin) and the East (e.g., Pennsylvania). These regions had the most acute industrial decline and job losses from foreign competition (Autor et al., 2016; Alder et al., 2023). Figure 7 also reveals an increased firm density in two regions not typically classified as part of the Rust Belt: New England states (e.g., Vermont) and Western mountain states (e.g., Wyoming). In New England, research has documented the long-term decline of textile manufacturing and employment losses (Koistinen, 2016; Choi, 2023). This is particularly relevant because textiles remain the largest sector representing the Made-in-USA category. Origin USA is one of such clothing firms emerged in New England by repurposing abandoned textile mills. Low-population Western Mountain states host lower numbers of

firms, but their density by population size is significant. Due to their extensive wilderness areas and outdoor culture, they have become home to a cluster of Made in USA ventures in the outdoor, tactical, and shooting industries. These sectors - often linked to military or veteran entrepreneurship - have expanded significantly across the Mountain West in the past two decades (Pattini et al., 2020).

Figure 6: Trade-Induced Job Loss in the U.S. (1994–2020)



Source: Trade Adjustment Assistance Program, U.S. Department of Labor.

We further performed a county-level analysis to incorporate the effects of local proximity to trade-induced unemployment. We constructed a geographic metric that accounts for both the magnitude of each county's trade-induced unemployment and distances between counties. Controlling for the county population, we find that a 1.25% increase in this unemployment exposure correlates with an additional Made in USA firm in that county. This quantitative finding is consistent with our qualitative observation that local job losses from globalization, especially after the financial crisis, motivated entrepreneurs such as Mark Andol and Pete Roberts. Appendix VI provides the technical details of this county-level analysis.

By 2015, the Buy American movement had evolved from civic pride into a strident anti-globalization platform. Entrepreneurs recast “Made in USA” from a patriotic marker

into a symbol of resistance, broadening its meaning of collective grievances across industries. What had once been an attribute-based label began to operate as a cross-industry banner, uniting diverse products under a shared ideological purpose. This redefinition consolidated the label as a goal-oriented category of resistance and, in doing so, increasingly became visible to—and ultimately appropriated by—political actors in the next phase.

Phase 3: Political Co-optation and Partisan Nationalism (2015–2023)

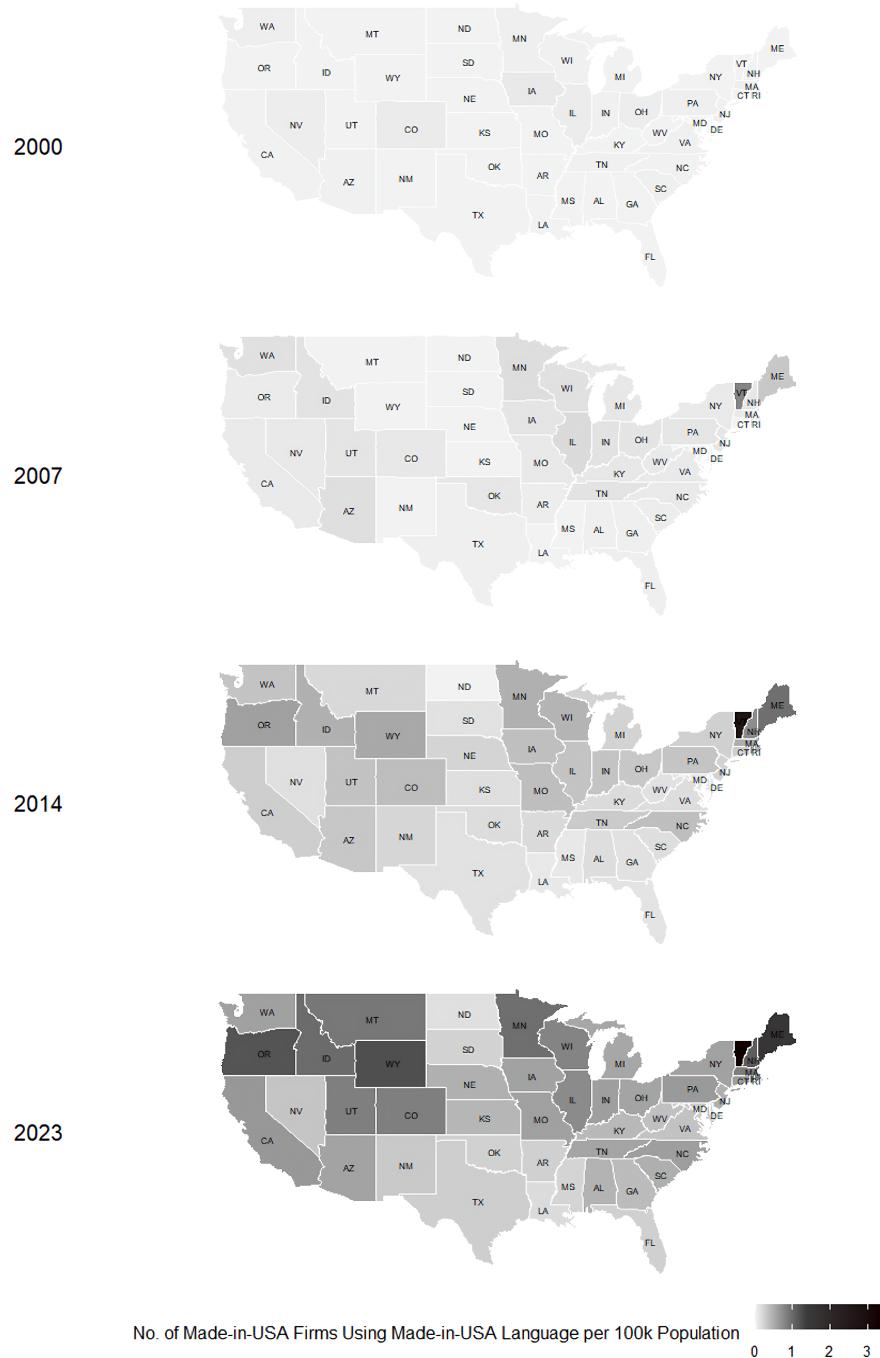
In the final phase, the narratives of the movement were amplified by political elites, transforming its ideological basis into a partisan nationalism where political loyalty became a salient connotation of the category. By the mid-2010s, the symbolic capital built by displaced entrepreneurs had grown visible enough to attract political actors. Partisan elites—especially within the ascendant MAGA movement—amplified these narratives, redirecting them into campaign slogans and policy agendas. What entrepreneurs had framed as economic resistance was reframed to support partisan mobilization, broadening the appeal to politically-motivated audiences. Early entrepreneurs became drawn into this alignment, as their ventures and identities were increasingly celebrated within partisan projects, attracting newer, partisan-motivated entrepreneurs. We refer to this appropriation of entrepreneurial narratives by partisan elites as political co-optation.

A striking feature of this period was the movement’s explosive growth even as its original economic basis waned. Our data show an unprecedented surge in firms promoting “Buy American” narratives (Figures 2, 3, and 4), with “National and Manufacturing Revival” themes expanding most dramatically (Figure 5). Similarly, Figure 7 shows that the number of “Made in USA” firms grew nationwide. Yet this growth occurred during a period of historically low trade-induced unemployment (Figure 6)—the very economic motivator that propelled the movement in the previous phase.

Political co-optation: Integration of market narratives in partisan discourses.

Republican leaders, led by President Trump, wove “Buy American” and “Made in USA” themes into the core of their “America First” agenda. This integration was institutionalized

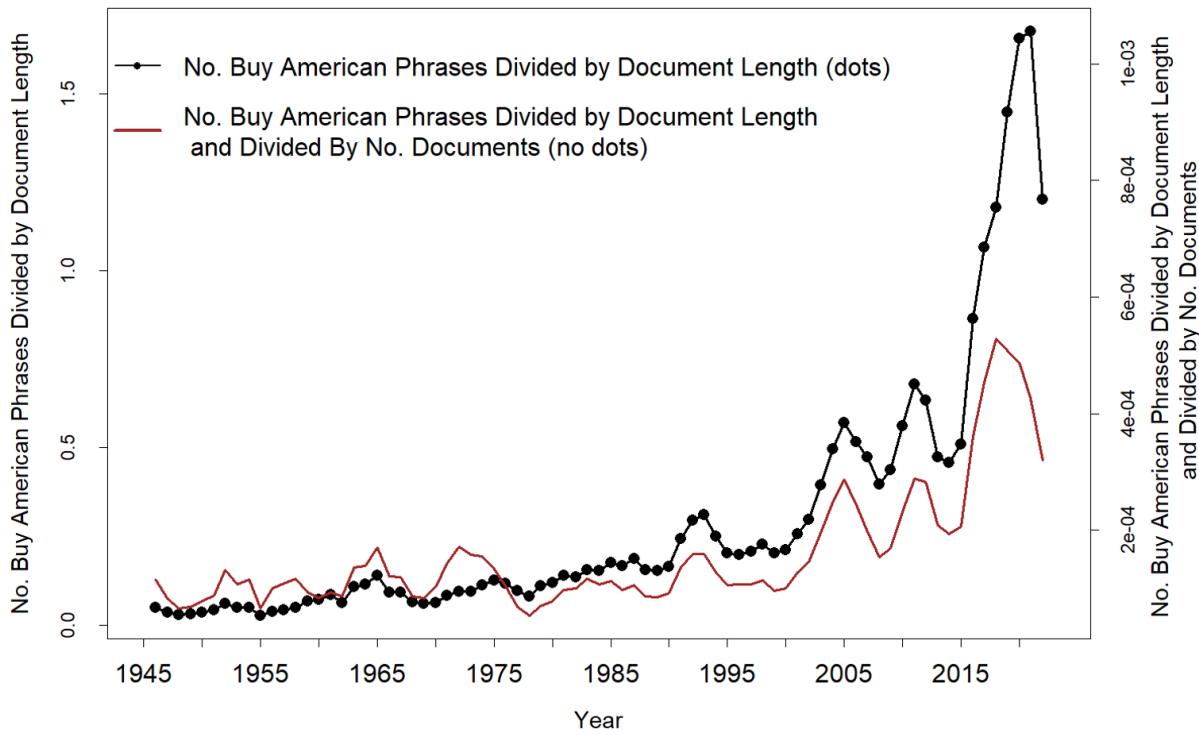
Figure 7: Geographical Distribution of Made in USA Firms Using Buy American Language in the Contiguous United States (State Population Weighted)



Note: Firm locations were obtained from the USPTO Trademark database and manual search coding. The annual figures for all 24 years are presented in Appendix VII.

through both policy and spectacle, from “Made in America Week” to framing the 2018 trade war with China. President Trump repeatedly fused market and political narratives, declaring, “Under this administration, we live by two very simple words: Buy American... It’s about ‘Make America Great Again.’”²⁰ As Figure 8 shows, presidential references to “Buy American” as a proportion of total remarks surged during the 2016 election and peaked under President Trump, surpassing all previous levels since 1945.

Figure 8: Relative Salience of Buy American Language in Presidential Records (1945 -2023)



Source: The American Presidency Project from UC Santa Barbara

As elites amplified the message, entrepreneurs themselves became aligned with this partisan framing. Mark Andol of the Made in America Store praised President Trump’s policies as correcting the “35-year mistake” of globalization.²¹ Henry USA, the firearms company, became a vocal proponent of Republican priorities, symbolically gifting a custom rifle to then-Governor Kristi Noem at a GOP gala in 2021.²² Its website, social media channels, and

²⁰White House Archives for August 13, 2019, trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov

²¹CBC Radio interview with Mark Andol on March 14, 2017. <https://www.cbc.ca/radio/asithappens/as-it-happens-tuesday-edition-1.4024284/it-s-very-hard-stocking-shelves-at-made-in-america-where-everything-is-100-u-s-made-1.4025083>

²²National Rifle Association (NRA) report on June 10, 2021. <https://www.nrawomen.com>

nonprofit arm “Guns for Great Causes” all reinforced this alignment.²³

Our quantitative analysis of firms’ website language supports this rightward shift. We computed language similarity between firms’ website narratives and Republican politicians using political slant measures developed by Gentzkow and Shapiro (2010) and widely adopted by scholars to estimate partisan biases in a range of communication outlets (e.g., Greenstein and Zhu, 2012; Greenstein et al., 2021; Jelveh et al., 2024). This measure estimates political bias by aligning text with phrases frequently used by Republican versus Democratic members of Congress in congressional records. A score of ”0” indicates politically neutral language, while positive values signify Republican-leaning language and negative values signify a Democratic leaning. As shown in Figure 9, the political slant of the movement’s firms, which was once largely nonpartisan, shifted overwhelmingly toward Republican narratives during this phase.

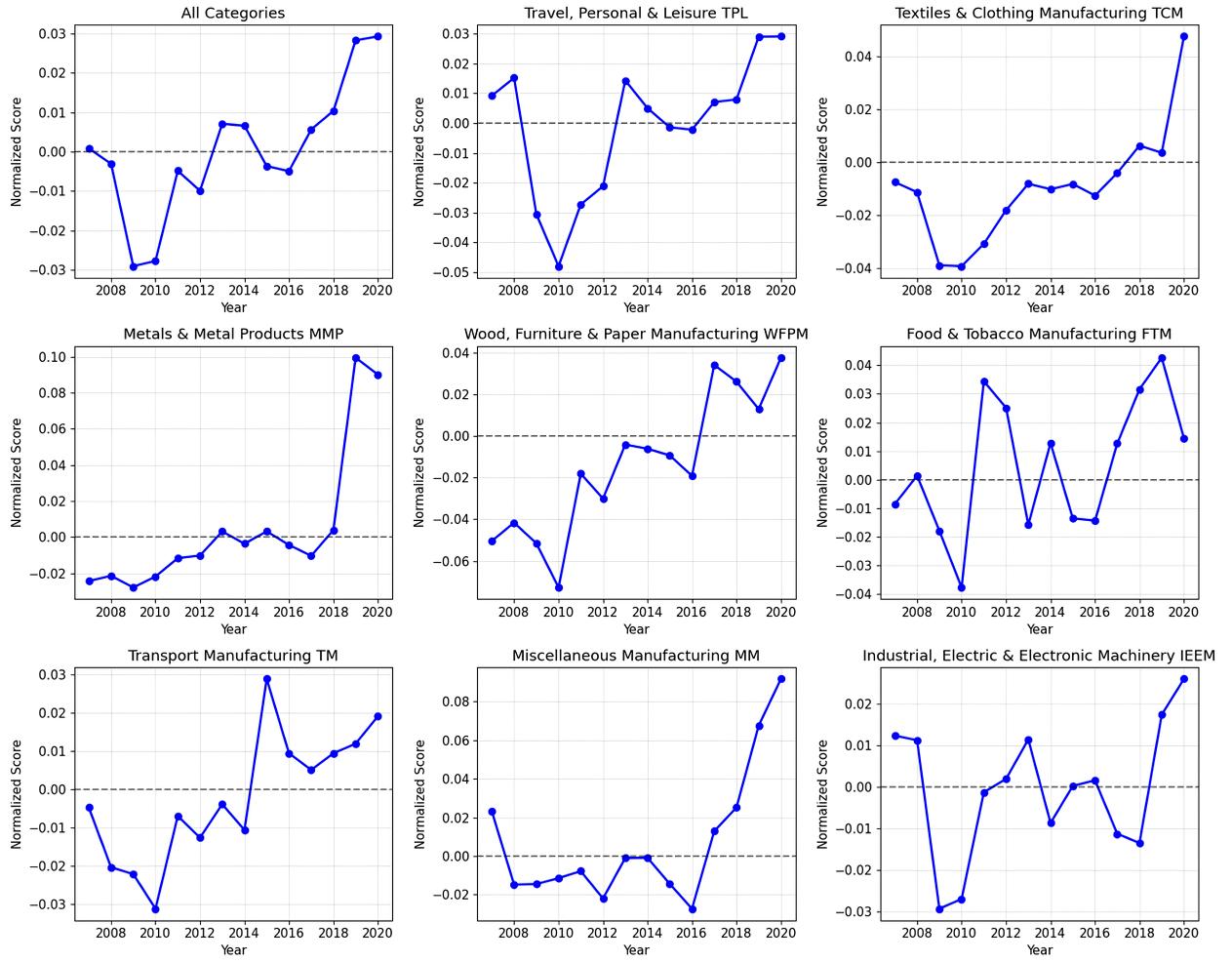
Expansion and looser coupling of the category. Political co-optation expanded the scale, scope, and symbolic reach of the category. Membership came to depend less on production location and more on partisanship. Origin USA evolved from local Maine producer of sportswear to a MAGA-aligned nationalist after former Navy SEAL Jocko Willink became co-owner in 2017, infusing the brand with martial allusions: “Critical victories in America’s history were won not only on distant bloody battlefields but also right here at home in factories, fields, and farms.” Customers embraced this: “ORIGIN = America!... It gave me chills! Keep up the fight, guys!” Another commented: “America Made Manufacturing on steroids, very cool/MAGA...” Similarly, American Made General Store, founded in 2018 by Iraq War veteran Chad Overman, displayed veteran photographs alongside the motto “We stand for our Flag. We kneel for the Cross.” Despite facing a \$100,000 loss in its first year, Overman emphasized its moral mission over profit, framing commerce as a nationalist duty.²⁴

/content/henry-big-boy-rifle-presented-to-gov-kristi-noem

²³Henry USA website documentation of its participation in NRA annual banquet in 2019. <https://www.henryusa.com/news/military-veterans-and-law-enforcement-nra-banquet/>

²⁴Report of American Made General Store in Sept 2019. <https://www.arkansasonline.com/news/2019>

Figure 9: Partisan Slant of Company Website Language



Note: Figure displays the average political slant of firms' website language over time, calculated using Gentzkow and Shapiro's (2010) index. The y-axis represents the political slant score, which is zero-centered (e.g., Greenstein and Zhu, 2012): a score of 0 is politically neutral, positive scores indicate Republican-leaning and negative scores indicate Democrat-leaning languages.

The clearest sign of the looser coupling of the category with its original meaning of manufacturing locations is seen in the case of Black Rifle Coffee (Figure 10), a Utah-based business founded by US Army Green Beret veteran Evan Hafer in 2014. The company appeared on consumer "Made in USA" lists in 2020 despite openly stating on its website that it "imports high-quality coffee beans."²⁵ This compares firms like Hula Daddy Coffee—an early entrant whose beans were domestically grown in Hawaii. Black Rifle Coffee was celebrated as the "unofficial coffee of the MAGA universe",²⁶ with its category membership resting on its

²⁵/sep/02/at-pocahontas-store-patronage-is-patrio/

²⁶Black Rifle Coffee information on the coffee source. <https://www.blackriflecoffee.com/about-us/our-coffee/>

²⁶New York Times report of Black Rifle Coffee on July 14, 2021. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/07/14>

alignment with conservative causes like the Second Amendment and gun rights.²⁷ Donald Trump Jr. personally endorsed the company by tweeting, “Great coffee, great guys and great Americans. I’ve had the chance to meet and hang out with them. Try it.”²⁸

Figure 10: Black Rifle Coffee on a Consumer List of Made-in-USA Firms (on April 18, 2020)

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General » General Discussion

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[ARCHIVED THREAD] - THE OFFICIAL MADE IN AMERICA

THREAD (Page 1 of 8)

Page 1 / 8

Posted: 4/18/2020 9:40:29 AM EST

I have an idea but I need all of GD to help me make it happen.

Let's put together a thread highlighting companies selling goods made in America so it's easy to find USA made products as alternatives to Chinese/foreign made goods.

I'll keep the OP updated and categorize links to various products so the links are easy to find.

We can make this happen guys, for the good of our country! This is something we can do that will make a difference.

Link to a site listing 100% Made in USA brands.

<https://clark.com/shopping-retail/american-made-in-the-usa/>

General Goods

<https://madeinamericastore.com/>

Food and Drink

Coffee

<https://www.valentinecoffeeeco.com/>

<https://www.blackriflecoffee.com/>

Black Rifle Coffee imports its coffee beans. But it is included in this Made in America list.

Food

<https://www.nueskes.com/>

<https://www.jacklinks.com/>

<https://www.wisconsincheese.com/our-cheese/our-makers>

<https://www.swisscolony.com/>

Condiments

<https://www.kikkoman.com/en/corporate/about/group/soysauce.htm>

Candy

<https://www.jellybelly.com>

Automotive, Watercraft and Recreational Vehicles

Righteous mission of the list to reject Chinese and foreign goods, according to nationalist consumers

Source: “The Official Made In America Thread” from AR15.com, the website is a forum that claimed to be a “gathering place for firearm enthusiasts of all types”. The authors added highlights and notes in blue.

By the end of this phase, the “Made in USA” label had become closely associated with a partisan symbol. Its boundaries expanded, its meaning became less about manufacturing origin and more about partisanship.²⁹ What began as a civic appeal had, through successive shifts, become a vehicle of partisan mobilization. This trajectory illustrates a broader pattern in which entrepreneurs’ symbolic work creates resources that political actors can later appropriate and redirect. In the next section, we formalize this recurring pattern into a

/magazine/black-rifle-coffee-company.html

²⁷Who-we-are page on Black Rifle Coffee website. <https://www.blackriflecoffee.com/about-us/who-we-are>

²⁸Donald Trump Jr. Twitter post on November 13, 2017. <https://x.com/DonaldJTrumpJr/status/930071572349636609>

²⁹Given the varied industry affiliations in our data, we also examined industry diversity over time. We constructed several diversity measurements, including the commonly-used Shannon (1948) and Simpson (1949) indices (see Appendix VIII).

process model that specifies the conditions, mechanisms, and outcomes of this transformation.

Toward a Model of Ideological Re-categorization

Our findings reveal a recurring pattern that transformed “Made in USA” from a label of manufacturing origin into a broad ideological banner. Across phases, entrepreneurs infused the category with shifting symbolic meanings—from civic patriotism to economic nationalism—that political actors later co-opted and redirected into a form of partisan nationalism. We conceptualize this trajectory as a process of ideological re-categorization, in which a market category anchored in product attributes becomes organized around shared ideological narratives, creating a goal-derived meta-category (Barsalou, 1983; Durand and Paoletta, 2013). Nationalism supplied the flexible yet powerful master frame that enabled this transformation. Our model specifies the antecedent conditions, the cycle of symbolic legitimization and political co-optation, and the central mechanism of narrative intensification and transformation that redefines the category. Figure 11 illustrates this process.

The cycle begins when three antecedent conditions converge. First, the process typically requires a salient public grievance, a widespread sense of economic, cultural, or political dislocation deeply felt but not adequately addressed by the mainstream institutions. Such grievances are often directed at abstract forces like globalization, financial elites, or cultural decline, creating a space for market actors to root for resistance. Second, the ideology of nationalism must be culturally available. As a thin-centered ideology (Freeden, 1998), nationalism does not prescribe a detailed social blueprint, but instead provides a flexible repertoire of symbols, narratives, and loyalties to an “imagined community” (Anderson, 1983). Its flexibility, affective charge, and historical resonance make it a powerful resource for framing grievances. Third, a displaced entrepreneurial class is crucial: actors whose jobs, businesses or communities have been directly undermined by structural changes such as offshoring, deindustrialization, and import competition. These entrepreneurs are positioned to lead the re-categorization: their personal losses lend moral authority to their narratives, and their displacement motivates entrepreneurial activity as a form of resistance.

Antecedents

Processes

Consequences

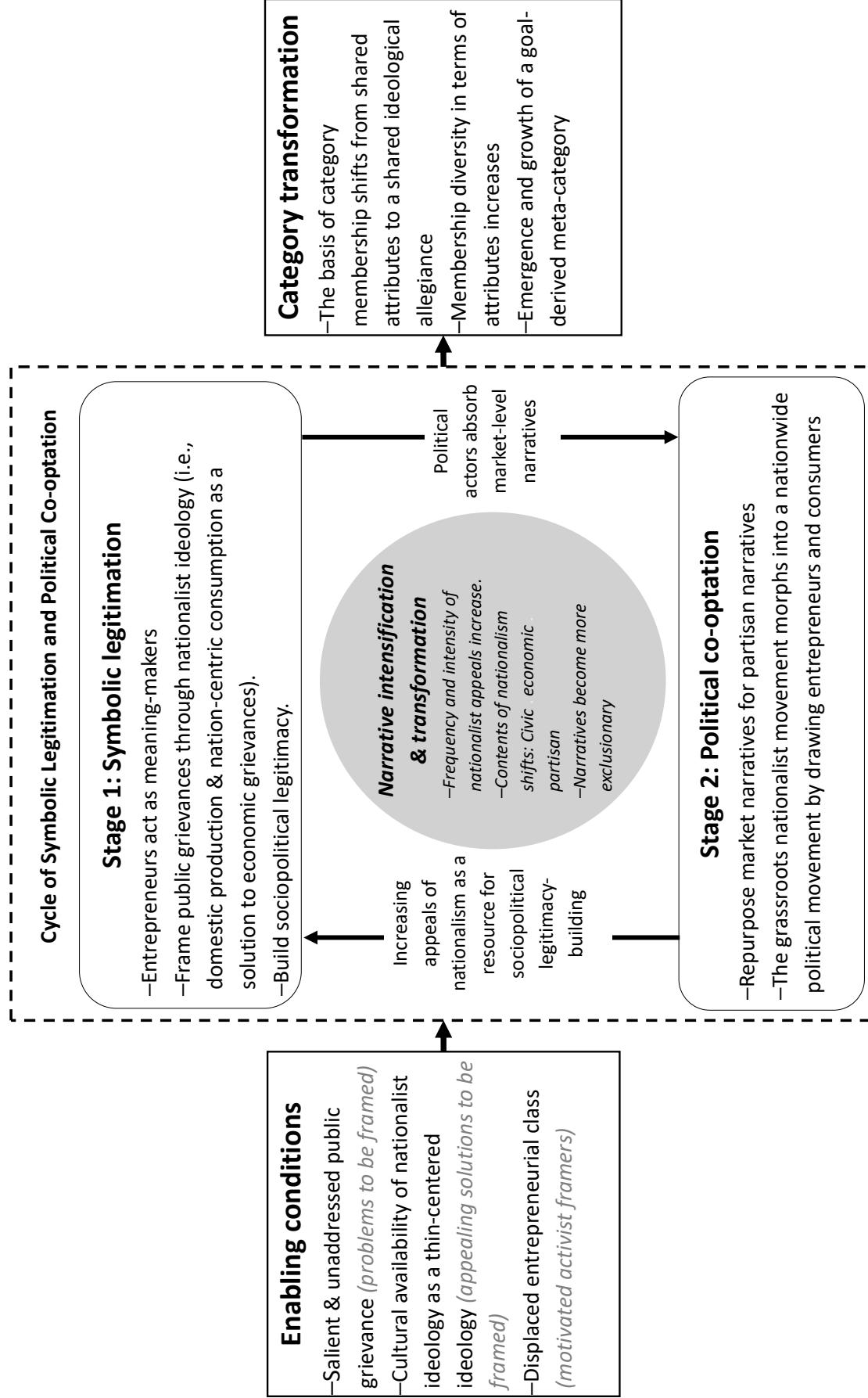


Figure 11: A Process Model of Ideological Recategorization

The first stage is *symbolic legitimization*. Entrepreneurs act as meaning-makers, first using the broad appeal of civic patriotism to transform an ordinary classification into a moralized claim. They may further deepen this legitimacy by framing personal and local struggles through the lens of a more combative economic nationalism, casting their ventures as solutions to collective national grievances. By doing so, they generate sociopolitical legitimacy (Aldrich and Fiol, 1994) that allows the category itself to be seen as a response to broader societal problems. This process expands the basis of membership: products are judged not by their material attributes alone, but by their symbolic contribution to the national good. In this way, consumption is reframed as a patriotic act, and the category acquires the moral authority that makes it a powerful resource for subsequent political appropriation.

The second stage is *political co-optation*, a process that transforms the movement's ideology into an exclusionary partisan nationalism. As the market-based narratives gain visibility, political actors appropriate the symbolic work of entrepreneurs and reframe it within their own agendas. This entails more than mere amplification: it involves aligning the category-level narratives with partisan narratives, a process that often draws in the original entrepreneurs as active participants. This dynamic differs from top-down category creation, where elites define the organizing goal from the outset. Here, the goal originates from below but is subsequently redirected and politicized by actors with greater reach. Through this co-optation, the category's symbolic boundaries are reshaped: what began as a broad appeal to civic and economic solidarity is narrowed into partisan mobilization, altering both who counts as a legitimate member and how the category is understood by audiences.

Symbolic legitimization and political co-optation thus generate *narrative intensification and transformation*. First, intensification occurs as the frequency of nationalist appeals accelerates across more firms and settings. Second, a transformation occurs as the very valence of the nationalist ideology shifts. Our findings show a clear trajectory where broad themes of civic patriotism are supplanted by sharper frames of economic nationalism, and eventually by the exclusionary and affective claims of partisan nationalism. This cycle thus amplifies the

narrative and transforms its ideological content, making it more overtly exclusionary and ratcheting up the symbolic power that ultimately redefines the category.

The outcome is a transformed category. As ideology intensifies and evolves its meaning, the category's basis for legitimacy shifts from product attributes ("where was this made?") to identity ("what does this stand for?"). The thin-centered nature of nationalism is crucial here: its semantic flexibility and emotional resonance function as a magnet, drawing in actors and products across domains and uniting disparate themes such as economic protectionism, cultural traditionalism, and militarism under one nationalist umbrella. The category's scope broadens, its boundaries loosen from its original material origins, and its symbolic reach expands as membership is defined by ideological alignment.

Discussion

Our analysis shows how a grassroots nationalist movement recast the "Made in USA" label from a manufacturing origin marker into a symbol of nationalist and partisan mobilization. The process began from below from grievance-driven grassroots entrepreneurs—socioeconomically distressed entrepreneurs who engaged in symbolic legitimization. Their success in channeling grievances into nationalist meaning turned the label into a potent cultural resource that political actors later appropriated. This political co-optation fueled the category's partisan turn, which in turn attracted a new wave of ideological joiners who reinforced and amplified its new ideological alignment. The category itself was transformed: its meaning became less about manufacturing origins but partisan allegiance.

Entrepreneurial Nationalism and Political Co-optation

We advance the emerging research on organizational nationalism (Yue and Takeda, 2025; Koveshnikov et al., 2025) by unpacking its grassroots entrepreneurial origins, mechanisms for its emergence, and its unintended consequences. Prior work established that organizations are not merely passive recipients of nationalist pressures but can actively adopt and project nationalist narratives and practices. Yet it has remained less clear where such organizational nationalism originates, how it takes hold in markets, and what happens when it escapes the

control of its originators. Our study tackles each of these questions.

First, we show that organizational nationalism can be seeded not only by large corporations or state-linked firms (Yue et al., 2024a,b) but by entrepreneurs operating on the margins of the economy. We specify a previously overlooked bottom-up pathway initiated by grievance-driven grassroots entrepreneurs—a displaced entrepreneurial class who reframe private grievances into a nationalist cause. As the movement they seed gains traction, it attracts ideological joiners who amplify its partisan direction. This two-stage process significantly advances our understanding of the intersection between nationalist movements and entrepreneurship: How a shifting set of entrepreneurs can act as catalysts for nationalist mobilization. In specifying this pathway, our model also shows how this entrepreneurial action transforms the very valence of nationalism itself—shifting it from an inclusive civic patriotism to combative economic nationalism and to an exclusionary partisan force.

Second, we theorize a novel form of appropriation we term political co-optation, a process that solidifies the movement’s shift into an exclusionary partisan nationalism. In contrast to prior work on internal movement dynamics (Aldrich, 1999), we show a distinct, externally driven pathway. Once the movement gains legitimacy, political actors appropriate its symbolic capital, amplifying its narratives for partisan mobilization. This highlights a paradox of success: the more successful the movement becomes, the more attractive it is for appropriation.

In this regard, our findings highlight why nationalism became the attractive target of political co-optation. Two features of nationalism as a thin-centered ideology (Freeden, 1998) proved critical. First, its semantic flexibility allowed political actors to graft it onto multiple policy agendas—from trade to immigration to manufacturing—without violating its logic of in-group loyalty. Second, its emotional resonance through social identity (Searle-White, 2001) created broader coalition potential. These two features make it structurally compatible with elite political projects—nationalism historically serves state-building and partisan boundary-making (Gellner, 1983; Wimmer, 2018)—made it appropriable by political elites. This contrasts, for example, sharply with Occupy Wall Street’s “We are the 99%,” which achieved

comparable visibility and tapped into similar economic grievances yet remained largely resistant to elite co-optation. The anti-elite content was structurally incompatible with elite appropriation—political elites could not authentically claim to represent “the 99%” against themselves. Our findings thus suggest that ideological re-categorization through political co-optation is more likely when grassroots movements mobilize thin-centered ideologies based on social identity claims—ideologies whose flexibility and structural affinity with elite projects make them appropriable once they achieve cultural salience.

Together, these insights reposition entrepreneurship as a central driver within the broader theory of organizational nationalism. They show that nationalism in business does not only flow downward from states or diffuse across large corporations; it can also emerge from below, spread through market categories, and ultimately reshape the political landscape in ways entrepreneurs do not control. This perspective reframes the marketplace as an incubator of nationalist narratives, where entrepreneurs function as early-stage developers of ideology and political elites and ideological joiners as later-stage adopters. For organizational theory, this reveals not just how organizations enact nationalism, but how they unintentionally create the symbolic raw material for partisan conflict. This dynamic expands the scope and stakes of organizational nationalism as a theoretical framework.

Sociopolitical Ideology and Market Category Transformation

We contribute to research on market categories by showing how goal-derived meta-categories can emerge from the bottom up. Prior work has emphasized top-down processes, in which powerful macro-actors such as states define a unifying goal that others then populate (Sine and David, 2003; Boghossian and David, 2021). Our analysis demonstrates how grassroots entrepreneurs, rather than a government or regulators, can furnish the ideological goal, transforming an attribute-based category into an ideologically infused meta-category. This extends category theory by specifying a supply-side entrepreneurial pathway to goal-derived transformation that has been largely overlooked.

We identify a powerful goal that can organize categories: Nationalism, which functions as

a symbolic magnet due to its semantic flexibility and emotional resonance (Freeden, 1998). As a social-identity-based ideology rooted in the logic of “us versus them” rather than a fixed doctrine (Freeden, 1998; Anderson, 1983), it unifies a much wider range of products, actors, and narratives, from tools and textiles to coffee and financial services, than prior work has recognized. This extends category research, which has typically examined “thicker” ideologies such as authenticity (Weber et al., 2008) or environmentalism (Sine and Lee, 2009). Nationalism’s semantic flexibility and emotional resonance also make it prone to deviating a category’s meaning away from material attributes and towards more broader claims about what nationalist symbolic meaning products represent.

This perspective highlights how ideological re-categorization transforms markets into arenas of political and cultural conflict. As trust in political institutions declines, ideological energy increasingly flows into economic spheres (Klintman and Boström, 2013). When producing and purchasing certain products signals participation in a cultural war, markets cease operating by economic logic alone. Coffee brands, news outlets, payment platforms, and wellness communities can become badges of tribal belonging (Morris, 2025) and civic participation. Managers face stark choices: align with one tribe or risk alienating all. To fully unpack these dynamics, we must map the full ideological ecosystem—tracing how grassroots entrepreneurs construct meanings, media amplify them, financial actors fund them, and political movements co-opt them. Does the fusion of market activities and identity strengthen or weaken democratic life? Does it expand civic participation or accelerate fragmentation into warring commercial tribes? Addressing these questions requires scholars to cross disciplinary boundaries, linking research on markets, social movements, and democratic futures.

Entrepreneurship as a Vehicle for Social and Political Resistance

We also contribute to research on entrepreneurship by theorizing it as a vehicle of resistance by marginalized actors. For decades, entrepreneurship scholarship has been preoccupied with “unicorns, gazelles, and other distractions” (Aldrich and Ruef, 2018, 458), privileging high-growth, venture-backed firms while neglecting the mundane ventures where most

entrepreneurial activity occurs. We respond to long-standing calls to broaden this lens by showing how grassroots actors displaced by globalization—the very system they resist—use entrepreneurship not just for commerce but as a form of political and cultural struggle. Their grievance narratives give authenticity to their ventures, which they mobilize as platforms of symbolic legitimization, and pave the way for more ideological joiners. This extends the view of entrepreneurship as a means for marginalized groups to contest prevailing social orders (Hwang and Phillips, 2024), while specifying how such contestation takes shape in markets.

One of today’s most consequential entrepreneurial innovations may not be technological but ideological: the redefinition of markets themselves. Our study joins calls to “reverse entrepreneurship’s causal arrow” (Eberhart et al., 2022; Jennings et al., 2022; Lubinski and Tucker, 2025) by shifting the focus from how institutions enable entrepreneurship to how entrepreneurship remakes institutions and political orders. While recent critiques have highlighted entrepreneurialism as a potent “ideology” (Bodrožić et al., 2025; Lubinski and Tucker, 2025) and a “tacit political theory” that reshapes society (Jarrodi and Bureau, 2019; Weiss et al., 2023), the mechanisms driving this transformation remain underspecified. Our model of ideological re-categorization speaks to one such mechanism by showing how entrepreneurs reshape a market category into a vehicle for political mobilization.

This perspective highlights entrepreneurship’s crucial societal role. Rather than asking, “What are the antecedents of high growth?” we highlight perhaps more urgent questions: Under what conditions do entrepreneurs become agents of social and political change? How do market-based movements turn into artifacts of political struggle? What are the implications of the entrepreneurial initiatives on the U.S. and the world? By documenting the struggles and innovations of grassroots entrepreneurs as well as national political actors who appropriate their grievance narratives, we identify a market-level mechanism fueling domestic anti-globalization sentiments, contributing to the de-globalization literature (Witt, 2019; Meyer and Li, 2022; Teece, 2022; Saittakari et al., 2023; Beugelsdijk and Luo, 2024; Luo, 2024; McCaffrey et al., 2024; Jandhyala, 2025). While this literature tends to focus on

multinationals in foreign host markets, we offer a domestic-focused, bottom-up, and long-term framework driving U.S. sociopolitical change with significant global implications.

Taken together, our contributions to nationalism, market categories, entrepreneurship, and de-globalization suggest that ideological re-categorization is one feature of contemporary capitalism, where economic, cultural, and political boundaries have collapsed. Displaced entrepreneurs respond to a growing hunger for meaning and belonging that civic institutions increasingly fail to meet. In doing so, they reshape commerce into a form of civic engagement. The story of the “Made in USA” label thus foreshadows a broader transformation—the re-routing of political life through the marketplace. Understanding this shift and how markets have become crucibles where collective identities are forged and political struggles are fought is one of the most urgent tasks before management and organization scholars today.

Analytic Transferability

Although grounded in a single case, our theory’s strength lies in its analytic transferability—the capacity of the process we identify to illuminate other contexts. Ideological re-categorization is not unique to Buy American. The underlying pattern—grassroots actors performing symbolic work that political actors co-opt—is a recurring dynamic. Our model offers a lens for examining such transformations, particularly those fueled by large-scale identity movements. Contemporary economic nationalism illustrates this process. In China, the Guochao (“National Trend”) movement re-categorized domestic brands across diverse sectors as symbols of national pride, beginning with grassroots producer and consumer sentiment and later amplified by state-affiliated media and government policy (Repnikova and Fang, 2018; Fang and Repnikova, 2018; Fan and Ip, 2023). India’s “Make in India” initiative follows a similar trajectory, with the government institutionalizing grassroots economic patriotism into a nationalist meta-category (D’Costa, 2009; Chacko, 2021).

Our model also helps explain the rise of other meta-categories, such as the global Halal market and the sustainability movement. The “Halal” principle unites disparate industries like food and finance under a shared commitment to Islamic principles; originating with

grassroots entrepreneurs, this category was later co-opted and standardized by state bodies and multinational corporations (Lever and Miele, 2012; Fischer, 2016,?; Akram, 2022). The sustainability movement offers a similar case. “Sustainability” has become a meta-category linking electric vehicles, sustainable fashion, and ESG investment funds under a shared ideological banner. Grassroots activists legitimized new sectors such as wind power (Sine and Lee, 2009) and moralized markets like grass-fed meat (Weber et al., 2008), while corporate and financial elites later adopted ESG rhetoric to strengthen their legitimacy (Scherer and Palazzo, 2011; Jones, 2017). In both cases, the same process—grassroots symbolic work followed by elite co-optation—offers a transferable framework for understanding how markets increasingly function as arenas of ideological struggle.

These examples reflect a larger trend shaping contemporary capitalism. Struggles over sociopolitical values and identities have become potent drivers of market evolution. In an era defined by identity politics (Bernstein, 2005; Fukuyama, 2018; Blake et al., 2024), the most consequential entrepreneurial act might not simply be about creating products but constructing the ideological world it inhabits. Political co-optation, in this light, is more than a political maneuver; it is also a market signal, marking where new forms of symbolic value are forged. The transferability of our theory lies in its ability to map this terrain of competition, where the ultimate prize is the power to define what it means to belong.

Boundary Conditions and Future Research

Our findings suggest three scope conditions that may shape vulnerability to ideological re-categorization. First, movements organized around anti-elite frames may face structural barriers to elite co-optation regardless of salience. Political elites may not be able to credibly appropriate narratives that position them as adversaries—as illustrated by Occupy Wall Street’s resistance to Democratic Party co-optation despite comparable visibility to the Buy American movement. Second, categories built on ideologies with specific doctrinal commitments may prove less semantically flexible and thus harder to redirect for partisan purposes. Fair Trade certification, for instance, embeds specific redistributive principles that

constrain appropriation in ways that nationalism did not. Third, categories with strong institutional gatekeeping—such as professional associations or certification bodies—may resist co-optation even when politically attractive. The Buy American movement lacked such institutional infrastructure, making its narratives more available for appropriation. These propositions require systematic comparative analysis to establish their generalizability.

Building on these scope conditions, we highlight three promising avenues for future research: the varieties of co-optation, the dynamics of resistance, and the producer and consumer experience in a decoupled market. One direction can be to examine the varieties of co-optation. Our model traces a cycle in which grassroots actors are co-opted by political elites for partisan ends, yet outcomes likely depend on who the co-opting elites are and the institutional context in which they operate. In countries with strong developmental states and less partisan division, state elites may harness nationalist movements for unified nation-building, as in postwar Japan (Johnson, 1982; Dower, 2000; Doak, 2006). When the co-opting actors are corporations—as when macro-breweries acquire craft beer brands (Carroll and Swaminathan, 2000)—the aim is market capture rather than political mobilization. Such cases often lead to mainstreaming or “watering down” of the original ideology (e.g., “greenwashing”), a pattern observed across moral markets (Sine and Lee, 2009; Weber et al., 2008). Future research could clarify how the identity and goals of co-opting actors shape both the trajectory and the societal consequences of re-categorized markets.

Creating a powerful, exclusionary ideological category inevitably invites resistance. While our model explains how such a category is built, future research should examine how it is dismantled. Fractures can emerge from several fronts. First, consumers and activists who reject the category’s ideology can launch counter-movements, such as the #GrabYourWallet campaign against MAGA-associated brands and pro-immigrant campaigns from Ben and Jerry’s. Second, original “true believers” who view certain aspects of the political co-optation as betrayal and seek to construct a “purer” sub-category within the MAGA camp. Third, incumbent Made-in-USA firms whose market positions are threatened or face ideological

pushback when they export to overseas markets. These dynamics raise critical questions: What strategies are used to resist ideological re-categorization? And under what conditions can counter-movements destabilize a co-opted category or establish viable alternatives?

Loosening the link between a category's symbolic meaning and its material reality creates a complex terrain for producers and consumers. When "Made in USA" describes coffee brewed from imported beans, what does the label truly signify, and how do consumers navigate the ambiguity? This opens a research agenda on consumer cognition and behavior in politicized markets. Some consumers may engage in symbolic adherence, treating political meaning as paramount and overlooking inconsistencies to signal identity. Others may act as purity seekers, feeling betrayed by decoupling and demanding brands that verifiably uphold the category's original attributes. Still others may grow cynical and disengage. Understanding the conditions that produce these divergent responses is critical for predicting the stability and influence of ideologically recategorized markets over time.

Our analysis of the contemporary Buy American movement tells a story far larger than a single market category or nation: it reveals a re-routing of political and social life in the 21st century. As trust in civic institutions falters, the marketplace has become a primary arena for forging collective identities and waging political struggle. Grassroots entrepreneurs—often displaced by the very system they resist—emerge as political organizers; their ventures function as new town squares; and production and consumption become a form of citizenship. For scholars of management and organizations, the implications are profound. The once-neat boundaries between the economic, the social, and the political have largely dissolved.

Online Appendices Available In OSF Repository

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