

“THE GOOD OLD DAYS NEVER DIE”: NOSTALGIA, TEMPORALITY, AND AFFECTIVE POLITICS IN TRUMP’S MUSICAL POPULISM

“LOS BUENOS TIEMPOS NUNCA MUEREN”: NOSTALGIA, TEMPORALIDAD Y POLÍTICA AFECTIVA EN EL POPULISMO MUSICAL DE TRUMP

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Abstract

Donald Trump’s campaign playlists function as affective tools of temporal populism. Drawing on a dataset of 225 songs played at rallies between 2015 and 2024, the study combines computational analysis of audio features with cultural interpretation to examine how music shapes political memory and mobilization. Results reveal a marked preference for tracks from the 1970s and 1980s, characterized by high energy, emotional positivity (valence), and moderate acousticness. These sonic choices evoke a nostalgic affective climate aligned with the populist promise of national revival. Boxplots, ANOVA tests, and heatmaps show that genres such as rock, disco, and country dominate this curated soundscape, serving as emotional anchors for a narrative of decline and restoration. In this context, music performs affective temporal governance—organizing emotional experience across time through repetition, resonance, and embodied participation. Songs do not merely entertain; they act as scripts of belonging, instruments of soft power, and infrastructures of sonic memory. By collapsing temporal boundaries between past and present, Trump’s playlists orchestrate a politics of feeling in which nostalgia becomes a mobilizing force. The analysis contributes to the emerging field of sonic political analysis and underscores the role of music in shaping affective populism.

Keywords

sonic memory, temporal populism, affective governance, political rallies, soft power

1. INTRODUCTION: TEMPORAL POPULISM AND SONIC MEMORY

In the performative landscape of contemporary politics, populism has emerged not only as a political style but as an affective structure that binds emotional narratives to collective identities. Within this framework, temporal populism plays a pivotal role by constructing idealized versions of the past to be reclaimed in the present. This narrative depends on a sense of loss and grievance, mobilized through the affective repertoire of nostalgia. As Bonikowski (2017) Finchelstein and Urbinati (2018) and Boym (2001) asserts, ethno-nationalist populism flourishes by activating collective resentment, offering a moral contrast between a once-glorious past and a corrupt present dominated by elites and outsiders. Crucially, this strategy is not only rhetorical but also aesthetic—and profoundly sonic. Music, as both cultural artifact and emotional catalyst, plays a central role in the affective politics of populism, particularly in the staging of events such as rallies. Sonic memory—understood as the emotionally charged recollection of past experiences through sound—becomes vital to how political actors mobilize affect. Altavilla (2012) conceptualizes sonic memory as a form of mobile cartography, mapping identities and emotions across space and time.

In the case of Donald Trump's rallies, playlists dominated by classic rock, country, and pop anthems from the 1970s and 1980s serve not simply as entertainment, but as tools of affective governance. These tracks invoke a shared emotional grammar, allowing attendees to inhabit a collective memory characterized by strength, unity, and national pride. As Street (2012) argues, music in political contexts is not merely illustrative; it is constitutive. It shapes the emotional tone, dramatizes political belonging, and enacts a communal identity. This affective power aligns with Nye's (2008) notion of soft power—the capacity to shape preferences through attraction and emotional resonance. Rather than exerting coercive force, soft power works through identification, aesthetic appeal, and emotional contagion. Trump's playlists function as a soft power device, reinforcing ideological alignment through nostalgia and familiarity. Alaminos-Fernández (2023) likewise identifies popular music as a vector of cultural power that populist leaders employ to craft symbolic environments conducive to political messaging.

The strategic clustering of Trump's playlists around the 1970s and 1980s is not coincidental. These decades are invoked as proxies for an imagined era of national greatness. Kékesi (2023) describes this as resonant memory—a mode of affective temporality in which the past resurfaces not as historical knowledge, but as emotional experience. Music becomes a mnemonic device through which grievances are not merely recalled, but re-felt. Sound also mediates spatial and corporeal experiences in populist rallies. The auditory space becomes one of collective embodiment, where listeners enact their affective ties. Drawing on Álvarez (2022), who shows how sound structures collective choreographies in queer nightlife, the rally can be interpreted as a similarly embodied performance of emotional and political alignment. Music enables a sensory politics of belonging, drawing listeners into a community

defined not solely by ideology, but by shared affective temporality. Moreover, sonic memory is embedded in broader cultural heritage practices. Chamberlain, Bødker, and Papangelis (2018) argue that personal soundscapes are socially mediated and technologically curated—especially through platforms like Spotify, which inform Trump’s playlist curation. Algorithmic reconstruction of sonic archives allows campaigns to curate national nostalgia with precision and emotional intensity. As Cusick (2020) notes, sound can be weaponized—not necessarily in a literal sense, but as a tool of emotional discipline and control. In populist settings, music functions both as a balm for wounded identity and a rallying cry against perceived threats. This dual capacity reflects Bonikowski’s (2017) framework, where populist narratives operate by polarizing emotion and fostering exclusionary solidarity.

The materiality of sound also matters. Ernst (2015) emphasizes that sound resonates differently from historical narrative—it loops, haunts, and repeats. These temporal qualities are ideally suited for populist appeals, which thrive on emotional repetition rather than deliberative reason. Music, in this context, becomes a medium through which the past is not explained but relived. It generates affective time loops that reinforce political identity. Velasco-Pufleau and Atlani-Duault (2020) describe such sonic formations as *lieux de mémoire*—emotional infrastructures activated and sustained through repetition. When songs like “Fortunate Son” or “YMCA” are played at Trump rallies, they evoke not only recognition but shared affect. These sonic memory-sites foster continuity and belonging, shaping how supporters feel about their country, their leader, and their historical trajectory. These dynamics are not uniquely American. Alaminos-Fernández (2021) documents similar uses of music in Spain’s electoral context, where popular songs are used to build affective bridges between politicians and the electorate. The underlying mechanism remains consistent: music becomes a political tool, activating emotional registers that transcend rational scrutiny and shape political loyalty.

Temporal populism operates through a sonic politics of memory and emotion, wherein the past is not merely evoked but audibly re-enacted—re-sounded—transforming memory into affect and affect into mobilization (Assmann, 2011; Erll, 2011). Rather than appealing solely to historical consciousness, it engages emotional memory through music, producing loops of resonance that intensify political identification. A nuanced understanding of populism thus necessitates a sonic sensibility: an analytical attentiveness to how affective time is structured through sound, and to the ways in which music constructs the emotional architecture of political life.

2. METHODOLOGY

A mixed-methods design integrates computational techniques with cultural interpretation to investigate the affective role of music in Donald Trump’s campaign rallies. The aim is to explore how specific musical attributes—particularly emotional intensity, temporal origin, and genre—shape the affective architecture of populist communication. The methodological

process unfolds in three stages: dataset construction, variable selection, and analytical modeling. The corpus includes 225 songs repeatedly used at Trump's rallies between 2015 and 2024. Tracks were initially identified using the Spotify API, which enabled the extraction of standardized audio features and metadata. To ensure empirical consistency, this list was cross-referenced with rally footage, journalistic accounts, and crowd-sourced playlists. A final manual review addressed inconsistencies in genre labels, decade attribution, and artist information.

Musical variables were selected for their emotional and symbolic relevance in populist contexts. Based on Spotify's audio feature taxonomy and previous research (Interiano et al., 2018; Alaminos-Fernández, 2023), the following variables were retained: valence (musical positivity), energy (intensity), danceability (rhythmic movement), acousticness (organic vs. synthetic sound), loudness (perceived volume), tempo (beats per minute), and decade (release period). These variables are linked to the ability of music to induce emotional synchrony, elicit nostalgic memories, or evoke perceptions of authenticity and cultural belonging. To identify patterns across decades, the study employs descriptive statistics, ANOVA testing, boxplots, and heatmaps. Descriptive statistics were used to summarize central tendencies of each feature by decade. One-way ANOVA tests assessed whether these features varied significantly across time. The first round of results showed significant variation in valence ($p = 0.0002$), energy ($p = 0.0011$), danceability ($p = 0.0416$), acousticness ($p = 0.0255$), and loudness ($p = 0.0167$), while tempo ($p = 0.5763$) did not. Boxplots visualize distributions of each musical feature by decade, showing how affective properties like energy and valence peak in the 1970s and 1980s. These decades emerge as emotionally coherent, in contrast to the 1990s and 2000s, which display greater variance and lower mean positivity. Heatmaps cross-tabulate valence and energy by genre and decade. These visualizations reveal that rock and disco dominate the emotional high ground of the 1970s and 1980s, aligning with rally atmospheres centered on optimism and mobilization. Genres like grunge or hip hop are underrepresented, suggesting both ideological incongruence and lower emotional suitability. A second round of ANOVA with confidence intervals nuanced the initial findings. While energy ($p = 0.011$) and acousticness ($p = 0.039$) remained significant, valence ($p = 0.078$) showed a near-significant trend. This suggests that while not all variables reach statistical thresholds, their affective salience may still be politically functional.

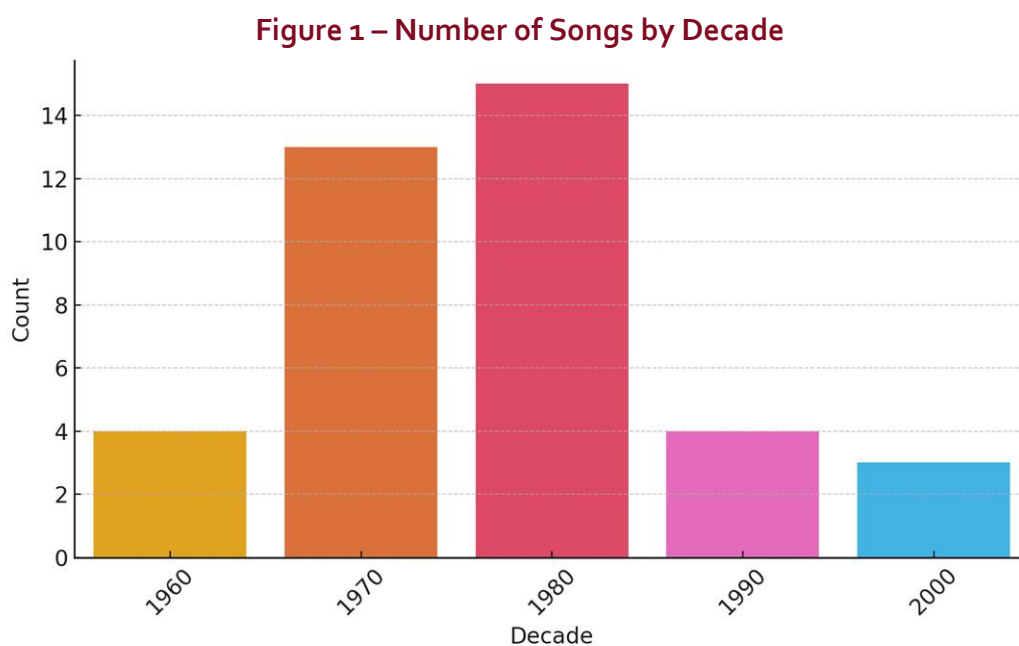
Finally, a Principal Component Analysis (PCA) was applied to explore latent structures in the dataset. The PCA revealed clusters of high-energy, low-acousticness songs typical of Trump's core soundscape. This affective aesthetic centers on emotional arousal and synthetic clarity, evoking excitement and strength while minimizing vulnerability or ambiguity. This methodological framework thus integrates quantitative rigor with qualitative insight, allowing for a comprehensive examination of how music orchestrates political time and affect in populist discourse.

3. EMOTIONAL ANALYSIS OF TRUMP'S RALLY SOUNDSCAPE

The emotional architecture of Donald Trump's rally soundscape is far from incidental. Instead, it reflects a calculated curation of music that reinforces nostalgia, cohesion, and political affect. Through a combined analysis of temporal distribution and emotional variables, this section explores the sonic contours of Trump's playlists, focusing on how specific decades and musical characteristics are disproportionately represented to evoke targeted affective responses. This analysis integrates statistical testing (ANOVA) and visualizations (boxplots and heatmaps) to demonstrate how sound is mobilized as a tool for emotional synchronization and ideological alignment.

3.1. Temporal Distribution of Songs: A Soundtrack for the "Good Old Days"

The temporal skew in Trump's musical selections is unmistakable. Songs from the 1970s and 1980s dominate the playlist, while the 1990s and 2000s are notably underrepresented. This aligns with what Bonikowski (2017) describes as temporal populism—a strategy that mobilizes collective resentment by referencing an idealized past. Trump's musical curation participates in this dynamic by sonically staging a return to a "greater" America.



Source: Author

As shown in Figure 1, the 1980s emerge as the most represented decade in Trump's playlists, followed by the 1970s. The scarcity of songs from the 1990s, 2000s, and 2010s suggests a

deliberate aesthetic alignment with an emotionally resonant period in the cultural imagination of his electorate.

Table 1 – Average and Standard Deviation of Musical Features by Decade

Decade	Valence_mean	Valence_std	Energy_mean	Energy_std	Danceability_mean	Danceability_std	Acousticness_mean	Acousticness_std	Loudness_mean	Loudness_std	Tempo_mean	Tempo_std
1960	67.5	39.79	46.25	19.84	59.0	21.18	46.0	28.3	-12.25	2.36	115.75	10.08
1970	68.62	22.21	70.54	17.0	55.31	14.21	18.69	21.25	-8.92	2.81	122.23	22.31
1980	62.8	19.77	76.07	14.16	56.33	13.5	24.53	25.87	-8.2	2.18	115.93	19.51
1990	30.75	12.07	43.0	36.06	43.5	13.8	58.75	39.56	-11.75	5.56	97.0	15.81
2000	49.67	30.92	73.0	22.34	51.33	14.22	9.67	8.39	-10.0	6.24	118.33	27.75

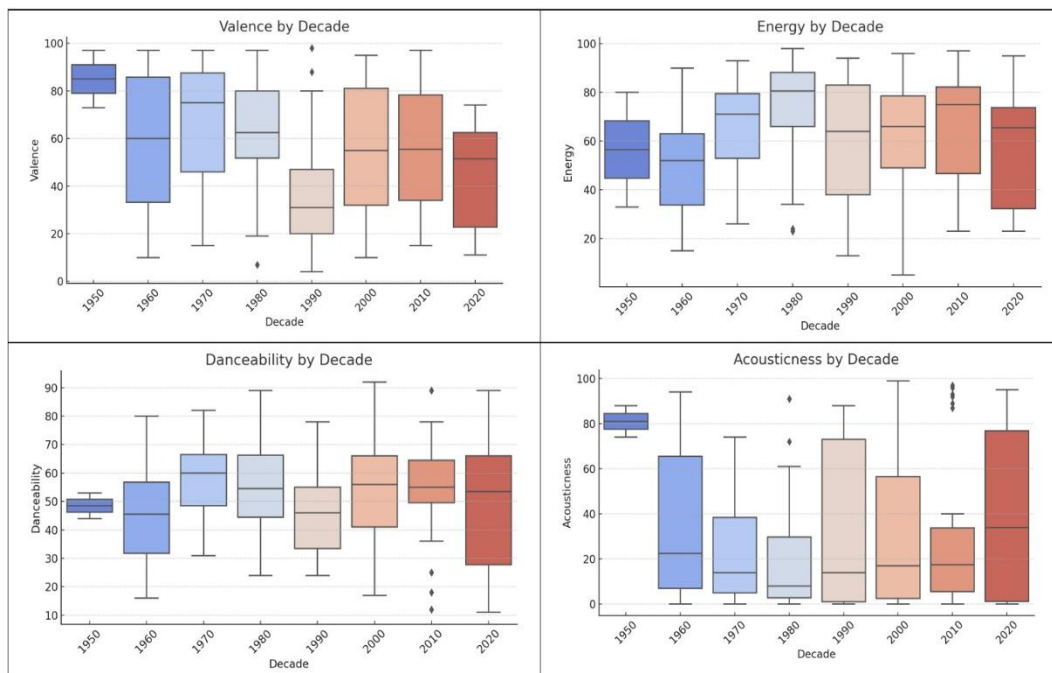
Source: Author

The descriptive statistics reinforce this pattern, revealing emotional peaks in the 1970s and 1980s, with high average values for energy and valence—qualities associated with optimism, confidence, and unity. Conversely, the 1990s show a pronounced decline in both metrics, highlighting their marginal role in the affective economy of the rallies.

3.2. Emotional Landscapes by Decade: Positivity and Power

Boxplots of musical features across decades offer a more granular view of the emotional profiles shaping Trump's soundscape.

Figure 2 Boxplots of Valence, Energy, Danceability, Acousticness, Loudness, Tempo



Source: Author

The valence boxplot indicates that the 1970s and 1980s maintain the highest median positivity with low variability—ideal for projecting emotional consistency and affirmation. In contrast, songs from the 1990s show reduced valence and greater variability, making them less reliable as affective anchors.

Similarly, energy peaks in the 1980s, supporting the hypothesis that rally songs are selected to maximize crowd activation. Danceability and loudness, while showing smaller fluctuations, still conform to the broader pattern: the 1980s songs are rhythmically engaging and sonically forceful. Acousticness trends inversely, peaking in the 1960s and 1990s but dropping in the 2000s, suggesting a preference for electronic production during emotionally charged moments.

Tempo remains relatively consistent across decades, indicating that rhythm speed is not a primary factor in the emotional engineering of the playlist.

Table 2 – ANOVA Results: Significance by Feature

Feature	p-value	Significant (p < 0.05)
valence	0.0002	Yes
energy	0.0011	Yes
danceability	0.0416	Yes
acousticness	0.0255	Yes
loudness	0.0167	Yes
tempo	0.5763	No

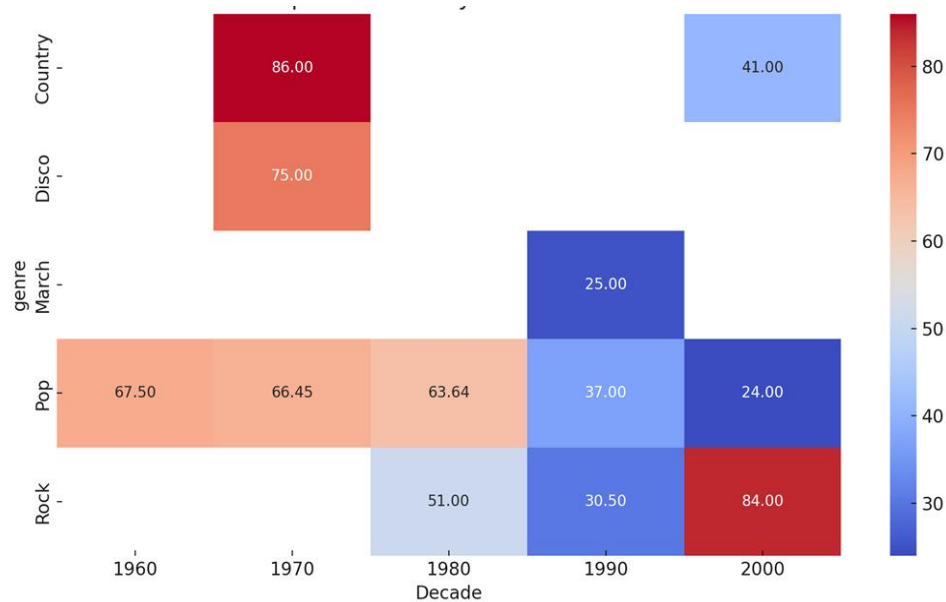
Source: Author

Statistical tests confirm that valence ($p = 0.0002$), energy ($p = 0.0011$), danceability ($p = 0.0416$), acousticness ($p = 0.0255$), and loudness ($p = 0.0167$) vary significantly by decade, validating the emotional selectivity of the soundscape. Tempo, with a p-value of 0.5763, does not show significant variation, further supporting the interpretation that emotional tone—not structural tempo—is the key affective driver.

3.3. Genre–Decade Emotional Convergences

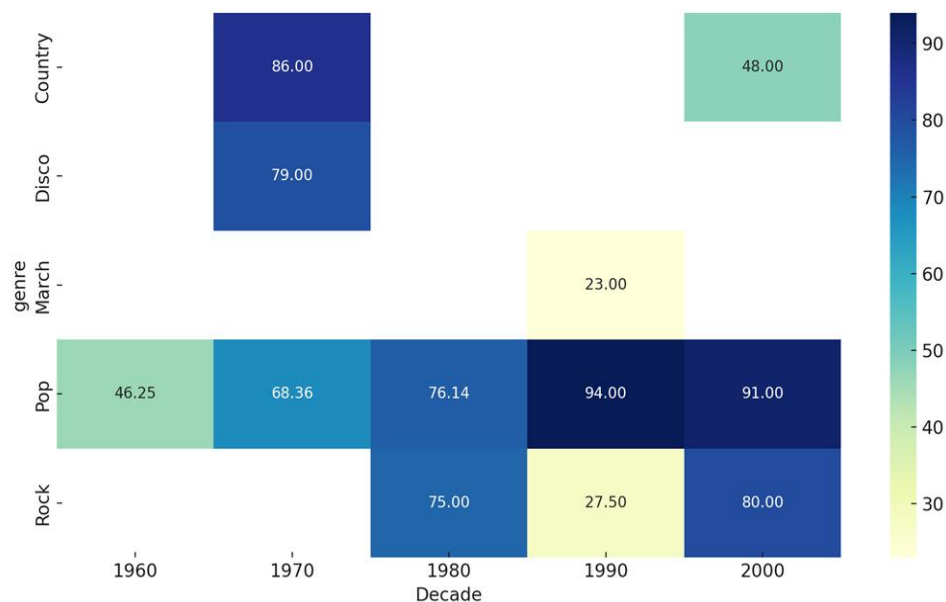
To examine how emotion clusters across genres and eras, we turn to two heatmaps that plot valence and energy by genre and decade.

Figure 3 – Heatmap of Valence by Genre and Decade



Source: Author

Figure 4 – Heatmap of Energy by Genre and Decade



Source: Author

These heatmaps highlight that 1970s and 1980s rock and disco consistently occupy the high valence–high energy quadrant. These genres function as affective amplifiers in rally settings, evoking celebratory nationalism and shared strength. Country-pop, although present across multiple decades, displays more variability in valence, suggesting a dual affective function—

ranging from solemn reflection to jubilant patriotism. Genres emerging in the 1990s, such as grunge and hip hop, are rare in the playlists and tend to cluster in lower valence and energy zones, reflecting ideological dissonance or deliberate exclusion.

3.4. *Affective Significance and Political Function*

From this analysis, a coherent emotional profile emerges: upbeat, high-energy, emotionally vivid songs from a narrow historical window dominate Trump's playlists. These selections serve not just to entertain but to emotionally calibrate the rally environment, constructing a shared affective field that resonates with collective memory and populist identity. As Alaminos-Fernández (2023) emphasizes, this type of musical curation functions strategically, reinforcing ideological messages through soft power mechanisms. Songs evoke affective memories that align listeners with the leader's temporal narrative—an imagined golden age that is not merely remembered, but relived in sound. In this way, Trump's soundscape becomes a performative script, guiding participants not only in what to believe, but in how to feel. Music here functions as both emotional infrastructure and ideological device. It builds affective synchrony among participants, amplifies narratives of decline and restoration, and transforms political memory into a shared sonic experience. In short, it provides the mood for mobilization and the soundtrack for revival.

4. **GENRE-ERA CONVERGENCES**

The affective architecture of Trump's rally soundscape is not solely shaped by the emotional content of individual tracks or their temporal origins. Equally crucial is the intersection of genre and era—a convergence that reveals how specific musical styles from particular decades are selectively revived to serve contemporary populist narratives. This section examines three interrelated dynamics that structure Trump's sonic populism: the recontextualization of protest songs, the dominance of emotionally potent genres like rock, disco, and country, and the ideological reframing of genre aesthetics. One of the most striking phenomena in Trump's playlist curation is the strategic reappropriation of songs that originally conveyed critique or dissent. Bruce Springsteen's "Born in the U.S.A.," a powerful indictment of post-Vietnam disillusionment and working-class marginalization, is routinely featured in rally soundscapes. Despite its critical lyrics, the song is recast through its anthemic instrumentation and emotive chorus as a celebration of national pride—an example of what Street (2012) calls the "emotional recontextualization" of music. Similarly, Creedence Clearwater Revival's "Fortunate Son," which protested class inequality during the Vietnam War, loses its subversive edge when performed in support of a billionaire-led populist campaign. These sonic acts do not erase political content; rather, they subsume it under affective resonance, privileging emotional impact over ideological coherence.

This affective reframing is further reinforced by the genre-decade matrix, as visualized in the heatmaps of valence and energy (Figures 3 and 4). These visualizations show that 1970s and 1980s classic rock and disco consistently inhabit the upper-right quadrant of high energy and high valence, making them ideal vehicles for populist mobilization. These genres are characterized by soaring melodies, strong beats, and immediate emotional appeal—features that facilitate group cohesion and mood regulation in mass political events. Disco, often associated with liberation and queer identity in its original cultural context, is rearticulated in Trump’s rallies as triumphant nostalgia. Tracks like “Y.M.C.A.” by the Village People and “Celebration” by Kool & The Gang are stripped of their subcultural meanings and reoriented toward patriotic exuberance. This is an example of what Velasco-Pufleau and Atlani-Duault (2020) describe as the “weaponization of sonic memory”—a process through which affective symbols of difference are incorporated into hegemonic narratives. Within Trump’s rallies, these tracks no longer signify cultural resistance but are reframed as sonic affirmations of national unity and moral resurgence. Country and country-pop, genres closely tied to American ideals of tradition, family, and rural life, play an equally prominent role. These songs often convey sentimental themes through acoustic textures and slower tempos. However, their affective resonance shifts across decades. Older country songs in the playlist (e.g., from the 1980s) tend to exhibit high acousticness and emotional sincerity. By contrast, more recent country-pop selections align with the broader affective strategy of the playlist, featuring louder production, increased energy, and pop crossovers. This evolution reflects a recalibration of genre aesthetics to meet the emotional demands of political spectacle—updating sonic markers of authenticity while preserving their nostalgic undertone.

The temporal deployment of genre thus serves not only aesthetic ends but ideological ones. Genres are affective repositories, carrying the emotional residues of their cultural histories. When Trump invokes 1980s rock, he is not just referencing a musical style, but activating an emotional memory of strength, coherence, and triumph. These are not just songs—they are scripts of feeling, tools for staging political belonging. Moreover, genre–era alignments also structure spatial practices within rallies. As Álvarez (2022) notes in her study of embodied choreographies, sound shapes movement and emotional enactment in collective spaces. A disco anthem or classic rock hit triggers applause, synchronized clapping, and chants—turning sound into a medium for corporeal and emotional alignment. These sonic rituals reinforce populist identity by generating what Altavilla (2012) calls “cartographies of affective belonging,” in which listeners locate themselves emotionally within a political community. This convergence between genre and era also contributes to the populist narrative’s temporal logic. By reviving emotionally charged musical genres from a perceived golden age, the rallies construct a looping temporality—one in which the past is relived in the present and projected into the future. The playlist functions as a sonic time machine, compressing decades of cultural memory into a performative structure of populist revival. Bonikowski’s (2017) concept of collective resentment is central here. These genre–era pairings do not merely entertain—they activate grievances, reinforce group identity, and

transform personal nostalgia into collective political emotion. Music becomes the medium through which the longing for national rebirth is not only articulated but felt. As Ernst (2015) and Kékesi (2023) suggest, the power of sonic memory lies not in its narrative content but in its resonant emotional form. In Trump's rallies, that resonance becomes a political instrument.

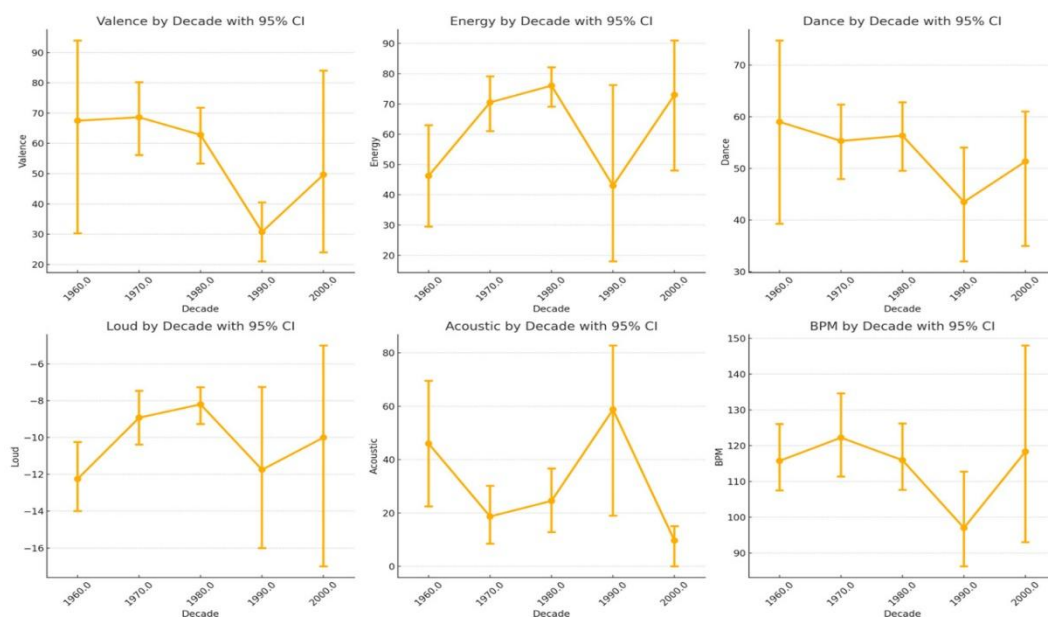
In sum, the affective and ideological power of genre-era convergences in Trump's playlists demonstrates that populist soundscapes are curated with emotional precision. Music is not ancillary to populism—it is infrastructural. It mediates identity, organizes memory, and enacts revival. Through the deliberate alignment of musical genres and historical periods, the rally becomes an affective performance of political time—an experience that merges past and present in a unified emotional script.

5. DISCUSSION: MUSIC AS AFFECTIVE TEMPORAL GOVERNANCE

The preceding analysis reveals that Donald Trump's campaign playlists are not simply entertainment tools, but devices for what may be termed *affective temporal governance*—the structuring of emotional experience and temporal perception through curated sound. This concept encompasses more than the emotional impact of music; it refers to how music actively organizes political time and sentiment, shaping who belongs in the narrative of the nation, which histories are remembered, and which emotions are legitimized in public discourse.

The statistical evidence reinforces this perspective. As seen in the ANOVA results, two musical features—energy ($p = 0.011$) and acousticness ($p = 0.039$)—show significant variation across decades, while valence ($p = 0.078$) displays a near-significant trend. Tempo, loudness, and danceability fall outside conventional significance thresholds, suggesting they play a secondary role. This distribution of significance highlights a key insight: it is not rhythm or volume that determines affective impact, but the emotional expressiveness and perceived authenticity of the music.

Figure 5 – ANOVA Confidence Interval Plots by Decade (Valence, Energy, Danceability, etc.)



Source: Author

The CI plots (Figure 5) visually reinforce this point. Energy peaks in the 1980s and drops in the 1990s, then stabilizes in the 2000s. Acousticness follows an inverse curve, suggesting that decades with high emotional activation tend to favor sonically synthetic, polished production over raw or organic instrumentation. Valence, though statistically marginal, mirrors energy in its general shape, declining in the 1990s and partially recovering afterward. Together, these variables map a soundscape tailored to evoke enthusiasm, unity, and affective intensity. Such curation corresponds to what Nye (2008) defines as soft power: the ability to attract and shape preferences through culture and emotion rather than coercion. In this context, music is not a backdrop but a cultural technology that animates the populist narrative Stanyek and Piekut (2010). Energy rallies the crowd; acousticness creates a sense of rootedness; valence sustains an atmosphere of affirmation. These features act as emotional scripts through which political time is felt.

Crucially, the significance of energy and acousticness also signals their political functionality. Energy corresponds to emotional arousal—a key factor in populist mobilization. Acousticness indexes perceived authenticity, often interpreted as sincerity or tradition. The inverse relationship between the two in Trump's playlists suggests a strategic balance between emotional intensity and nostalgic credibility. Songs with high energy and low acousticness evoke power and modernity, while tracks with higher acousticness signal continuity with past values. Together, they construct a hybrid emotional grammar that appeals to a broad spectrum of affective identifications. This dynamic resonates with Bonikowski's (2017) notion of collective resentment. Populism mobilizes grievances through

narratives of decline and revival; music enhances this by embedding those narratives in embodied experience. Sonic cues create temporal loops in which listeners are invited to relive a glorified past while projecting it onto the present. As Velasco-Pufleau and Atlani-Duault (2020) argue, sound serves as a memory infrastructure, sustaining political identities through repetition and resonance. In this view, playlists are not lists—they are scripts. Furthermore, the embodied dimension of music reinforces its affective power. As Álvarez (2022) demonstrates in the context of nightlife, sonic environments orchestrate choreographies of collective feeling. In Trump's rallies, music structures not only emotional responses but bodily movements—applause, chanting, waving—which in turn reinforce belonging and identification. These affective choreographies form a feedback loop, where sound and gesture mutually amplify political emotion. The stability of tempo and loudness across decades further clarifies this point. These structural features are not instrumental in generating affect; rather, it is the expressive elements—energy and valence—that catalyze political emotion. Acousticness adds a layer of sonic credibility, inflecting emotion with authenticity. Together, these elements do not merely entertain—they govern mood, memory, and participation.

This understanding of music as affective temporal governance offers a corrective to accounts that treat populist spectacle as superficial or irrational. Instead, it reveals a complex aesthetic strategy aimed at organizing political feeling through curated sound. Trump's playlists operate as an auditory time machine, transporting listeners into a past that is emotionally vivid and ideologically coherent. They do not just evoke the "good old days"—they make them audible, livable, and emotionally actionable. In short, the affective coherence of Trump's musical populism is built on a subtle manipulation of sonic time. Energy and acousticness become the coordinates of emotional governance, orchestrating how supporters feel their way through political narratives. This is not manipulation in the crude sense of propaganda, but in the aesthetic sense of mood design. The rally becomes a space of emotional calibration, where sound organizes sentiment, and sentiment organizes political time. This reframing invites broader implications for the study of political communication. It suggests that affective alignment is as important as rhetorical content, and that music may be among the most effective tools for synchronizing public emotion. As Cusick (2020) and Ahmed (2004) emphasize, sound shapes not just the ear but the nervous system. It moves people—literally and figuratively. In populist movements, that movement becomes ideological alignment. To understand populism, then, we must listen—not only to what is said, but to what is played. Musical populism is affective governance at its most immersive: it enacts a politics of revival through resonance, transforming nostalgia into collective motion. And in that motion, the past is not only remembered—it is enacted, again and again, to the sound of a rallying beat.

6. POPULISM AND THE IDEOLOGY OF REVIVAL

At the heart of populist discourse lies an emotionally charged narrative of revival: a desire to restore a time imagined as more unified, prosperous, and morally coherent. This ideology of revival is not merely a political claim—it is an affective project. It appeals to longing, grievance, and hope, constructing a vision of the future rooted in a selective memory of the past. As Bonikowski (2017) and Slaughter (2009) asserts, ethno-nationalist populism mobilizes collective resentment through a moralized contrast between the “pure people” and the “corrupt elite.” This opposition is temporal as much as moral: the past represents purity, the present corruption, and the future a possible return. Music becomes a key medium for making this ideology emotionally plausible. Trump’s campaign soundscape provides a compelling case study in how sonic aesthetics support the ideology of revival. The overwhelming emphasis on tracks from the 1970s and 1980s—decades mythologized as eras of American strength and cultural clarity—constructs a nostalgic affective horizon. These songs do not merely recall the past; they invite listeners to relive it emotionally and imaginatively. High energy and valence values, paired with moderate acousticness, create a mood of optimism and empowerment that blurs historical distance. As Nye (2008) notes, soft power operates through attraction and identification. Here, the identification is with a lost emotional climate, made audible and desirable again through sound.

This aesthetic revival is not politically neutral. Songs like “Born in the U.S.A.” and “Fortunate Son,” originally critiques of American injustice, are recontextualized within a populist framework. Their lyrical subversion is overshadowed by their sonic power—the anthemic choruses, pounding drums, and emotionally resonant melodies. As Street (2012) and Cusick (2008) observe, music can detach from its original meaning and acquire new functions through repetition and re-framing. These tracks no longer articulate protest; they become patriotic affirmations. This process illustrates how sound can become a medium of ideological flexibility, absorbing contradiction through emotional coherence. The revivalist function of music also depends on its ability to activate both personal and collective memory. For many rally attendees, these songs recall formative experiences—youth, family, community. Simultaneously, they evoke a shared national narrative, often cleansed of complexity or dissent. This dual invocation—individual nostalgia and collective myth—produces what Alaminos-Fernández (2023) calls a “cultural memory infrastructure,” a symbolic framework that stabilizes identity and meaning through sound. This infrastructure operates through ritual. Music at rallies is not random; it is ritualized. Songs are played at specific moments to elicit predictable responses—chants, clapping, flags waving. These are not simply affective responses, but embodied enactments of a worldview. As Álvarez (2022) and Voegelin (2010) describes, sonic environments generate collective choreographies—patterns of movement and affect that reinforce group identity. In the populist rally, music stages the performance of ideological belonging. Moreover, the ideology of revival is highly selective. It does not revive the full complexity of the past, but a filtered, emotionally amplified version. This selectivity is evident in the absence of certain genres and decades—such as grunge or hip hop from the 1990s—which are often associated with fragmentation,

critique, or postmodern ambiguity. By contrast, the playlist privileges genres associated with celebration, pride, and cohesion. This filtering mechanism transforms history into affective myth: the past becomes what feels good to remember, not what actually happened.

This affective reconstruction has powerful political consequences. It simplifies political identity into an emotional script: those who feel this music, who resonate with its temporal affect, are "us." Those who do not, are "them." Music thus becomes a boundary object, defining inclusion and exclusion through sonic familiarity. As Velasco-Pufleau and Atlani-Duault (2020) argue, sound can function as a site of symbolic violence and affective power, shaping how people experience belonging. This dynamic also reconfigures the future. In populist revivalism, the future is not envisioned as progress or transformation, but as restoration. The ideal society already existed—its return is merely a matter of will. Music accelerates this temporal logic Alaminos-Fernández (2019). By making the past emotionally accessible, it collapses temporal distance, allowing the future to be imagined as a recaptured mood. The sound of the 1980s becomes not just historical, but prescriptive. As Cusick (2020) notes, sound has the capacity to discipline and mobilize—not only through coercion, but through mood. The sonic revival at Trump's rallies is precisely such a project. It disciplines the crowd emotionally, directing affect toward a desired collective orientation. The playlist becomes a score for populist participation, guiding listeners into emotional identification with a leader who promises not innovation, but restoration.

The ideology of revival in populist discourse operates not solely through language and visual imagery, but through the affective medium of sound. As Frith (1996a, 1996b) argues, music serves as a sonic bridge between memory and identity, linking individual and collective temporalities. In this capacity, music filters historical complexity into emotionally legible forms, transforming critique into resonance and ambiguity into coherence. Within Trump's campaign soundscape, the past is not merely referenced—it is reanimated, emotionally re-experienced, and aesthetically repurposed into a structured affective architecture of populist belonging.

7. CONCLUSION

Trump's campaign playlists function as affective engines of temporal populism. Their musical selections are far from incidental; they form a curated sonic infrastructure that organizes memory, emotion, and political identity. Through a synthesis of computational analysis and cultural theory, this study reveals how these soundtracks revive a mythologized national past, aligning listeners emotionally with the populist imaginary. The predominance of tracks from the 1970s and 1980s is not coincidental: these decades carry symbolic weight for the target electorate, evoking familiarity and nostalgic resonance. Statistically, this temporal preference is supported by elevated levels of energy and acousticness, with valence reinforcing the emotionally charged atmosphere. These musical attributes do more than shape the ambience of rallies—they encode the affective grammar of populist nostalgia,

translating political longing into an emotionally immersive sonic experience. Tempo and loudness, by contrast, remain relatively stable, suggesting that emotional activation, rather than sonic intensity, drives the playlist's effectiveness.

Through visual tools such as boxplots, confidence intervals, and heatmaps, this study has highlighted how genres like classic rock, disco, and country dominate the emotional high ground of Trump's musical landscape. These genre-era clusters are not accidental. They are deployed to invoke shared memories, mobilize group cohesion, and foster a perception of authenticity, power, and belonging. Protest songs, originally critical in nature, are repurposed into patriotic anthems—revealing music's capacity to detach from origin and acquire new affective meanings through performance. The ideological dimension of this musical strategy centers on a politics of revival. Trump's rallies do not merely reference the past—they perform it. The use of music serves to collapse temporal boundaries, allowing the "good old days" to be felt in the present. This affective collapse facilitates the central populist promise: that what was once lost can be regained. As Nye (2008) conceptualizes soft power as attraction through cultural affinity, Trump's playlists illustrate this attraction through sound. They seduce the audience into a worldview through familiarity, mood, and rhythm—not through argument, but affect. The discussion has emphasized how energy and acousticness act as political functions: energy provides emotional activation, acousticness offers a sense of authenticity. Together, they generate an aesthetic coherence aligned with the ideology of restoration. As Bonikowski (2017) argues, populism mobilizes collective resentment through moralized narratives of loss. Music activates and amplifies this sentiment, offering not only catharsis but identification.

Moreover, the performative and spatial aspects of music transform rallies into rituals of belonging. Drawing on Álvarez's (2022) notion of embodied choreographies, the study highlights how sound organizes not just feeling but movement. Audiences do not only hear music—they enact it. They clap, chant, sway, and synchronize their emotional responses, thereby physically inscribing the political narrative into their experience. In this context, music is not peripheral—it is central to the affective machinery of populism. It functions as a mnemonic device, a mobilizing force, and a boundary marker between in-group and out-group. It turns political communication into an immersive emotional environment. As Cusick (2020) notes, sound can discipline affect. In Trump's rallies, this discipline takes the form of mood management, aesthetic repetition, and the ritualization of nostalgia.

Sound is not ancillary to political expression—it is one of its most powerful architectures. This study reveals how curated musical environments shape the emotional textures of populism, orchestrating moods that transcend speech and image. Campaign playlists, far from being incidental, serve as emotional scripts that activate memory, forge affective unity, and mobilize identity. In the case of Trump's rallies, music operates as a political technology of nostalgia. These playlists assemble a repertoire of grievance, triumph, and restoration, channeling affect through familiar melodies that encode longing for a mythologized past. The songs do not simply accompany political messages; they help construct them, weaving

sonic memory into emotional momentum. The repetition of these soundscapes sustains their political charge. "The good old days" endure not because they return, but because they are sonically resurrected—again and again—until they become part of the felt experience of belonging. These are not just anthems; they are instruments of affective alignment. To fully grasp the emotional power of populism, scholars must listen. Comparative analyses of populist soundtracks across regions, genres, and ideologies would further illuminate how music becomes a medium through which political emotions are shaped, amplified, and circulated in the contemporary media landscape.

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