

ABSTRACT

Populism and Its Discontents: Populism on the American Left and Right During the 2016 Election Cycle

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The 2016 U.S. election broke numerous precedents and revealed an American electorate that is deeply dissatisfied with politics as usual. It was in this milieu of discontent that populist candidates like businessman Donald J. Trump and Senator Bernie Sanders were able to vastly outperform the expectations of many seasoned pundits and commentators. This thesis first considers the versions of populism that have influenced American history and recent Latin American and European politics and defines populism as a movement that sets the “righteous people” against the “corrupt elites.” It then analyzes the Trump and Sanders campaigns and argues that each can be broadly understood as populist, though for somewhat different reasons. It concludes by outlining the potential impact that populist sentiments may have on American politics in the near future, arguing that the future of populism in the U.S. largely depends on Trump’s success or failure as President.

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POPULISM AND ITS DISCONTENTS: POPULISM ON THE AMERICAN
LEFT AND RIGHT DURING THE 2016 ELECTION CYCLE

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CHAPTER ONE

An Introduction to Populism

Introduction

Populism is on the rise around the world. As Europe struggles to offer aid to hundreds of thousands of displaced Syrian, Iraqi, and Afghan refugees, anti-immigrant rhetoric has reached new levels across Europe. Such rhetoric is not limited to Eastern European countries like Greece and Hungary that have borne the brunt of the migration from the Middle East. In a recent piece in the *Washington Post*, Pippa Norris argues that authoritarian populism is on the rise throughout much of the West, both in countries with robust welfare states and in countries with higher levels of economic inequality.¹

A kind of populism drove the recent British vote to quit the European Union: an outcome that most commentators – and surely David Cameron – found almost unthinkable when the idea for a vote was first proposed. Likely surprised by victory, Nigel Farage, who served as the leader of the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP), has had to walk back some of the promises that Brexit proponents made over the course of the campaign, such as huge increases in funding for the NHS.² Of course, this decision was not made in a vacuum: Britain’s decision to depart has angered many E.U.

¹Pippa Norris, “It’s not just Trump. Authoritarian populism is rising across the West. Here’s why,” *Washington Post*, March 11, 2016, accessed October 15, 2016, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2016/03/11/its-not-just-trump-authoritarian-populism-is-rising-across-the-west-heres-why/>.

²Alexandra Sims, “Nigel Farage says ambitious promises made by Brexit campaigners were ‘mildly irresponsible,’” *Independent*, September 14, 2016, accessed October 15, 2016, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/brexit-nigel-farage-latest-vote-leave-nhs-promises-350m-mildly-irresponsible-a7304081.html>.

countries and has even inspired Nicola Sturgeon, the Scottish First Minister, to announce her intentions to hold a second Scottish independence referendum.³ Moreover, the success of the Brexit vote has led populist and Eurosceptic parties across Europe to press for their own votes on withdrawal from the European Union.⁴

It would seem that a good deal of populist sentiment has been on display throughout the 2016 American election cycle, embodied on the left and right respectively by Senator Bernard Sanders and business magnate Donald J. Trump. Initially a little-known Senator from Vermont, Sanders surged onto the scene by inveighing against rising income inequality and trade deals that helped America's business elite while harming those who had spent their careers in the manufacturing sector. By energizing (largely) white progressives and younger voters, Sanders proved to be a much more formidable opponent than expected, and managed to defeat Hillary Clinton in several key states, including New Hampshire and several Super Tuesday contests.⁵ On the Republican side of the aisle, New York businessman Donald Trump even more successfully made a case against the Washington establishment, far outpacing his next-closest rival, Senator Ted Cruz, and shattering the expectations of lifelong politicians and pundits alike.⁶ His call to "Make America Great Again!" by re-negotiating trade deals like the North American

³"SNP's Nicola Sturgeon announces new independence referendum bill," *BBC News*, October 13, 2016, accessed October 15, 2016, <http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-scotland-scotland-politics-37634338>.

⁴Peter Foster et al., "EU faces Brexit 'contagion' as populist parties across Europe call for referendums," *The Telegraph*, June 24, 2016, accessed October 15, 2016, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2016/06/24/eu-faces-brexite-contagion-as-populist-parties-across-europe-call/>.

⁵Wilson Andrews et al., "2016 Delegate Count and Primary Results," *New York Times*, July 5, 2016, accessed October 8, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2016/us/elections/primary-calendar-and-results.html>.

⁶*Ibid.*

Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and eliminating government corruption has galvanized a core group of supporters who yearn for a bygone era. Both of these contemporary political movements draw on elements of populism, though Trump's rhetoric more decidedly fits the populist mold. As a result, it seems that populist ideas no longer exist merely on the fringes of American politics; they now occupy a comfortable position in mainstream discourse.

The ascendancy of populist ideas and leaders across Europe and the Americas has been a source of concern for some political scientists. In the introduction to a recent work on the subject, Carlos de la Torre observes that “when the term ‘the people’ is used to describe those who are to be liberated, alleged enemies of the people – such as ‘illegal aliens’ or the ‘evil oligarchy’ – are constructed as external ‘Others’ who represent a threat to the purity of the homogeneous body of the people.”⁷ Consequently, when populist leaders appeal to “the people” of their state and indicate that they have been the victims of the poor (or self-serving) decisions of the political elite, such leaders run the risk of stirring up violent and xenophobic sentiments among the populace.

Before delving into a discussion of populist sentiment in the 2016 American election cycle, it is important to clarify what populism is and understand the role that it has played in Western history over the last century and a half. The subsequent section offers some preliminary definitions to help guide this course of inquiry.

⁷Carlos de la Torre, “Introduction: Power to the People? Populism, Insurrections, Democratization,” in *The Promise and Perils of Populism: Global Perspectives*, ed. Carlos de la Torre (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2015), 2.

Definitions

Albertazzi and McDonnell offer the following definition of “populism”: “An ideology which pits a virtuous and homogeneous people against a set of elites and dangerous ‘others’ who are together depicted as depriving (or attempting to deprive) the sovereign people of their rights, values, prosperity, identity and voice.”⁸ According to this definition, “populism” consists of two basic elements: an anti-elitist message that argues that power must be returned to the people and a nationalist message that insists that the “others” – including immigrants and those with different racial or ethnic backgrounds – are responsible for the difficulties faced by the majority group in a state. To be sure, not all movements that have been termed “populist” include a distinct racial element, and many populist leaders would be quick to repudiate any such characterization (many, indeed, disavow the term “populist” altogether).⁹ But racial appeals – whether masked or open – are nonetheless an important facet of many recent populist movements.

Populism so defined has clearly played an important role in contemporary Western democracies. A number of recently-formed right-wing parties throughout Europe espouse populist positions and rhetoric, decrying the potential dangers of immigration and arguing for greater state autonomy within – if not independence from – the European Union. Populist leaders have also exerted considerable influence in various Latin American countries (among them Argentina, Brazil, and Uruguay) throughout the twentieth century, and populist movements have had some influence on American

⁸Daniele Albertazzi and Duncan McDonnell, “Introduction: The Sceptre and the Spectre,” in *Twenty-First Century Populism: The Spectre of Western European Democracy*, ed. Daniele Albertazzi and Duncan McDonnell (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2008), 3.

⁹Margaret Canovan, *Populism* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1981), 5.

political history as well. The following sections will consider populism's role in these three domains, beginning with its impact on American history.

Populism in American History

Perhaps the clearest example of populism in American history is the rise of the People's Party in the South and Midwest during the late 19th century. In August of 1890, in response to tough economic conditions and soaring debt, Kansas farmers coalesced to form the People's Party of the State of Kansas. This party argued for the farmers' "seven demands," which included prohibitions on "alien ownership of land" and on the use of taxation to "to build up one interest or class at the expense of another," along with the requirement that "the means of communication and transportation shall be owned and operated in the interest of the people."¹⁰ Other agricultural states faced many of the same challenges as Kansas did and proved to be fertile ground for the growth of populist ideas. During the last decade of the 19th century, the Farmers' Alliance and Industrial Union exerted a great deal of influence on Democratic politicians throughout the South, requiring that they support the "demands" or risk forfeiting the votes of Southern farmers.¹¹ Populism's embodiment in the People's Party was short-lived, however: it largely disbanded after the presidential election of 1896. But during its brief life, it gave a voice to aggrieved farmers who felt left behind by industrialization and the emphasis it placed on profits rather than workers' well-being.¹²

¹⁰William A. Peffer, *Populism, Its Rise and Fall*, ed. Peter H. Argersinger (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1992), 34.

¹¹*Ibid.*, 53.

¹²Norman Pollack, ed., *The Populist Mind* (New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1967), 12.

According to Peffer, the People’s Party was characterized by leftist positions on transportation and land ownership. “The Populist,” he writes, “is opposed to private monopoly of any of the resources of nature; and he believes that wherever and whenever the public can be better . . . served through public ownership and management . . . that course ought to be adopted.”¹³ But not all American populist movements have advocated for left-wing policies. As the Second World War came to a close and the Cold War began in earnest, conservative politicians took advantage of widespread anti-Communist feelings among the American public. They railed against liberal attempts to undermine traditional values and to grow the size and influence of the federal government. But this version of populist rhetoric differed markedly from the ways in which it had previously been used: “For the first time in United States history, large numbers of activists and politicians were employing a populist vocabulary to *oppose* social reform instead of support it.”¹⁴ American populism, then, has been used by politicians from both ends of the political spectrum to achieve their policy goals. What made these leaders and movements “populist” – regardless of their other political persuasions – is their shared belief that ordinary Americans were suffering at the hands of a political or cultural elite that was concerned only with satisfying its own interests.

From this brief review of populism in American history, it becomes clear that populist sentiments tend to take root during periods of significant upheaval. From the industrialization of the late nineteenth century to the rise of the Communist threat in the middle of the twentieth, populist movements have found the most success when citizens

¹³Peffer, *Populism*, 183.

¹⁴Michael Kazin, *The Populist Persuasion: An American History* (New York: BasicBooks, 1995), 167.

are uncertain about what the future will hold. This feeling of uncertainty seems also to characterize contemporary American life. The last twenty years have seen a heightened concern about terrorism in the wake of the 9/11 attacks and attacks on Madrid, London, Paris, and elsewhere. Perhaps even more significant are the rapid social and demographic changes that have taken place in the U.S. and throughout the West.

In *The End of White Christian America*, Robert P. Jones, CEO of the Public Religion Research Institute, analyzes the substantial demographic shifts that have occurred over the last several decades. Mainline Protestantism has long been a declining force in American culture, and white evangelicalism is also in the process of declining, especially among members of Generation X and millennials.¹⁵ Meanwhile, the proportion of Americans who do not claim any particular religious affiliation (the religious “nones”) has rapidly increased among younger generations.¹⁶ At the same time, the racial and ethnic makeup of the United States has changed rapidly as well. According to one projection, by 2055 the majority of American citizens will be African American, Hispanic, or Asian.¹⁷ These demographic changes could also have dramatic political implications. A recent study by the Pew Research Center reported that while white voters leaned toward the Republican Party by a 49-40 margin, black, Hispanic, and Asian voters overwhelmingly identified as Democrats (80-11, 56-26, and 65-23, respectively).¹⁸

¹⁵Robert P. Jones, *The End of White Christian America* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2016), 54.

¹⁶Ibid., 48.

¹⁷D’Vera Cohn and Andrea Caumont, “10 demographics trends that are shaping the U.S. and the world,” Pew Research Center, accessed October 22, 2016, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/03/31/10-demographic-trends-that-are-shaping-the-u-s-and-the-world/>.

¹⁸“A Deep Dive Into Party Affiliation,” Pew Research Center, accessed October 23, 2016, <http://www.people-press.org/2015/04/07/a-deep-dive-into-party-affiliation/>.

If these groups continue to strongly support Democrats as they comprise an ever-larger share of the electorate, they will likely help to create a nation that looks markedly different from the America of years past.

These rapid shifts in America's religious and ethnic makeup have resulted in a feeling of uncertainty on the part of what Jones calls "White Christian America" (which encompasses mainline and evangelical Protestants, though – importantly – does not include Catholics). Some Americans yearn for an earlier time in which it was safe to assume that your neighbors shared your religious commitments and when cultural Christianity was a dominant political force. Times have changed, however, as the United States grows more diverse and secularism becomes ever more commonplace. It seems likely that these changes helped to create an environment in which populist appeals like Donald Trump's resonated with many voters.

Populism in Latin America

Populism has also proven to be a potent political force in a number of Latin American countries over the last century. These populist leaders, in the words of Michael Conniff, "Stood out from the ranks of ordinary politicians. . . . They campaigned for public office early, often, and almost always successfully. They constitute one of the most important groups of leaders in twentieth-century Latin America."¹⁹ The influence of populism is perhaps nowhere more pronounced than in Argentina, where populism in one form or another has shaped much of the country's recent history, from Hipólito

¹⁹Michael L. Conniff, "Introduction," in *Populism in Latin America*, ed. Michael L. Conniff (Tuscaloosa, AL: The University of Alabama Press, 1999), 1.

Yrigoyen's Radical Party to Juan Perón's rise in the 1940s and fall in the 1950s.²⁰ Perón appealed to members of Argentina's working class by ensuring that contracts between workers and employers were actually enforced. And workers were satisfied as they saw their real wages increase to the tune of ten percent or more.²¹ During this period, Argentina experienced many social changes as well, including the extension of voting rights to women. And Perón sought to elevate his own image in the minds of Argentina's citizens by convincing them that he was responsible for their economic prosperity. Not surprisingly, as the country's economy began to crumble, Perón's reputation followed suit and he was ousted by military leaders in 1955.²²

Horowitz concludes, "The era of populism may be over in Argentina but the scars remain. . . . Populism helped create a society where the opposition was viewed as lacking essential virtues. It helped create a large state and bureaucracy. [It] may have brought new groups into the society, but it also divided the nation and made it more unstable."²³ This assessment reveals several of the common characteristics of Latin American populists in the twentieth century. For one thing, populist leaders tended to be charismatic figures who derived their legitimacy from their broad base of popular support, which they reached by using various forms of media. In some cases (as that of Argentina's Perón), they also instituted universal suffrage and thoroughly enjoyed the combative nature of political campaigns. But in Argentina (as in Brazil and elsewhere),

²⁰Joel Horowitz, "Populism and Its Legacies in Argentina," in *Populism in Latin America*, ed. Michael L. Conniff (Tuscaloosa, AL: The University of Alabama Press, 1999), 23-37.

²¹Horowitz, "Populism," 30.

²²Ibid., 36-37.

²³Ibid., 42.

populist administrations proved to be quite unstable and many were forcibly removed from office.²⁴ Several of these features also seem to characterize the populist leaders that have led the formation of far-right parties in present-day Europe. These parties and their influence will be considered in the next section.

Populism in Contemporary Europe

In his 1995 article “New Populist Parties in Western Europe,” Paul Taggart argues that a new kind of political party – the New Populist – has recently emerged onto the political scene. While this “new” populism shares many of the features of older variations (such as a strong opposition to the established political system), it is distinct from them because of the specific historical context in which it developed. The New Populism, Taggart claims, arose as a byproduct of the “collapse of the postwar settlement in Western Europe.”²⁵ This postwar settlement reflected the consensus views on the importance of Keynesianism and the welfare state (among other issues), and the New Populism formed as a response to these widely-held views.²⁶ This new movement strongly favors free markets over government intervention and believes that corporations and special interests have become too powerful, to the detriment of ordinary citizens. Interestingly, Taggart asserts that a defining characteristic of New Populist parties is their propensity to coalesce around an individual leader.²⁷

²⁴Michael L. Conniff, “Brazil’s Populist Republic and Beyond,” in *Populism in Latin America*, ed. Michael L. Conniff (Tuscaloosa, AL: The University of Alabama Press, 1999), 61-62.

²⁵Paul Taggart, “New populist parties in Western Europe,” *West European Politics* 18 (1995): 37-38.

²⁶Ibid., 38.

²⁷Ibid., 41.

Norris cites the emergence of parties like the Swiss People's Party, the Austrian Freedom Party, and the Danish People's Party as evidence that populism has been on the rise throughout much of Western Europe.²⁸ These movements are certainly not without controversy: the leader of the Dutch Freedom Party, Geert Wilders, is set to be tried for "inciting racial hatred" after he asked a group of supporters whether they would prefer to have more or fewer Moroccans in the Netherlands.²⁹ Akkerman observes that right-wing parties in Europe often do not have a great deal of leverage in their coalitions with center-right parties, although they may benefit from "dominating the political agenda with an issue [immigration] they own."³⁰ European populism, then, seems to stress its racial and ethnic element (through its opposition to inclusive immigration policies) to a greater degree than other iterations of populism throughout the West in recent years.

The Basic Elements of Populism

From this brief overview of populism's influence in several regions of the world, a number of key qualities of populist leaders and movements are discernible. At the most basic level, populism is characterized by a deep and abiding distrust of political elites who are believed not to have the people's best interests at heart. Populist leaders attempt to grow their base of support by stirring up popular opinion against the political establishment. Second, populist leaders are often charismatic figures who may present themselves as the only possible solution to their nation's problems as they campaign for

²⁸Norris, "It's not just Trump."

²⁹"Geert Wilders: Dutch Freedom Party chief will be tried for racial hatred," *BBC News*, October 14, 2016, accessed October 22, 2016, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-37653453>.

³⁰Tjitske Akkerman, "Comparing Radical Right Parties in Government: Immigration and Integration Policies in Nine Countries (1996-2010)," *West European Politics* 35 (2012): 512, accessed October 19, 2016.

office and as the primary reason for their nation's success after a period of service. In this way, populist movements frequently focus on the identity of their leaders in a way that other political movements do not. Third, populist leaders often appeal to anti-immigrant or xenophobic sentiments among the general population and aim to inspire nationalist attitudes among their supporters. While not all populist movements fit this general mold, it provides a useful standard of comparison against which to judge current political leaders and movements.

In the following chapters I will consider the extent to which the policies and rhetoric of Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders fit this definition of populism and discuss the factors that have driven their unexpected success. Both men have made a name for themselves by decrying the political establishment and a system that is "rigged" against everyday Americans, but in many ways their policies could not be more divergent. I will then discuss the implications that an increase in populist sentiment, particularly within the Republican Party, has for the future of American politics.

CHAPTER TWO

Left-Wing Populism: The Case of Sanders

Introduction

“Ahead by an average of 49 points in early polls,” reads an *Economist* article from February 2015, “It is not clear that Mrs Clinton has *any* serious competition.” After mentioning Vice President Joe Biden, Governor Martin O’Malley, and Senator Jim Webb, it continues, “Bernie Sanders of Vermont, the Senate’s lovely irascible socialist, might take the opportunity to speak truth to weary beat reporters.”¹ Several millions of votes later, it seems that the author may have slightly underestimated the lovely Senator from Vermont. By the conclusion of the Democratic primary in June, Sanders had received 1,879 delegates (including a meager 48 unpledged delegates, or “superdelegates”) compared to Clinton’s 2,811 (including 591 unpledged delegates).² Needless to say, the breadth and passion of support for Sanders blindsided Democratic Party leaders and prolonged a primary process that many thought would not last long past Super Tuesday. While Hillary Clinton ended up winning the nomination by a substantial margin, Sanders’ unanticipated success nonetheless prompted pundits and political scientists to analyze the factors that contributed to his rise. This chapter will consider

¹Will Wilkinson, “Hillary Clinton’s suffocating presence,” *The Economist*, February 12, 2015, accessed October 21, 2016, <http://www.economist.com/blogs/democracyinamerica/2015/02/2016-democratic-primaries>.

²Andrews, “2016 Delegate Count and Primary Results.”

several of the most significant causes of Sanders' success and attempt to discern his place within the populist movements that are sweeping across the West.

Sanders as an Anti-Establishment Candidate

Central to Sanders' appeal was his status as an opponent of the "Washington establishment." Although he had served in Congress since his election to the House in 1990, he was registered as an Independent and successfully cultivated the image of an outsider who did not fit in with the social and political elite. The fact that he was often disheveled and spoke gruffly only helped to make the case. His speeches were not as polished as those of Clinton or many of the contenders for the Republican nomination (with the notable exception, of course, of Donald Trump) and he lacked the support of wealthy donors. Nevertheless, he managed to attract tens of thousands of supporters – particularly young people – to his rallies and led a movement of voters who were dissatisfied with the status quo.

Why did Sanders' anti-establishment identity appeal so strongly to many in the Democratic base? After all, Democrats had controlled the White House for seven years by the time the Iowa Caucus was held on February 1. As of January 2016, the unemployment rate had dropped to 4.9 percent, its lowest point since early 2008, before the financial crisis had come into full swing.³ The Obama administration had long since passed the Affordable Care Act and millions of previously uninsured Americans had health insurance. The majority of American troops had been removed from Iraq and Afghanistan (although the Islamic State was wreaking havoc in Iraq and Syria) and Iran's

³"Labor Force Statistics from the Current Population Survey," Bureau of Labor Statistics, accessed November 26, 2016, <http://data.bls.gov/timeseries/LNS14000000>.

nuclear ambitions appeared to have been curbed. And same-sex marriage was the law of the land as the result of the Supreme Court's *Obergefell* decision in June of 2015. Issues and challenges still remained, but some significant liberal goals had been achieved over the course of Obama's tenure. One would have anticipated that Democratic primary voters would be pleased with the direction that the nation was heading and would have overwhelmingly supported Hillary Clinton, who was broadly believed to be Obama's successor.

The reality, of course, was far more complicated. Clinton, who was expected to win Iowa handily, ended up defeating Sanders by only three-tenths of one percent.⁴ She then lost to him by 22 points in the New Hampshire primary before regaining her footing in Nevada, South Carolina, and the Super Tuesday contests.⁵ In Iowa and New Hampshire, Sanders overwhelmingly won younger voters; as one example, he won 25-29 year olds in New Hampshire by a staggering 71-point margin.⁶ His success with millennials was a defining feature of his campaign and helped him compete with a polished and well-funded politician whom almost everyone assumed was going to win the nomination. It also provides an interesting contrast between Sanders' appeal and that of Donald Trump, whose base of support (particularly in the general election) was largely comprised of older voters. Here, then, is the first salient difference between left-wing and right-wing populism in the 2016 election: the former appealed to younger voters while the latter appealed to older ones. This distinction is particularly significant insofar

⁴"Results from the 2016 Iowa Caucus," *Wall Street Journal*, February 2, 2016, accessed November 26, 2016, <http://graphics.wsj.com/elections/2016/iowa-caucus-results/>.

⁵"New Hampshire Primary Results," NBC News, accessed November 26, 2016, <http://www.nbcnews.com/politics/2016-election/primaries/NH>.

⁶*Ibid.*

as it could have profound implications for the strategies that both parties implement going forward.

Sanders' status as an anti-establishment candidate also aligned with the prevailing mood of the nation. Various polls from 2015 and early 2016 indicated that a majority of Americans believed the country was headed in the wrong direction. And these trends in public opinion continued through the course of the general election; for instance, a Wall Street Journal poll from July of 2016 reported that 73 percent of Americans believed that the country was on the wrong track, while only 18 percent believed it was headed in the right direction.⁷ According to a series of Gallup polls, no more than 32 percent of Americans have reported that they were "satisfied" with "the way things are going in the United States" from the beginning of Obama's second term in early 2013 until the election.⁸ As a result, the stage was set for an antiestablishment candidate to emerge onto the scene and win the support of disgruntled voters who were ready for change. Sanders appealed to these voters with a message of left-wing populism that decried the influence of money in politics and a system that has seen an increase in income and wealth inequality favoring "the top one-tenth of one percent."

In a recent discussion of populism in the U.S., George Michael offers a useful distinction between left- and right-wing populism: "The rightist version of contemporary populism sees government as the problem, not the solution. By contrast, contemporary left-wing populists . . . seek a government that will create a safety net, redistribute wealth

⁷Aaron Zitner, "U.S. Seen on Wrong Track by Nearly Three-Quarters of Voters," *Wall Street Journal*, July 17, 2016, accessed December 1, 2016, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-seen-on-wrong-track-by-nearly-three-quarters-of-voters-1468760580>.

⁸"Satisfaction with the United States," Gallup, accessed December 1, 2016, <http://www.gallup.com/poll/1669/general-mood-country.aspx>.

more evenly, and restrain the power of corporations.”⁹ This big-government approach accurately describes the positions that Sanders took throughout the campaign, which included demanding that the wealthy pay “their fair share” and inveighing against the disproportionate influence that Wall Street has on public policy. Sanders’ positions on economic policy formed the bedrock of his campaign.

Sanders on Economic Inequality

Sanders was perhaps best known for his left-wing positions on various economic issues. He highlighted issues like income inequality, the (corrupting) influence of money on American elections, and the loss of blue-collar manufacturing jobs as a result of poor trade agreements. On a number of issues (like trade), he and Donald Trump made essentially the same arguments: both, for instance, declared their opposition to the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) that had been spearheaded and championed by President Obama. But Sanders’ focus on income inequality and his effective criticisms of the role of money in politics set him apart from Trump and most other candidates. This section will consider his positions on each of these issues.

Economic inequality can be measured using several different metrics, most notably income, consumption, and wealth.¹⁰ Of these, income is the easiest to measure thanks to the amount of data that has been collected, although it does not provide a complete picture of the degree of inequality in a society. In a classic study, John Moroney states that “inequality of wage incomes is an essential characteristic of modern

⁹George Michael, “A New American Populist Coalition?” in *The Promise and Perils of Populism: Global Perspectives*, ed. Carlos de la Torre (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2015), 268-69.

¹⁰“A three-headed hydra,” *The Economist*, July 16, 2014, accessed November 27, 2016, <http://www.economist.com/blogs/freeexchange/2014/07/measuring-inequality>.

capitalistic and socialist economies.”¹¹ Nonetheless, this does not mean that economic inequality is without its harms. Gornick and Jäntti outline a number of potential harms caused by inequality, including declining well-being for those at the bottom of the income distribution, decreased economic mobility, depressed economic growth, and potential political ramifications as policymakers are more attentive to the desires of wealthy voters than poor ones.¹²

The trend of increasing income inequality in the United States is well-documented. In a report entitled “Trends in Family Wealth, 1989-2013,” the Congressional Budget Office (CBO) notes that “the share of wealth held by families in the top 10 percent of the wealth distribution increased from 67 percent to 76 percent, whereas the share of wealth held by families in the bottom half of the distribution declined from 3 percent to 1 percent.”¹³ Sanders’ emphasis on the harms of economic inequality served to distinguish him from many other candidates (including other populists), and he deftly incorporated his position on this issue into his broader populist message.

He stated his opinion on income inequality in no uncertain terms. According to his campaign website, “The issue of wealth and income inequality is the great moral issue of our time, it is the great economic issue of our time, and it is the great political issue of

¹¹John Moroney, “Introduction,” in *Income Inequality*, ed. John R. Moroney (Lexington, MA: D.C. Heath and Company, 1978), 16.

¹²Janet Gornick and Markus Jäntti, “Introduction,” in *Income Inequality: Economic Disparities and the Middle Class in Affluent Countries*, ed. Janet Gornick and Markus Jäntti (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2014), 3-4.

¹³“Trends in Family Wealth, 1989 to 2013,” Congressional Budget Office, August 2016, accessed December 1, 2016, https://www.cbo.gov/sites/default/files/114th-congress-2015-2016/reports/51846-Family_Wealth.pdf.

our time.”¹⁴ In response to rising levels of economic inequality, he proposed a number of reforms, including raising the minimum wage to \$15 an hour nationwide, making public colleges and universities tuition-free, and instituting a single-payer healthcare system.¹⁵ Support for these policies led some to call him a “socialist” – a designation which he was more than happy to accept, though with the qualification that he was a “democratic socialist.”

Sanders on Money in Politics

Sanders coupled his message about economic inequality with a series of repeated criticisms of the outsized role that money plays in American politics. He regularly argued that he would more faithfully represent the will of the people than his opponents would, because they relied much more heavily on money from special interests and wealthy donors. According to Federal Election Commission (FEC) guidelines, individual donors are only permitted to donate up to \$2,700 dollars to a campaign per election (primary and general election campaigns are regarded as distinct). However, donors are allowed to contribute an unlimited amount of money to “independent expenditure-only campaigns” – more commonly known as “Super PACs” – which exist separately from a candidate’s official campaign. While political action committees (PACs) were active before 2010, Super PACs only came into existence as a result of the Supreme Court decision in *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission* and *Speechnow.org v. FEC*. The former decision overturned section 203 of the Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act,

¹⁴“Income and Wealth Inequality,” Bernie 2016, accessed December 1, 2016, <https://berniesanders.com/issues/income-and-wealth-inequality/>.

¹⁵Ibid.

which prohibited corporations and unions from engaging in “electioneering communications” within 30 days of a primary election or 60 days of a general election.¹⁶ The latter decision, by the D.C. Circuit Court, eliminated contribution limits to Super PACs altogether, provided such PACs do not donate directly to candidates’ campaigns.¹⁷

Taken together, these decisions opened the door to enormous contributions from wealthy donors who seek to influence election outcomes. But Sanders publicly repudiated such spending and preferred instead to raise money by means of small donations from individual supporters. Over the course of his primary campaign (per the *Washington Post*), Sanders raised \$234 million.¹⁸ By contrast, as of October 19, pro-Clinton Super PACs had raised approximately \$188 million for her campaign.¹⁹ Throughout the primary campaign, Sanders criticized Clinton for relying on contributions from wealthy donors and for refusing to release transcripts of speeches that she delivered to big banks on Wall Street. While both he and Clinton called for the Supreme Court to overturn (or at least limit) the *Citizens United* decision, Sanders was able to make a more compelling argument against it because of his refusal to accept the support of wealthy donors.

¹⁶Adam Liptak, “Justices, 5-4, Reject Corporate Spending Limit,” *New York Times*, January 21, 2010, accessed December 1, 2016, http://www.nytimes.com/2010/01/22/us/politics/22scotus.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0.

¹⁷Adam Liptak, “Courts Take on Campaign Finance Decision,” *New York Times*, March 26, 2010, accessed December 1, 2016, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/03/27/us/politics/27campaign.html>.

¹⁸“How much money is behind each campaign?” *Washington Post*, accessed December 1, 2016, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/politics/2016-election/campaign-finance/>.

¹⁹Ibid.

Sanders on Trade

The final pillar of Bernie Sanders' economic platform was his position on trade. According to his website, Sanders supported "reversing trade policies like NAFTA, CAFTA, and PNTR with China that have driven down wages and caused the loss of millions of jobs."²⁰ He was also very open about his opposition to the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), an agreement which would have decreased tariffs in an effort to strengthen economic ties between 12 countries which collectively comprise 40 percent of the world's economy (including the U.S., Canada, Japan, Singapore, Australia, and Mexico.) Significantly, the TPP did not include Russia or China.²¹ However, despite the President's claims that TPP would encourage economic growth, Sanders (and Trump, for that matter) lambasted the deal because they believed it would make it easier for corporations to move manufacturing jobs overseas.²²

Sanders' – and Trump's – concerns are not without foundation. According to a report by the Economic Policy Institute, the United States lost *five million* manufacturing jobs between 2000 and 2014.²³ Blue-collar workers have been hit hardest by this decline. Baily and Bosworth point out that while computer and electronics manufacturing has been quite successful in recent years, "The 90 percent of manufacturing that lies outside [these industries] has seen its share of real GDP fall substantially, while its productivity

²⁰"Income and Wealth Inequality."

²¹"TPP: What is it and why does it matter?" *BBC News*, November 22, 2016, accessed December 3, 2016, <http://www.bbc.com/news/business-32498715>.

²²Trump also criticized Hillary Clinton for having advocated for the TPP in her role as Secretary of State, only to come out against it partway through the primary campaign.

²³Robert E. Scott, "Manufacturing Job Loss: Trade, Not Productivity, Is the Culprit," Economic Policy Institute, August 11, 2015, accessed December 3, 2016, <http://www.epi.org/publication/manufacturing-job-loss-trade-not-productivity-is-the-culprit/>.

growth has been fairly slow.”²⁴ Sanders sought to appeal to these voters by presenting himself as the champion of everyday workers against the political elites and large corporations that were only concerned with their own bottom line, not the well-being of American workers.

Sanders the Populist

The best explanation for Bernie Sanders’ unexpected success in the Democratic primary was his strong populist appeal. Even though he lacked the financial resources and establishment support that other candidates had, he was able to tap into deep wells of discontent in the electorate. Throughout his campaign (and consistently during his more than twenty years in Congress) he rebuked the social and political elite for their disregard of “the people” of the United States. His status as an antiestablishment candidate helped him gain credibility with an American public that overwhelmingly believed the nation was headed in the wrong direction. His economic message appealed to these same voters who believed that the wealthy had a disproportionate amount of influence in politics and who were affected by the disappearance of blue-collar manufacturing jobs across the country. In short, Sanders won the hearts and minds of white, working-class Americans and young people who were eager for a more authentic kind of politics.

It remains to be seen whether or not the Sanders movement will have a lasting effect on the Democratic Party, particularly in the wake of Hillary Clinton’s unexpected loss to Donald Trump. In the aftermath of the election, some within the party have called for an overhaul of the leadership, beginning with the Chair of the Democratic National

²⁴Martin Neil Baily and Barry P. Bosworth, “US Manufacturing: Understanding Its Past and Its Potential Future,” *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 28 (Winter 2014): 3.

Committee. Sanders threw his support behind Keith Ellison, a member of the House from Minnesota who argued that the Democratic Party needs “to stand for a strong, populist economic message.”²⁵ While the DNC ultimately decided to elect Obama’s former Secretary of Labor, Thomas Perez, the point remains that whether or not the party embraces this populist trend will likely have a significant impact on its success in the near future.

²⁵Alice Miranda Ollstein, “Keith Ellison’s radical plan to save the Democratic Party,” *ThinkProgress*, December 1, 2016, accessed December 4, 2016, <https://thinkprogress.org/keith-ellisons-plan-to-save-the-democratic-party-organize-organize-organize-c983a27486df>.

CHAPTER THREE

Right-Wing Populism: The Case of Trump

Introduction

Not long after Barack Obama was swept into office as the forty-fourth President of the United States, a significant opposition movement began to voice its strong disagreement with a range of liberal (particularly economic) policies. Dubbed the “Tea Party” in reference to a comment made by a reporter in early 2009, this movement decried increased government spending and legislation like the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act. In addition to inspiring protests like the Taxpayer March on Washington, the anger and discontent that were captured by the Tea Party likely helped the GOP regain control of the House in the 2010 midterms. However, the Tea Party’s ire was not simply reserved for President Obama and congressional Democrats; indeed, some of the most bitter feuds involved establishment-minded Republicans in Congress and their more conservative primary challengers.¹

Whatever its influence over the course of Obama’s presidency, it now seems that the Tea Party’s heyday has come and gone. But although it only lasted for a few years, the movement demonstrated that there existed a substantial base of white, working-class voters who disagreed forcefully, not only with the direction in which the U.S. was headed under Obama, but with the entire political establishment in Washington. And this lesson

¹Kate Zernike, “Tea Party Activists Angry at G.O.P. Leaders,” *New York Times*, January 1, 2011, accessed February 4, 2017, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/01/02/us/politics/02teaparty.html?ref=collection%2Ftimestopic%2FTea%20Party%20Movement>.

would not be lost on a man whom almost no one took seriously as a candidate for President even months after he announced his intention to run. This chapter will consider some of the factors that contributed to Donald J. Trump's unexpected election as President of the United States, comparing his rhetoric and policy positions to those of his Democratic populist counterpart, Bernie Sanders. In so doing, it will attempt to discern Trump's place within the broader populist movement in the West.

The Discontent Electorate

Any attempt to explain the rise of Donald Trump must first gesture toward the discontent that pervaded the American electorate over the course of the 2016 campaign. In the days leading up to the election, only 37 percent of Americans were satisfied with “the way things [were] going in the United States,” while 62 percent were dissatisfied; moreover, satisfaction with the country's direction regularly dipped below 30 percent throughout much of 2016.² This fact alone was a source of great concern for Democrats who wished to retain control of the White House, but perhaps more concerning were polls that indicated the relative unpopularity of some of Obama's key policies. Most notably, a September 2016 poll reported that a majority (51 percent) of Americans disapproved of the Affordable Care Act (considered by many to be Obama's key domestic policy achievement).³

But even more important than voters' discontent with either the direction of the country generally or with particular Obama-era policies like Obamacare was their broad

²“Satisfaction with the United States,” Gallup.

³Art Swift, “More Americans Negative than Positive about ACA,” Gallup, September 8, 2016, accessed January 8, 2016, <http://www.gallup.com/poll/195383/americans-negative-positive-aca.aspx>.

and deep hostility toward the political establishment. Americans have long held extremely negative views of Congressional performance and this was no different during the campaign. A Gallup poll conducted in September 2015 found that 79 percent of Americans thought most members of Congress were “out of touch,” while 69 percent believed they “focused on the needs of special interests” rather than those of their constituents.⁴ In the middle of 2016, Americans viewed Congress negatively by an overwhelming 46-point margin (57 to 11).⁵ Americans also held negative perceptions of the Democratic and Republican Parties (50-45 and 62-33, respectively).⁶ The one exception to this general trend was the pattern of rising approval ratings for President Obama throughout 2016, which approached the level of support he received during the first year of his administration.⁷

During the Republican primary contest, Trump sought to exploit the negative sentiments that many Republicans felt toward the party establishment. He relentlessly attacked candidates who were establishment favorites, like Governor Jeb Bush and Senator Marco Rubio, whom he derisively dubbed “Little Marco.” He criticized Speaker of the House Paul Ryan and Senator John McCain for criticizing him after a recording

⁴Andrew Dugan, “Majority of Americans See Congress as Out of Touch, Corrupt,” Gallup, September 28, 2015, accessed January 28, 2017, <http://www.gallup.com/poll/185918/majority-americans-congress-touch-corrupt.aspx>.

⁵“Congressional Performance: Voters Still Down on Congress,” Rasmussen Reports, July 8, 2016, accessed January 28, 2017, http://www.rasmussenreports.com/public_content/politics/mood_of_america/congressional_performance.

⁶“GOP’s Favorability Rating Edges Lower,” Pew Research Center, April 28, 2016, accessed January 28, 2017, <http://www.people-press.org/2016/04/28/gops-favorability-rating-edges-lower/>.

⁷“Presidential Approval Ratings – Barack Obama,” Gallup, accessed January 28, 2017, <http://www.gallup.com/poll/116479/barack-obama-presidential-job-approval.aspx>.

surfaced in which Trump made demeaning comments about women.⁸ These moves no doubt energized a substantial base of voters who were tired with the “political correctness” of Washington elites, and Trump was able to turn out these voters en masse. In a word, Trump appealed to many voters who felt they had been “forgotten.”

Trump’s Appeal to the Forgotten Voter

“Today,” remarked a newly-minted President Trump,

we are not merely transferring power from one administration to another or from one party to another. But we are transferring power from Washington, D.C., and giving it back to you, the people. ... January 20, 2017 will be remembered as the day the people became the rulers of this nation again. The forgotten men and women of our country will be forgotten no longer.⁹

One explanation of Donald Trump’s success was his ability to connect with these “forgotten” voters, who had long felt alienated from the political process. Some of these people were residents of Appalachia who had for decades made their living working in the coal mines of Kentucky, West Virginia, and elsewhere. J.D. Vance describes the plight of Appalachian “hillbillies”: “Nearly a third of [Jackson, KY] lives in poverty ... And that doesn’t count the large majority of Jacksonians who hover around the poverty line. An epidemic of prescription drug addiction has taken root. The public schools are so bad that the state of Kentucky recently seized control.”¹⁰ Trump’s opposition to the progressive environmental policies of the Obama administration and his support for

⁸Alan Rappoport, “Donald Trump Berates Paul Ryan and ‘Disloyal’ Republicans,” *New York Times*, October 11, 2016, accessed January 28, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/12/us/politics/donald-trump-paul-ryan.html>.

⁹“Inaugural address: Trump’s full speech,” *CNN*, January 21, 2017, accessed February 4, 2017, <http://www.cnn.com/2017/01/20/politics/trump-inaugural-address/index.html>.

¹⁰J.D. Vance, *Hillbilly Elegy: A Memoir of a Family and Culture in Crisis* (New York: HarperCollins, 2016), 19.

expanding the use of fossil fuels (including coal) certainly helped him appeal to disaffected voters in Appalachia.

But Trump's appeal reached beyond Appalachia: he also spoke to the struggles of many in the white middle class whose livelihoods had been threatened by the shrinking number of manufacturing jobs. And his message resonated with many Americans who suffered from an acute lack of economic mobility, or the ability to improve their economic status. Chetty et al. have observed that intergenerational mobility varies widely across geographic regions of the United States, as much of the Southeast along with states like Ohio and Michigan suffer from lower levels of mobility than the Mountain West and rural Midwest.¹¹ Trump's rhetoric and policies appealed to a broad swathe of the population that has suffered from very low levels of economic mobility over the last several decades. What solution did he propose? He advocated for making it much more difficult for companies to "ship jobs overseas" by imposing large tariffs on imports to the U.S. from various countries.

Trump on Trade and Globalization

One of the principal planks of Trump's platform was his fierce opposition to trade deals that he claimed were costing American manufacturing jobs. He argued that the nation needed a leader with business expertise to negotiate new and improved trade agreements that would benefit American workers and prevent jobs from being shipped abroad. Trump often called NAFTA "the worst trade deal" in American history, and sharply criticized the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) – and President Obama and Hillary

¹¹Raj Chetty, et al., "Where Is the Land of Opportunity? The Geography of Intergenerational Mobility in the United States," *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* 129 (4): 1556.

Clinton for supporting it – as well.¹² Trump’s message on trade resonated with many voters who had watched as factories closed and manufacturing jobs fled. An important element of remembering the “forgotten men and women” of the country was bringing back the jobs that had been sacrificed on the altar of globalization.

The fact that Trump’s “protectionist” trade policies fared so well in the Republican primary is itself surprising, given that most Congressional Republicans had long been advocates for free trade. While many Democrats opposed the TPP, Republican officeholders were more supportive, at least before the start of the 2016 primary campaign. Paul Ryan was also initially supportive, but his position seemed to change partway through the campaign.¹³ Trade is therefore one example of an issue where Trump seems to have changed the orientation of the Republican Party by means of effective and relentless messaging. On this issue the GOP has adopted a radically different stance than the one it almost universally espoused just a few years ago. On trade and globalization, at least, the Republican Party now appears to be a populist party, and they have Donald Trump to thank for the sudden change. Besides trade, the GOP also appears to have taken a more populist stance on the issue of immigration.

Trump on Immigration

From the very beginning of his campaign, Donald Trump took a hardline stance against illegal immigration. As he announced his intention to run for President, he

¹²Vicki Needham, “Trump says he will negotiate or withdraw from NAFTA,” *The Hill*, June 28, 2016, accessed April 9, 2017, <http://thehill.com/policy/finance/285189-trump-says-he-will-renegotiate-or-withdraw-from-nafta-without-changes>.

¹³Jeff Stein, “Paul Ryan used to love TPP. Then came Donald Trump,” *Vox*, January 23, 2017, accessed April 9, 2017, <http://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2017/1/23/14359196/paul-ryan-trump-tpp>.

warned Americans that illegal immigrants from Mexico are ““bringing drugs, they’re bringing crime, they’re rapists, and some I assume are good people.””¹⁴ This statement and others like it hounded him throughout the campaign, as reporters and critics cited his words as evidence that he was not friendly to minority voters. Trump promised that he would build a wall on the U.S.-Mexican border, and his supporters frequently chanted their support for such a policy at raucous campaign rallies. He also controversially called for a “total and complete shutdown of Muslims entering the United States,” a proposal which was quickly repudiated by Republican leaders like Paul Ryan.¹⁵ Trump also touted the endorsement that he received from the union that represents Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) officers and staff, and decried Clinton’s stance on immigration reform as “amnesty.”¹⁶

When compared to those of Bernie Sanders, Trump’s stances on immigration and religious diversity much more clearly fit the mold of populism that has been common in contemporary European politics. Many European populists, like Geert Wilders and Jean-Marie Le Pen (father of Marine Le Pen) have made incendiary and xenophobic comments – and both men have faced prosecution for their statements about minority groups. Trump’s opposition to allowing Syrian refugees to enter the United States (and his criticism of Clinton’s plan to substantially increase the number of refugees admitted) also

¹⁴Rupert Neate, “Donald Trump announces US presidential run with eccentric speech,” *The Guardian*, June 15, 2015, accessed February 16, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2015/jun/16/donald-trump-announces-run-president>.

¹⁵Jenna Johnson, “Trump calls for ‘total and complete shutdown of Muslims entering the United States,’” *Washington Post*, December 7, 2015, accessed April 8, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-politics/wp/2015/12/07/donald-trump-calls-for-total-and-complete-shutdown-of-muslims-entering-the-united-states/?utm_term=.cf39770c5390.

¹⁶“ICE union endorses Trump,” *Politico*, September 26, 2016, accessed April 8, 2017, <http://www.politico.com/story/2016/09/immigration-customs-enforcement-union-endorses-trump-228664>.

echoes some common populist refrains in Europe, which has struggled to relocate hundreds of thousands of people displaced by the Syrian civil war and the brutality of the Islamic State. Trump's positions, however, contrast sharply with the views espoused by Sanders and Clinton, who consistently sought to celebrate diversity and emphasized including immigrants in the American way of life. While Trump and Sanders' positions on trade and globalization were largely similar, Trump's position on immigration makes him look much more like a traditional populist, whose message contains a distinct nationalist element.

Trump and the Religious Vote

The 2016 election contained many surprises, but perhaps one of the most unexpected results was Trump's tremendous success with religious Americans. Exit polls released the day after the election indicate that Trump won fully 81 percent of self-identified evangelicals (compared to Clinton's 16 percent), surpassing even the percentage won by George W. Bush, a former evangelical Governor of Texas who cast himself as a passionate social conservative.¹⁷ Trump also won white Catholics by a large margin (60-37) – though he lost Hispanic Catholics (67 percent of whom favored Clinton) – and overwhelmingly won the support of Mormon voters as well (61-25). By contrast, Clinton secured large majorities of Jewish voters (71-24), the religiously unaffiliated (68-26), and members of other religions (62-29).¹⁸

¹⁷Gregory A. Smith and Jessica Martínez, "How the faithful voted: A preliminary 2016 analysis," Pew Research Center, November 9, 2016, accessed February 3, 2017, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/11/09/how-the-faithful-voted-a-preliminary-2016-analysis/>.

¹⁸Smith and Martínez, "Faithful."

Trump's overwhelming success with evangelicals no doubt helped him to secure victories in states with large evangelical populations, like North Carolina. His success with this demographic led *Christianity Today* to declare in the early morning hours of November 9, "Trump Elected President, Thanks to 4 in 5 White Evangelicals."¹⁹ This outcome came as a surprise to many commentators, who thought that the condemnations of Trump which issued from high-profile evangelicals like Max Lucado, Russell Moore, and Jen Hatmaker would lead evangelicals to support Clinton or a third party candidate. What explains Trump's success with religious voters, particularly white evangelicals and Mormons?

Trump no doubt made some overtures to conservative religious voters. After identifying as pro-choice for many years, he made a hard pivot to the right on the issue of abortion, going so far as to call for criminal penalties for women who receive abortions (much to the dismay of many in the pro-life movement); though he retracted this statement soon afterwards.²⁰ He also attended the Values Voters Summit and included several prominent conservative evangelicals on an advisory board. However, he spoke very little about other prominent social issues, like LGBTQ rights and the push for marijuana legalization. And when he did talk about these issues, he often strayed from

¹⁹Kate Shellnutt, "Trump Elected President, Thanks to 4 in 5 White Evangelicals," *Christianity Today*, November 9, 2016, accessed February 3, 2017, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/gleanings/2016/november/trump-elected-president-thanks-to-4-in-5-white-evangelicals.html>.

²⁰Matt Flegenheimer and Maggie Haberman, "Donald Trump, Abortion Foe, Eyes 'Punishment' for Women, Then Recants," *New York Times*, March 30, 2016, accessed February 3, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/31/us/politics/donald-trump-abortion.html>.

the typical conservative position by, for instance, indicating his support for transgender-inclusive policies.²¹

So Trump's support among conservative religious voters does not seem to stem primarily from the statements he made about prominent social issues throughout his career. Instead, I think the best explanation for this support is the fact that many evangelicals and Mormons thought Clinton's positions on these issues diverged even more sharply from theirs and concluded that Trump would do a better job of representing their views. Many abortion opponents, for example, were put off by Clinton's proposal to repeal the Hyde Amendment, which prohibits Medicaid funds from being used to pay for abortions except in rare instances, such as when the pregnancy results from rape or incest or when the mother's life is at risk.²²

Here as well Trump's populist message helped him make inroads with voters. Throughout Obama's presidency many conservative religious voters (and their leaders) perceived that their political clout was on the decline. Though this fact was made most evident by high-profile losses at the Supreme Court (in cases like *Obergefell v. Hodges* and *Whole Woman's Health v. Hellerstedt*), many evangelicals and Mormons could feel their influence slipping as a result of ongoing racial and religious shifts, as well as the growing influence of women voters. In Trump these voters found a candidate who was willing to stand up to the "liberal establishment" and bring the country back to a time when traditional values had more purchase, while Clinton represented the opposite.

²¹Ashley Parker, "Donald Trump Says Transgender People Should Use the Bathroom They Want," *New York Times*, April 21, 2016, accessed February 3, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/politics/first-draft/2016/04/21/donald-trump-says-transgender-people-should-use-the-bathroom-they-want/>.

²²Molly Redden, "Clinton leads way on abortion rights as Democrats seek end to decades-old rule," *The Guardian*, July 26, 2016, accessed February 3, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/jul/26/abortion-rights-clinton-hyde-amendment-federal-funds>.

Trump the Populist

On the basis of the analysis presented in this chapter, two facts should be readily apparent. First, there are some important differences between the platforms of Sanders and Trump, both in terms of what issues they prioritized and in terms of their policy prescriptions. Sanders, for instance, spoke frequently about income inequality, while Trump – himself part of the “1%” – eschewed this language in favor of deriding trade agreements like NAFTA and the TPP. Perhaps most significantly, Sanders frequently extolled the benefits and importance of immigration and diversity, while Trump made many controversial comments and inveighed against the dangers of illegal immigration and “radical Islamic terrorism.” These differences are no doubt important, and the contrast between the two candidates on issues of immigration lead to the conclusion that Trump better fits the populist mold (when compared to European populist candidates) than Sanders.

But these separate treatments of Sanders and Trump should also reveal that there are some remarkable similarities between the appeals that each candidate made throughout the campaign. Both were highly critical of trade deals that they accused of stealing jobs from American workers, and both lamented the influence that money and wealthy donors have on the political process (although their solutions to this problem could not have been more different). In light of these similarities, I maintain that both candidates should be understood as “populists” to a degree, although Trump more closely resembles other contemporary populist figures than does Sanders.

CHAPTER FOUR

Populism and Its Implications

Introduction

The election of Donald Trump rocked the political world. Many pundits who had initially regarded his candidacy as something of a joke were stunned by the realization that the New York businessman (and former host of *The Apprentice*) was now President-elect of the United States. While it came as a surprise to many – most – pundits, the signs of populist discontent were hiding in plain sight. Trump’s election was in some ways presaged by the United Kingdom’s vote to exit the European Union on June 23, 2016 (a result which also stunned many observers). In the weeks following the American election, some commentators speculated about the impact that populism could potentially exert on upcoming elections, including those in western European nations like the Netherlands, France, and Germany.¹

Still, as of this writing, concerns about a populist wave sweeping the European continent have appeared unfounded. In the wake of the Austrian vote to elect former Green Party leader Alexander van Der Bellen over his right-wing opponent Norbert Hofer, *The Economist* declared, “Populism hits a snag in Austria’s presidential election.”² Far-right candidate Geert Wilders suffered a defeat in the Dutch election in March,

¹Ronald Brownstein, “How Will Donald Trump Handle Europe’s Populist Right?” *The Atlantic*, December 8, 2016, accessed March 5, 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2016/12/donald-trump-europe-populist-far-right/509906/>.

²“Populism hits a snag in Austria’s presidential election,” *The Economist*, December 4, 2016, accessed March 5, 2017, <http://www.economist.com/news/europe/21711212-far-rights-norbert-hofer-suffers-surprising-loss-populism-hits-snag-austrias>.

though his *Partij voor de Vrijheid* (Party for Freedom) won 20 seats, making it the second-largest party in the Netherlands' House of Representatives.³ European populism will face further tests in the months ahead, as France's Marine Le Pen strives to be among the top two candidates in the country's presidential election so as to participate in a runoff (assuming no candidate wins an outright majority). And Germany's right-wing *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD), led by Frauke Petry, is hoping to gain seats in the German Parliament after the federal election takes place in September.

In the light of President Trump's lackluster approval ratings and ongoing controversies, some have publicly wondered whether his performance is negatively affecting populist candidates and parties in Europe.⁴ Only time will tell whether populism will continue as a strong political force or whether it recedes to the fringes of European (and American) politics. But populism seems to have had a substantial impact on another important phenomenon in American politics: political polarization.

Populism and Polarization

A considerable amount of debate surrounds the topic of polarization in contemporary American politics. Most political scientists agree that the American political climate has grown increasingly polarized in recent years, as the Republican Party has moved further to the right and the Democrats further to the left, as is evident

³Alissa J. Rubin, "Geert Wilders Falls Short in Election, as Wary Dutch Scatter Their Votes," *New York Times*, March 15, 2017, accessed March 19, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/15/world/europe/geert-wilders-netherlands-far-right-vote.html>.

⁴Pierre Haski, "Has Trump's Incompetence Killed Europe's Populism?" *The Daily Beast*, March 16, 2017, accessed March 19, 2017, <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2017/03/14/has-trump-s-incompetence-killed-europe-s-populism.html>.

from the sharp increase in partisan voting records among elected officials.⁵ Political scientists disagree about whether this polarization is mostly concentrated among the political elite or pervades the American mass public as a whole.⁶ I will not attempt to put an end to these longstanding debates. However, it does seem clear that the use of populist *rhetoric* and the articulation of more extreme *policy positions* helped Trump and Sanders energize their respective bases and build support for their campaigns. This indicates a substantive relationship between populism and polarization: populist candidates benefit from a political culture that is already polarized, and the use of populist rhetoric can serve to exacerbate the political polarization present in a society.

By pitting the “righteous people” against the “corrupt elites,” populists often appear to further polarize the already fractured political climate in their respective countries. Such rhetoric can lead voters to lose faith in the institutions and individuals that perform essential administrative tasks and help to preserve a robust systems of checks and balances on government power. However, these claims made by populist politicians would not have much purchase among the electorate at large unless voters already felt a certain level of distrust toward the government generally, or particular political leaders, or even religious or ethnic groups. By calling officeholders from the opposing party “corrupt” or “insiders,” populists often alienate opposing partisans, increasing the level of political polarization in their society. Further, the more extreme policy positions of right-wing populists on issues like immigration can widen the chasm

⁵Nolan M. McCarty, Keith T. Poole, and Howard Rosenthal, *Polarized America: The Dance of Ideology and Unequal Riches* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2016), 17-18.

⁶For articulations of the two positions, see, respectively, Fiorina et al. (2006) and Abramowitz and Saunders (2008).

between certain minority groups (Hispanics, Muslims, etc.) and the populist's supporters, leading to increases in both affective and issue polarization.

Princeton's Jan-Werner Müller points out another element of populism that could drive polarization as well. He calls it the "tell-tale sign of populism": populist leaders "claim that they, and only they, represent the people."⁷ Such assertions were common at Trump rallies, where he promised his supporters that he would "drain the swamp" in Washington if elected. Sanders' relentless broadsides against Wall Street and the Washington establishment fit into the same mold: he claimed he would represent the American people rather than the big banks or the political class (whom, he claimed, Hillary Clinton was more interested in representing). The stridency of populist condemnations of the political establishment seems capable of dividing not only politicians from their constituents but also members of one party from those of the other.

It is not surprising, then, that recent polls have revealed striking levels of polarization even on (presumably) straightforward issues like what it means to be "American." An AP-NORC poll from February 2017 highlighted stark differences of opinion between Republicans and Democrats on whether or not "a culture grounded in Christian religious beliefs" or the "mixing of cultures and values from around the world" are important components of the American identity. The *Washington Post's* Chris Cillizza observes, "What the numbers suggest is that not only are Democrats and Republicans living in two different countries ... but they don't even agree on what the

⁷Jan-Werner Müller, "Trump, Erdoğan, Farage: The attractions of populism for politicians, the dangers for democracy," *The Guardian*, September 2, 2016, accessed March 11, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/sep/02/trump-erdogan-farage-the-attractions-of-populism-for-politicians-the-dangers-for-democracy>.

country should, at its center, *be*. Partisanship now extends not just to whom you vote for and why but also what you think the United States is and should be.”⁸

Populism and the Republican Party

The impact that the current wave of populism will have on the future of the Republican Party begins with Donald Trump, who was swept into office by a populist surge in the American electorate. He promised to remember the nation’s forgotten citizens, those who had been left behind by “politics as usual.” At least for the foreseeable future, the impact that populist ideas will have on the GOP (and the country more broadly) will depend on Trump’s success in living up to his campaign rhetoric. If his policies help working-class Americans, he could potentially remake the Republican coalition to include lower-middle class voters and (possibly) union members as well. On the other hand, if – as his critics on the left allege – his policies primarily benefit the wealthy, the Republican Party’s recent success with white working-class voters may be short-lived. In essence, the impact that populism will have on the GOP (and American politics more broadly) over at least the next several years will largely depend on Trump’s success or failure as President.

Ever since Trump announced his candidacy, many people have expressed concerns about his fitness to hold the office of President. Throughout the campaign, Clinton relentlessly slammed him as unqualified, and President Obama also asserted that

⁸Chris Cillizza, “The astounding political divide over what it means to be ‘American,’” *Washington Post*, March 6, 2017, accessed March 18, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2017/03/06/the-astounding-political-divide-over-what-it-means-to-be-american/?tid=pm_politics_pop&utm_term=.13245c44b2ea.

Trump was “unfit to serve as president.”⁹ And Trump’s election does not seem to have put these concerns to rest. In a chapter entitled, “The Presidency: Donald Trump and the Question of Fitness,” political scientist Paul Quirk does not mince words. After discussing nine problematic character traits possessed by Trump, he states

This second group of traits – inexperience, lack of information, reckless policy pronouncements, disregard for the Constitution, and pervasive narcissism – have definite and alarming, if not dire, implications for Trump’s performance as president. Casual decisions on major issues, angry response to criticism, defiant self-assertion, and uncalculating retribution: The possibilities for calamitous failure are unlimited.¹⁰

If Trump’s possession of these character traits leads voters to increasingly dislike him, they may also reject the populist ideas he espouses. But there are other perils for the Trump administration besides the President’s behavior.

It would seem obvious that a Republican-controlled White House and Congress will succeed in enacting major legislative reforms on issues like immigration, healthcare, and tax reform. But if the experience of Trump’s first two months serve as a guide, this impression is anything but clear. President Trump already issued two executive orders prohibiting individuals from several African and Middle Eastern countries from entering the United States on a temporary basis. But both of these orders have been halted by federal judges and seem likely to end up before the Supreme Court.¹¹ Moreover, efforts

⁹Isaac Stanley-Becker and Sean Sullivan, “Obama: Trump is ‘unfit to serve as president,’” *Washington Post*, August 2, 2016, accessed March 5, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/amid-continuing-fallout-from-khan-controversy-a-gop-congressman-declares-his-support-for-clinton/2016/08/02/a756b792-58b3-11e6-9ace-8075993d73a2_story.html?utm_term=.fdceb5959632.

¹⁰Paul J. Quirk, “The Presidency: Donald Trump and the Question of Fitness,” in *The Elections of 2016*, ed. Michael Nelson (Thousand Oaks, CA: CQ Press, 2017), 205.

¹¹Richard Gonzales, Joel Rose, and Merrit Kennedy, “Trump Travel Ban Blocked Nationwide by Federal Judges in Hawaii, Maryland,” *NPR*, March 15, 2017, accessed March 18, 2017, <http://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2017/03/15/520171478/trump-travel-ban-faces-court-hearings-by-challengers-today>.

to “repeal and replace” the Affordable Care Act faltered after the conservative House Freedom Caucus objected to the American Health Care Act, which proved deeply unpopular in recent polling: a mere six percent of those polled were strongly supportive of the bill, while nearly half (43%) were strongly opposed to it.¹² If Congressional Republicans are unable to make good on Trump’s campaign promises on healthcare, trade, and the economy, his tenure as President will likely be viewed as a failure and his populist ideas may be rejected as a consequence. Such an outcome would likely lead Republican leaders to use less inflammatory rhetoric and return to more traditional conservative policy positions. Moreover, Trump’s ability to deliver on many of his campaign promises may depend at least partially on his ability to work with Democrats in Congress, and his frequent attacks on Democratic leaders will likely make it more difficult for them to find common ground with the President.

Populism and the Democratic Party

Since losing the White House to Donald Trump, the Democratic Party has been forced to confront a number of issues. Perhaps most prominent among these is the issue of how Congressional Democrats should interact with the President. Democratic leaders have said that they are open to working with Trump on issues such as investing in infrastructure and reforming the tax code. Democratic officeholders from states which Trump won – including, e.g., West Virginia’s Joe Manchin and North Dakota’s Heidi Heitkamp – may have a particular incentive to cooperate with him. However, if the

¹²Philip Bump, “The Republican health-care proposal is breathtakingly unpopular,” *Washington Post*, March 23, 2017, accessed March 23, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/politics/wp/2017/03/23/the-republican-health-care-proposal-is-breathtakingly-unpopular/?utm_term=.620e2f5c07c8.

President's approval rating continues to lag behind 50 percent, Democrats in Congress may not feel nearly as much pressure to work with the new Republican administration.

In the immediate aftermath of the election, some in the Democratic base hoped that the old guard in Congress and the Democratic National Committee (DNC) would step aside and make room for new leadership. There was an especially fervent push for a new chairperson of the DNC as a consequence of reports that the previous Chair, Congresswoman Debbie Wasserman Schulz of Florida, had favored Hillary Clinton during the primaries (a revelation which prompted her resignation in July 2016).¹³ Some within the party hoped that Congressman Keith Ellison, who represented Minnesota's fifth district, would be elected Chair, but ultimately President Obama's former Secretary of Labor Thomas Perez was selected for the position. Though this result dismayed some detractors, Perez has since asked for letters of resignation from all current DNC employees, a move which is not without precedent but may nevertheless signal sweeping changes within the organization.¹⁴

As the midterm elections approach, Democratic members of Congress may seek to appropriate some of Trump and Sanders' populist, anti-establishment rhetoric and policy positions. If Trump and the Republican Party remain unpopular, Democrats running for Congress and in state-level races may benefit from a backlash against the current administration. And this backlash could continue into the next general election; in fact, some early polls indicate that Sanders and Massachusetts Senator Elizabeth

¹³Jonathan Martin and Alan Rappeport, "Debbie Wasserman Schulz to Resign D.N.C. Post," *New York Times*, July 24, 2016, accessed April 5, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/25/us/politics/debbie-wasserman-schultz-dnc-wikileaks-emails.html>.

¹⁴Curt Mills, "Democratic National Committee Begins Restructuring," *U.S. News and World Report*, March 29, 2017, accessed April 5, 2017, <https://www.usnews.com/news/politics/articles/2017-03-29/tom-perez-asks-for-all-dnc-employees-resignations>.

Warren (who often employs similar rhetoric) are among the frontrunners for the Democratic nomination in 2020.¹⁵ If right-wing populism does not succeed under Trump, left-wing populism will have an opportunity to supplant it. But it remains to be seen whether and to what extent the Democratic Party will adopt Sanders-style rhetoric and policies in advance of upcoming races. If Democrats shift increasingly toward populist appeals, they may be able to win back white working-class voters, a demographic which has historically supported them. But if they do not speak to the challenges faced by the working class, they may further persuade such voters that their interests are better represented by the Republicans and President Trump.

Conclusion

In recent years and decades, populist movements have had a considerable impact on many Western countries. Contemporary populist movements have transformed the face of British, Dutch, French, and American politics, defying the expectations of political scientists and seasoned pundits. Populist surges are in large part responsible for the British decision to leave the European Union and the unanticipated successes of Bernie Sanders and Donald Trump in the American election. Within the American context, there are important differences between left-wing and right-wing populism when it comes to immigration, religious diversity, and the demographic groups to which each movement appeals. However, both varieties of populism share a certain wariness of free trade and globalization and seek to set the “righteous people” against the “corrupt elites.” The success of Trump and Sanders can be ascribed to their skill at appealing to everyday

¹⁵“Trump, Ryan Both Hit Record Low Approval,” *Public Policy Polling*, March 30, 2017, accessed April 9, 2017, http://www.publicpolicypolling.com/pdf/2017/PPP_Release_National_33017.pdf.

Americans, those who have felt left behind by a political establishment they see as too self-interested and driven by money. The future of right-wing populism in the United States will depend largely on the success of Trump's presidency, while the future of left-wing populism will depend on whether and to what extent Democrats use populist rhetoric and policies to oppose him.

More broadly, the future of populism throughout the West also remains to be seen, and the success or failure of President Trump will likely have an impact on populist parties and candidates throughout Europe and elsewhere. Regardless of what may happen in the coming years, it is clear that contemporary politics in the West has been radically changed by the rise of populism, though the jury is still out regarding the impact populism will have in the long term. Recent events reveal that candidates who appeal to voters' suspicions toward elected officials can succeed, even if their campaigns lack the institutional support and financing that more "mainstream" candidates possess. Whatever the challenges that these changes present for the health and vitality of democracy and democratic institutions, populism's influence is wide-ranging and undeniable. Thanks to populism, American politics will never again be the same.

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