

“Anti-Anti Populism, or: The Threat of Populism to U.S. Democracy Is Exaggerated”

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Count de Money: “It is said that the people are revolting!”

King Louis XVI: “You said it, they stink on ice!”

--*History of the World, Part I* (1981)

Ours is a time of great unease. Commentators, including yours truly, warn that our democracy is in danger of “backsliding.”¹ This week, a survey of Americans suggests that 59 percent of us consider the current moment the “lowest point” in U.S. history that they can remember.² Our elites are anxious, too. After all, media have explained to them that the white working class deserves the credit—rather, the blame—for ushering in the Trump administration. Belief in this “fact” has led to a number of scouting expeditions to understand flyover country, which are now necessary given the fact that elites are increasingly socially, civically, and spatially distant from non-elites. Much of political science is on the same page. Christopher H. Achen and Larry M. Bartels’ *Democracy for Realists*, perhaps the leading current study of American public opinion, finds most of our fellow citizens to be uninformed, unable to conceive of their interests, and unable to reason effectively from their interests to their political choices.³ American voters, it seems, stink on ice.

In this memo, I offer some reasons why I think the case against populism is not (yet) persuasive. This is not a brief in support of populism and its virtues.⁴ Rather, I suggest why I am not convinced by many claims regarding populism’s consequences for democracy (at least, perhaps, those for consolidated democracies) made by anti-populists. In particular, and in contrast to much of the discourse around America under Trump, I argue that our era is marked by a good deal more continuity with the past half-century than many believe. Risks to U.S. democracy are serious, but not as dire as some think. Moreover--and this is the other side of the continuity coin--evaluations of U.S. democracy before 2016 are in my view too positive. Additionally, I argue, ours is certainly a populist era, and yet populism is less central to contemporary American politics than many believe. What ails our politics has less to do with populism than with broader forces: elite polarization, negative partisanship, racial conflict, and the failure of our major parties.

There are often conceptual and normative differences among comparativists and Americanists regarding populism. Many comparativists use the term solely as an epithet, and consider populism a virus that must be expelled from the body politic lest democracy become “illiberal” or even collapse.⁵ Many historically-oriented Americanists, still under their grad-school swoon for the Populists, think more positively about the phenomenon. I am not sure these differences are bridgeable, but don’t think they need to be for us to learn from one another.

After spelling out how I think about populism, I briefly sketch some of the currents of U.S. populism since the late 19th century. I then discuss the populist campaigns of Bernie Sanders and Donald Trump, and argue that the outcome of the 2016 election was less shaped by populism than is often thought. Next, I discuss the prospects for Trump’s populism to imperil U.S. democracy, with particular emphasis on the claims that populism is culpable in

the erosion of democratic institutions (formal as well as informal) allegedly underway. I then suggest that longer-term forces, which can coexist with populism but are not driven by it, are fueling the current threats to U.S. democracy. I close with a few *what is to be done?* comments.

Some Throat-Clearing on Populism

I view populism as a form of claim-making, a style of political communication rather than an ideology. Populist speakers claim to speak directly to the people, and on behalf of them. Often deploying anger, they use unadorned, unpretentious, often folksy language, and regularly transgress norms of decorum.⁶

Populist claims have a particular structure to them. They define “the people” and pits them against an “other” that populists also define. This other is typically economic elites and the politicians who act on their behalf. These elites are framed as disrespecting the people, subverting democratic institutions to strip the people of much of their power, taking what rightfully belongs to the people, and generally acting against the people’s interests. Here, the people are carriers of virtue and the only “legitimate source of political power.” Thus, intermediary institutions, especially those vulnerable to elite manipulation that could frustrate the operation of the will of the people onto the polity, are considered suspect.⁷ The “us” and the “them” are viewed as being in perpetual conflict. Populists often also voice a rejection of deference to elites, professionals, and haughty experts.⁸ In consolidated democracies such as the U.S., in which political power is pursued through parties, populism may characterize parties’ strategies of electoral mobilization and governance.

Populisms differ enough that we must retreat to populism with adjectives. As discussed below, more inclusive populisms conceive of the people broadly with respect to civic and class identities. Exclusionary populists, on the other hand, see the people in ethno-racial (whites, Christians, etc.) or nativist terms, and thus helpfully define which of a polity’s inhabitants lay beyond (sometimes literally) the pale. This exclusionary language often pits a mythical “heartland” against those individuals, or areas, that are not intrinsic or essential to the nation. Targets of populists differ, too, across these broad subtypes. Where more inclusive populists might target economic and political elites, exclusionary populists often add a marginalized group—typically a racial, ethnic, or religious minority—that, wittingly or not, are somehow enlisted to act in concert with these underhanded elites against the people.⁹

Populism is a recent phenomenon. For the people even to be available to be dishonored and disrespected, they first must be above contempt. Only in the past two hundred-odd years have most citizens been invested by society with sufficient dignity that they could be robbed of it. Additionally, prior to democratic rule, individuals could not claim that a fair process of political representation was being manipulated by a “them” to the detriment of “the people.”

As a style, it is in principle available to a variety of political actors and movements, particularly those seeking to mobilize previously unmobilized constituencies, such as politically alienated non-voters. Given this definition, populists are most likely to emerge, and succeed politically, when they can legitimately claim an outsider status, when there is a widely shared perception of political corruption, and when established political parties studiously avoid to discuss the issues raised by populists.¹⁰ Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser argue that in consolidated democracies, populists on the outside pressing in can enhance the quality of democracy by mobilizing previously unmobilized constituencies, forcing issues ignored by major parties onto the agenda, etc. If in power, they can have a moderate effect on democracy, positive or negative. Here, Mudde and Kaltwasser differ from the Framing Paper, which doesn’t expect to uncover salutary effects of populism.¹¹

The dangers of populism in consolidated democracies are many. First, as “a way of structuring the political field along an antagonistic divide,” populism makes increased social conflict likely.¹² In particular, by often defining people in terms of social groups, populist appeals—whether electorally successful or not—have “the potential to reproduce widely held stereotypes,” legitimate lines of thought, speech, and action once repressed by social

norms, and “incite inter-group conflict.”¹³ Second, in that it emphasizes popular sovereignty above all, checks and balances and minority rights may be vulnerable to critique and even erosion, and countermajoritarian institutions such as independent judiciaries may be targeted.¹⁴ Third, successful populist campaigns may embolden and empower governments to exploit moments of anger and frustration with politics as usual, and undertake “reforms” that “tilt the playing field” of political competition in their favor; competitive authoritarian regimes may soon follow.¹⁵ As our Framing Paper suggests, populist governments may endanger both formal institutions and the rule of law, as well as important democratic norms regarding conflict of interest, financial transparency, respect for political oppositions, free media, and so on. These norms, the authors suggest, often take decades to build, and their erosion may not be swiftly reversed.

Populism in American History

Across U.S. history, populist speakers and movements emerged in accordance with this approach. They have flared up when governments suffer from legitimacy deficits, especially due to corruption; in moments of social tumult, including sharp demographic changes such as an upswing in the share of foreign-born inhabitants; and in periods of economic distress and/or sharp inequality. Revolutionary-era discourse regarding popular sovereignty has consistently “made inevitable episodic outburst of populist passion “for the people” recurrent events throughout our history.”¹⁶ These began in the regulator movements among backcountry colonists in the mid-18th century, and farmers’ movements against creditors in the 1780s, and continued after the founding with anti-Masonic and “Know-Nothing” movements.¹⁷ However, standard textbook populism began with the Farmers’ Alliances of the 1880s and the People’s Party (also called the Populist Party) of the early 1890s, an effort at a moment of great economic dislocation and inequality to bring together farmers of the South and West with laborers in the East, all of whom suffered under the yoke of the same “money power.”

The People’s Party platform of 1892 declared that “Corruption dominates the ballot-box, the Legislatures, the Congress, and . . . the bench. The people are demoralized; most of the states have been compelled to isolate the voters at the polling places to prevent universal intimidation and bribery.” More: “the fruits of the toil of millions are boldly stolen to build up colossal fortunes for a few, unprecedented in the history of mankind; and the possessors of these, in turn, despise the Republic and endanger liberty.” These populists sought to “restore the government of the Republic to the hands of ‘the plain people,’ with which class it originated.”¹⁸

As memos by the Ricks make clear, the Populist movement was far from the irrational, anti-modern emotional spasm described by many historians. Rather, this agrarian revolt was constructed by office-seekers and their supporters, spread through a sophisticated and massive campaign of public education through newspapers and hundreds of full-time lecturers in a Speakers’ Bureau, and propelled forward by quite rational and instrumental policy demands that the major parties had refused to take up, and by a potent critique of highly corrupt legislatures (Congress and state legislatures) and the manipulation of democratic institutions, in particular party nomination processes.¹⁹ Organizers and rank-and-file members often defined this “plain people” irrespective of race, as the coordination of activities by the white and black Farmers’ Alliances attested. Though they lost the battle to overtake the Democratic party, their organized pressure, as Elizabeth Sanders shows, ultimately shaped much of the regulatory state constructed by Congress during the Progressive era.²⁰

Exclusionary populist movements were of course also present at this time. These, such as the nativist and racist California Workingmen’s Party, defined the people as the white producing classes.²¹ Still, there was no single populism, and certainly no single populism that imperiled democracy. And it is also worth noting that the exclusionary populisms of the era were not exactly out of step with much of America’s political establishment, which at the time was hard at work to “reconcile” North and South by codifying Jim Crow and convincing first itself, and then the public, that the dream of universal suffrage had been a mistake (in both the South, and—as immigrants could attest—in the North as well). Thus, in this period it was a decreasingly small cadre of black and white Republican officeholders as well as many Populists who fought for racial equality as against most of the

nation's political and economic elites.²² While the decline in mass political participation in the 1890s and 1900s had many sources, the defeat of the Populists at the hands of the major parties in 1896 was a major factor.²³

In the 1920s, the Klan experienced a rebirth outside the South, and offered a new exclusionary populism that combined their central target—Catholics and Jews—with corporate interests in denouncing an “enemy liquor gang” that sought to implement Prohibition and end the immigration of Europe’s lower orders.²⁴ On the eve of the Depression, the Democratic Party, while still influenced by remnants of agrarian revolt, was hardly a vehicle of intense populist demands. The Party’s 1928 platform viewed states’ rights as “a bulwark against centralization and the destructive tendencies of the Republican Party.”²⁵ Even by 1932, amidst high levels of economic devastation (including more than a decade of agrarian depression in the South) and inequality, neither major party advanced a coherent vision to escape the Depression. Indeed, candidate FDR promised to balance the budget.²⁶ During Roosevelt’s first term, a variety of populist movements emerged. The most important were those of Louisiana politician Huey Long, who planned to challenge Roosevelt from (in part) the left, and Detroit’s Father Charles Coughlin, a rabid racist and anti-Semite who, through a massive, national radio audience, helped pioneer right-wing populists’ embrace of isolationism.²⁷ By 1936, perhaps in part due to the pressure from Long’s movement, Roosevelt was denouncing “economic royalists” who “reached out for control over Government itself. . . . And as a result the average man once more confronts problems that faced the Minute Man.”²⁸

Historian Michael Kazin argues that U.S. populism changed shape at this time. Before the New Deal, the main differences in populism concerned the definitions of the people and their adversaries. Various populist movements, including those of Long and Coughlin, were not clearly distinguishable on ideological grounds, as their policy demands didn’t track recognizable modern ideologies of left and right.²⁹ But from the New Deal on, ideology and type of populism became (and have remained) aligned, with left-wing populisms much more likely to articulate an inclusive conception of the people, while their right-wing counterparts have drawn on exclusivist, ethno-racial and nativist understandings of who constitutes the people (and who doesn’t). As I discuss in the conclusion, this makes sense, as populism depends on, and is inextricable from, the workings of the party system. And from the New Deal forward, non-whites would be incorporated into America’s left(er) party.

In the 1960s, the economy was booming and inequality was low. But tumultuous cultural change and disorderly social movements throughout the country, the destruction of Jim Crow in the South and the heightened political salience of racial conflict in non-southern cities over busing, fair employment, and fair housing all helped advance the closest predecessor to Donald Trump, Alabama Governor George Wallace. Wallace’s racist, anti-elitist populism gained force as he stormed across the country. Marveling at his growing support, especially in the Midwest, he declared, “The Whole United States is Southern!” Wallace described the people in terms of their work: “the bus driver, the truck driver, the beautician, the fireman, the policeman, and the steelworker, the plumber, and the communications worker, and the oil worker and the little businessman.” Wallace returned to a theme of the Populists, in which state officials were included as enemies of the people (“unelected judges,” “pointy-headed intellectuals,” “sissy-bitches welfare people,” etc.).³⁰ Nixon, whose 1968 presidential bid and (for a while) his 1972 reelection effort were threatened greatly by Wallace’s popularity, beat a steady retreat from the racial liberalism of his 1960 bid as he brought into focus and claimed to defend the country’s “silent majority.”³¹ Later, Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan, while not fully embodying populist styles and messages, clearly drew on populisms of different stripes. Reagan at times defined the people as “the taxpayers” overburdened by the growing rolls of welfare cheats.³² While Pat Buchanan, Bill Clinton, and George W. Bush drew on populist tropes in their speeches, substantial populist movements would have to wait for the Great Recession.

Our current populist era began in 2008, and has been rooted in reactions to the financial crisis and recession, the election of Obama, Obama’s economic policymaking, and—increasingly—growing public recognition of and anger about economic inequality.³³ In many respects, Alaska Governor Sarah Palin inaugurated the period. She quickly defined a “rill,” Christian America existing only between the two coasts, and denounced the snobbery of bicoastal elites and their tight embrace of secular values and higher education (a line echoed by Rick Santorum),

and their fealty to a false meritocracy based on gatekeeping professions and the cloying deference to technocratic expertise.

Quickly thereafter, the Tea Party movement erupted. Before being cannibalized by the Republican party and its affiliated, elite-driven organizations (including FreedomWorks and the Koch brothers' Americans for Prosperity), the Tea Party was an incredibly impressive movement of the grass roots numbering some 800 local chapters. While partaking of much of Palin's populist messaging, Tea Partiers claimed that the runaway growth of the federal government and public debt threatened the republic. However, a variety of evidence, from interviews to ethnography to survey data, quickly made clear the central role of nativism, perceptions of illegal immigration, and racial resentment in fueling the movement.³⁴ For Joseph Lowndes, the Tea Party brought together "the populism of the Silent Majority with an emergent libertarianism. Producerist language of independence and self-reliance was expressed through libertarian forms of antistatism in an exaggerated form of GOP populism – one that at once fiercely defended Medicare and Social Security as earned entitlements while opposing nearly all other forms of social provision."³⁵ While Trump's candidacy and populism differ in many respects from the Tea Party, there are of course family resemblances as well.

But before Trump's 2016 bid there was also Occupy Wall Street. Starting in New York's Wall Street district, movement drew self-consciously on older populist forms, and spread meetings and protests in most cities across the country. Not only was its discourse about the financial crisis and the Great Recession populist, but it clearly enunciated claims about the breakdown of democratic representation in American politics—a discourse that was echoed by its own decision-making structures.³⁶ Besides popularizing a rhetoric of "the 99%" versus "the 1%," and helping to put economic inequality (slightly) on the 2012 presidential campaign agenda, Occupy Wall Street and its success helped convince Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders to run for president. While impressive in some respects, Occupy was much, much smaller than the Tea Party, and the Tea Party dwarfed Occupy in its importance for major party competition. While often seeking to remain outside and independent of Republican channels, local Tea Party branches organized impressively on behalf of their own candidates for state legislative and congressional offices, as well as for more radical Republican primary candidates—and, more to the point for congressional incumbents, against those they viewed as insufficiently principled.³⁷

The 2016 Election

The election campaign was clearly marked by, and propelled forward, our current populist moment. However, both the campaign and the election outcome were marked by a good deal of continuity with the past. The election did not feature a massive mobilization of previously alienated Americans into politics, or a substantial movement of voters between parties. Nor are there signs as yet that the campaign has led to the construction of a new political movement or even a coherent party faction likely to endure.

Bernie Sanders' candidacy was clearly populist as I have defined the term. Indeed, his rhetoric was often indistinguishable from the Populists *and* from Trump. Announcing his campaign, Sanders said, "Today, we stand here and say loudly and clearly that enough is enough. This great nation and its government belong to all of the people, and not to a handful of billionaires, their Super-PACs, and their lobbyists."³⁸ While his was a "consistently progressive" populism, he spent much more time defining a "them"—Wall Street, billionaires, and their political handmaidens. While appealing to liberals, college students unexcited about college debt, supporters of Occupy Wall Street, and others, his conception of the people was more vague than that of those harming the people.³⁹ Sanders' primary supporters had on average lower incomes than Trump's.⁴⁰

Like populists of all eras, he succeeded in altering the agenda of Secretary Clinton and of the Democratic Party more broadly, especially with respect to what had seemed to be highly quixotic demands for a \$15/hour livable wage. But while he spoke often, and repetitively, of Wall Street, his policy demands regarding financial regulation were not much more involved than fully implementing Dodd-Frank. Somewhat bolder were his calls for a comprehensive welfare state, and his attack on the three-decade-long bipartisan consensus on trade policy

(the latter of which helped tie Clinton in knots regarding the Trans-Pacific Partnership). While convenient more than principled, Sanders' critique of what seemed to be the Democratic National Committee's support of Clinton's candidacy recalled many previous populist movements' depiction of democratic institutions that have been hijacked by elites. His remarks on campaign finance, and his reliance on very small donations, reinforced this common populist trope.⁴¹

As early as 2011, at a media appearance in which he discussed opposing Obama in 2012, Trump began his "birtherism" campaign. Combining racism and nativism with a wild charge that the current administration was illegitimate, Trump claimed more broadly that U.S. politics was broken, that the people deserved better, and that he could fix it. Trump's 2016 campaign, beginning with and imbued throughout with nativist nationalism, was in most respects textbook populist.⁴² At a campaign rally in May, Trump announced that "the only important thing is the unification of the people— because the other people don't mean anything."⁴³ As Kazin points out, though, Trump's description of the people's enemies—Mexican immigrants, their drug gangs, corrupt politicians, both parties' political establishments, etc.--is much clearer and rousing than his account of "the people."⁴⁴ Echoing Sanders, he argued that "the whole economy is rigged by big donors who want to keep down wages, by big business who want to leave the USA, fire our workers, and sell their products back into the U. S....It's rigged against you, the American people."⁴⁵ His overt nostalgia for an America led by its manufacturing sector was crafted to appeal to communities devastated by what economists call the NAFTA and China trade shocks.⁴⁶

From the beginning of his candidacy, Trump made virtues out of his career in business (making "the best deals"); his lack of a political career, which left him unsullied by the failures of the establishment; and by his knowledge of how this establishment operated. Trump decried the corruption and incompetence of "the establishment, the media, the special interest, the lobbyists, the donors" and claimed that he "alone can fix it." "I have joined the political arena so that the powerful can no longer beat up on people that cannot defend themselves. Nobody knows the system better than me, which is why I alone can fix it. I have seen firsthand how the system is rigged against our citizens, just like it was rigged against Bernie Sanders – he never had a chance."⁴⁷

The Republican Primaries

Trump's triumph in the Republican primaries is probably more surprising than his victory in the general election. Why did he succeed? Enormous name recognition and what would end up being billions of dollars of free media on cable television surely helped. More to the point, though, Trump exploited "a massive . . . chasm between the respective priorities and agendas of the parties' policy demanders and rank-and-file GOP voters."⁴⁸ Running against his (recently adopted) own party was effective in part because of this growing disconnect between party elites (including his nomination competitors) and primary voters. Doesn't this fact suggest that a right-wing populism can help explain growing splits within the Republican party? Sure. Still, as Julia Azari noted presciently back in 2015, it is worth pointing out that two of the three historical parallels to the Republicans' 2016 split—1912 and Teddy Roosevelt, and 1948 and the Dixiecrats—were *not* populist episodes.⁴⁹ Of course, the third parallel, 1968, certainly was such an episode, as it featured both the formidable campaign of George Wallace (which siphoned off supporters from both parties), as well as the intra-Democratic party split between Eugene McCarthy/New Left and machine pols.

Finally, as Azari points out, the 2016 Republican nomination battle *didn't* feature an establishment candidate against an insurgent. Indeed, it is easier to mischaracterize Trump's nomination as built on a populist wave than one enabled by a shocking failure of elite coordination. While united in their opposition to Trump, the vast majority of Republican donors, resource-holders, and organized interests failed to coordinate behind one of the dozen non-Trump candidates. While timidity at being attacked by Trump may explain their failure to endorse a candidate, their stubborn hope that their favored candidate could win kept many from accepting a second-choice until it was too late.

Republican elite coordination, Azari argues, was due in substantial part to the fact that “bargaining [within the party had] broken down.” And this in turn has been caused by the fact that, “in many cases, no one has anything that anyone else wants.” Whereas the “UCLA” school of parties sees networks of intense policy demanders and organized interests associated with each party “deciding” on its nominees, 2016 suggests that “voters do not have to listen to elite signals. Elites do not have to listen to each other's signals. Parties have been stripped (in part by their own actions) of their ability to coordinate and bargain” through credible commitments to deliver votes and the ability to offer coveted posts in government.⁵⁰ Trump effectively exploited his own very unique resources (most importantly his name recognition and free media) and existing fractures within the Republican establishment *and* between party elites and the primary electorate.

The General Election

As crazy as it was as a lived experience, the general election exhibited in retrospect a great deal of continuity with past elections. Overall turnout did not exhibit a groundswell of populist mobilization. It was three percent lower than 2008, and barely higher than 2012. Millions of the so-called “missing white voters” whose absence hurt Romney in 2012 again failed to materialize. While third parties did better than usual, almost 95% of the electorate once again backed the two major parties. Additionally, the election resembled a typical pattern of retrospective voting. Compared to post-World War II presidential elections, the incumbent party’s share of the two-party vote was exactly in line with what we would expect given GDP growth over the preceding year.⁵¹

By the morning after the election, a narrative took hold that Trump was swept into power by a wave of new, or newly Republican, white working-class voters. Given the anti-elite and often working-class nature of populism, this narrative has been used by anti-populists to blame populism as the culprit in America’s current crisis. There seems at first glance to be support for this view. The usual partisan difference in vote choice by income was much smaller than usual; Hillary Clinton won almost one-half of voters with incomes above \$100,000. However, two-thirds of Trump voters had above-median incomes.⁵²

Some commentators argue that class is best apprehended by educational attainment, not income. More college-educated whites backed Trump than Clinton, but only by a four-point margin (ten points smaller than Romney’s margin over Obama. And Trump’s “advantage among non-college educated whites was nearly 40 points.”⁵³ Moreover, it is true that 69% of Trump voters lacked college degrees. Still, sixty percent of *these* non-college whites had above-median incomes. In fact, twenty percent came from households with incomes higher than \$100,000. Non-college whites with below-median household incomes made up just *one-quarter of his supporters*—hardly the leader of a massive new populist coalition.⁵⁴

What about the role of racial resentment in convincing whites to vote Republican? Like income and education, the place of racism in the 2016 election is also not evidence of a new, dangerous populism. Majorities of both white women and white men have backed Republican presidential candidates in every election since 1968. In this respect, the election was a typical one. Gelman and Azari note that “men and women alike voted along party lines, and a majority of white women voted for Trump, but the gender gap in 2016 was about twice as high as in recent years.”⁵⁵ Racist and sexist attitudes seem to account for about two-thirds of the gap in vote choice between college- and non-college whites in 2016.⁵⁶

Election postmortems, especially among Democrats and the left, have featured angry debates about whether “economics” or “culture” (and in particular populist support for Trump’s nativist and racist campaign) better explain his white support. Median household income of Trump voters in the primaries was \$72,000, well above the white median household income of about \$60,000.⁵⁷ Pippa Norris and Ron Inglehart cite this as evidence that economic anxiety was unrelated to Trump’s victory, and that culture—and probably racism and nativism—drove Trump support. Still, Trump voters in the general election—even higher-income voters—were more likely than their same-income counterparts to live in areas hard-hit by trade shocks and other economic dislocations.⁵⁸

This is not evidence that Trump's populist campaign appeals did not influence the election. But it does suggest that the election was less different than those of the preceding four decades than we might like to believe. Moreover, populist elections often feature large numbers of office-seekers at all levels of the polity framing their own campaigns as part of a populist wave. Trump's candidacy and election are notable for the incredibly paltry number of endorsements he received *either* from incumbent Republicans in Congress or in state legislatures. Trump made this less likely by not offering a stable, coherent agenda that others might sign onto. Likewise, neither campaign has left standing organizations that others allied with their cause might seize upon and develop. As discussed in the conclusion, this is characteristic of America's "hollow parties." More to the point, it also points to the fact that this remarkable, populist election may not mark a rupture with the recent past.

(How) Does the Trump Administration Threaten Democracy?

As noted above, populist governments, including those in consolidated democracy, are considered very dangerous for democracy. In less than a year, the Trump administration—both through the president's own speech acts and the unilateral action of the executive branch--has convinced many that these dangers are very real.

Most prominent, of course, has been Trump's endless talking and tweeting, which feature one norm violation after another. He has attacked the media as the people's "enemy," the opposition party, naysayers in his own party, the independent judiciary (and its "so-called judges"⁵⁹), and even the legitimacy of his own election victory!⁶⁰ To many, more serious was his firing of FBI Director James Comey, considered a major violation of presidential norms and a threat even to the rule of law.⁶¹ Were he to fire Special Counsel Robert Mueller, congressional Republicans as well as Democrats suggest that the U.S. would face a constitutional crisis.

The reaction to Comey's firing seems a bit overwrought. This is thought to have violated a hallowed norm that presidents don't fire FBI directors. However, this is a post-Watergate reform. Would today's commentators look at pre-Watergate America and think that the rule of law was irreparably damaged by the absence of this norm? I doubt it. Ironically, though, they should—the state of affairs for three decades before Watergate was that presidents shouldn't fire FBI Director Edgar J. Hoover, but because he could ruin them politically in retribution, not because it would be bad for democracy to fire him. Indeed, U.S. democracy during what commentators today consider a golden age of pre-polarized and pre-populist U.S. politics was in fact much *less* democratic than today. Hoover's invulnerability enabled him to rule a federal police apparatus with relative impunity. Between 1956 and 1971, through more than 2,000 operations, the FBI sought to discredit and disrupt black protest organizations, antiwar groups, and other perceived threats.⁶² Congressional investigations into alleged subversion further threatened civil rights and liberties. And from the time the FBI, CIA, and the National Security Agency were created, presidents used them to monitor White House staff, journalists, political opponents, and activists, and to launch "red" and "lavender" scares.⁶³ Thus, the "before" picture of U.S. democracy seems less rosy than the nostalgia-tinged worries about norm violations suggest. More generally, I wonder how we would know if a "norms" claim like this were wrong. This is especially a problem given how easy it is to invoke weakening norms.

But the Trump bill of attainders continues. The administration's unconcern with the appearance (and substance) of financial conflicts of interest, venality, and the Emoluments Clause is flagged as a constitutional violation. Congress' own inattention to these matters seems to many to be a further blow to the rule of law, as well as to separation of powers and Congress' fulfillment of its own oversight duties.

In periods of high partisan polarization, dangers of executive overreach increase. Frustrated by their inability to accomplish their legislative goals by the gridlock that accompanies this polarization, presidents (as evidenced by Bush 43 and Obama) are motivated to undertake a range of unilateral actions that push constitutional limits. These include executive orders, signing statements, executive agreements, and so on.⁶⁴ Even worse, the very polarization that obstructs presidents' legislative agendas also inhibits Congress' ability to act unitarily in response to this executive action, leaving the president institutionally stronger and the branch of the people even weaker. For a president whose populist rhetoric has heightened his supporters' frustrations with separation of powers, the

dangers seem even higher. All this said, the actual damage inflicted by Trump's populist administration thus far seems scant. His partial Muslim travel ban, and even his ban on transgendered military personnel, have been blocked by federal judges. His firing of Comey led to the installation of Special Counsel Mueller. While it is of course possible that Trump's unilateral actions could begin to succeed, few of these actually imperil democracy or portend democratic backsliding.

One of the most concerning actions of the Trump administration is the Voter Fraud Commission. Trump's Commission, which is not faring well at present,⁶⁵ seems to be a way for him to save face after his allegations that he actually won the popular vote.⁶⁶ Whatever his motives, while voter fraud is not a problem, but efforts to make it more difficult for some voters—those likely to back Democratic candidates—is. Trump's Commission may recommend federal legislation or push for model state-level legislation to, as southern Democrats said in the 1940s after the abolition of the all-white Democratic primary, “tighten the belt of democracy.”

Again, though, this move cannot be laid at the feet of an insurgent populism in the U.S. Trump is late—quite late—to the suffrage restriction party, which has been underway in state legislatures—especially those recently taken over by Republican majorities—for the past fifteen years.⁶⁷ It has been further empowered by the Supreme Court's *Shelby County* decision (2013), which effectively ended Section 5 of the Voting Rights Act (the radical “pre-clearance” provision that gave many southern states the benefit of the guilt when they proposed to change their election laws). While there is—as now on most every issue—partisan differences among voters on whether voter fraud is a problem and whether voter identification and other laws are a solution, there is no sense in which there has been a populist demand by the Republican base for such restrictions. This was not an issue discussed by the Tea Party, despite the fact it was already well underway in the states by 2010.⁶⁸ Rather, as with Republicans' institutional changes in Congress, this is very much a strategic, partisan initiative begun by Republican officeholders and elite resource-holders at the state level. Trump's actions with respect to voting rights must be condemned; they are bad for democracy. But they are not at all rooted in populism.

How populist in style or substance has his administration been? Judging by most of his agenda and by his appointments, his “base” cannot feel fulfilled. Much of his agenda, as discussed below, is that of congressional Republicans, and lacks majority support—on many issues, even among Republicans. Many cabinet and sub-cabinet appointments seem actually ironic. More than half of 341 Senate-confirmable nominations have a notable conflict of interest—most of these individuals have worked in, or even captained, the industries they are meant to regulate.⁶⁹ In this sense, they are far from a set of ‘populist’ picks meant to curry favor with the commoners. Moreover, these officials' administrative and regulatory agendas—what Bannon trumpeted as the “deconstruction of the administrative state”—are in most every case opposed by majorities of the public.⁷⁰ Goldman Sachs alumni occupy many important policymaking positions (Steven Mnuchin, Gary Cohn, and formerly Stephen Bannon, to name just three). There have been, of course, some screwballs, and it could perhaps be argued that these are “populist” choices—such as Dr. Sebastian Gorka, backer of the Hungarian Arrow Cross. But there is no evidence that these are highly influential in White House decision-making. Of the top-echelon advisers advocating a populist-authoritarian-nationalist agenda, Stephen Bannon and General Mike Flynn (of norm-destroying “Lock her up!” fame⁷¹) have been ousted, and only speechwriter Stephen Miller remains.

Additionally, it's worth noting that the Trump administration is certainly not popular. Gallup puts Trump's job approval this week at thirty-five percent; and he hasn't reached forty percent for consecutive days since March. What is especially surprising about these numbers is that the U.S. is (mainly) at peace, and the economy seems to be doing relatively well. Presidents amidst these structural conditions are much more popular than Trump is now. Where will his approval be if/when the economy takes a downturn?

After winning over some two-thirds of non-college whites in the 2016 election, his approval among them is now below fifty percent in recent NBC/*WSJ* and Fox News polls. And Mueller's investigation of Russian collusion in the election, Trump's financial dealings, and much else besides has, at least for the moment, majority public support—including about forty percent of Republican identifiers.⁷²

New York Magazine claims Trump will face a contested 2020 primary. And Governor Chris Christie (R-NJ) thinks Trump may not run again.⁷³ Why does Trump's popularity matter? Certainly, more popular populist governments will more effectively pursue a populist agenda than less popular ones. And, as Richard Neustadt made clear long ago, modern presidents' chance of legislative success is based primarily on their popularity. Of course, it could be that Trump is sufficiently popular among *some* Republicans—maybe the populist rank-and-file—that Republicans in Congress have been cowed into enacting his agenda. If Congress signaled a willingness to enact Trump's most cherished policy initiatives, this would perhaps be a warning sign that the country's most important political institution, and with it America's system of separate institutions sharing power, was in danger of being cannibalized by populism. I discuss that below.

Trump and Congressional Republicans

Congressional Republicans are entering the Trump era with “the most ambitious conservative policy agenda since the 1920s.”⁷⁴ That said, none of it has passed. As with Trump's populist campaign promises (regarding a travel ban, the wall, etc.), most of the Republican agenda lacks majority support. This includes, of course, the proposed repeal of the Affordable Care Act and much of the tax “reform” agenda. (Gallup reports that more than six in ten Americans consider their own income taxes to be fair, a twenty-year high.⁷⁵)

As Matt Glassman notes, Congress has made clear its disdain for Trumps' own agenda. It has not seriously considered a statutory travel ban on immigrants from Muslim-majority countries, and has taken little action on the construction of a border wall or Trump's much-touted infrastructure initiative. Glassman writes, congressional Republicans are “undermining his legislative agenda while...pretending to be endorsing it, but substituting their own, and he goes along.” Indeed, one of the only major pieces of legislation that has been signed into law was something Trump greatly opposed: renewed sanctions against Russia. What may seem like Trump's dominance of congressional Republicans is, Glassman argues, often the reverse: “on every issue [the] GOP cares about, [Trump has] come along like a puppy dog: health care, taxes, judges.”⁷⁶ His central failure of the current year has been his inability to shepherd unpopular legislation through Congress, most importantly on health care. As his popularity remains low, we shouldn't expect him to improve in this regard.

It is also worth reiterating that the congressional Republican agenda, such that there is one, is *not* responding to the party's rank-and-file. As Danny Schlozman and Sam Rosenfeld note, “at the programmatic core of the modern GOP's agenda, interest groups and donors have fought for upwardly redistributive economic policies” opposed by most Republican voters. Increasingly in conflict with this agenda is that of “populist campaigns of position-taking, symbolic conflict, and mobilized resentment . . . merge[d] seamlessly with” right-wing media. This conflict further divides Republican elites and voters. To fend off possible primary challenges—whether those fueled by Trump or by Stephen Bannon—many Republican incumbents seem to have decided to “chang[e] their tone and profess loyalty to Trump.”⁷⁷ Still, congressional Republicans have not responded to conflict with their own base or with Trump by adjusting their anti-statist agenda *or* by taking steps to implement Trump's.⁷⁸

Finally, we of course do not yet know how this majority-Rep Congress might respond to overt “high crimes and misdemeanors,” or current (or future) investigations into the Trump administration by the Special Counsel or others. While Senate committees seem to be fulfilling their oversight functions, House Republicans--in particular Cong. Devin Nunes (R-CA), chair of the House Intelligence Committee—has obstructed the Special Counsel, as well as Democrats' efforts on the committee. More worrisome, it is doubtful that Nunes' behavior has not been approved of by House Speaker Paul Ryan. It is early days.

Congress and Institutional Damage

Congress *is* the site of the erosion of norms and internal rules and procedures in ways that are inimical to a well-functioning democracy. However, it is difficult (at least for me) to lay these at the door of Trump or of populism.

This erosion well predates Trump, and it does not seem at all responsive to populist sentiments in the country at large or the Republican “base.” This erosion includes a vast increase in the deployment of the filibuster, delay tactics, the abandonment of regular parliamentary order (as decried by Senator John McCain recently), the use of hearings, allowing for minority-party amendments to legislation, and much more.

Additionally, congressional Republicans during the Obama era refused to staff the upper echelons of the executive branch (such as a director of the newly created Consumer Finance Protection Bureau), seeming to invest in the state apparatus’ incapacity. Mann and Ornstein call this new trend “the new nullification,” in which Republicans block nominations in order “to prevent the legitimate implementation of laws on the books.”⁷⁹ During the Obama administration and anticipating the Clinton administration, John McCain and other leading Republicans promised that they would oppose *any* Supreme Court nominee Clinton sent to the Senate.⁸⁰

Again, these changes are not attributable to populism, but to partisan ideological polarization and intense, and balanced, partisan competition.⁸¹ And it is also rooted in the Republican party’s radicalization since the early 1990s. The Party, Thomas Mann and Norman Ornstein argue, is an “insurgent outlier—ideologically extreme, contemptuous of the inherited social and economic policy regime; scornful of compromise; unpersuaded by conventional understanding of facts, evidence, and science; and dismissive of the legitimacy of its political opposition.”⁸² Is this radicalization itself a product of a populist groundswell? Perhaps, but were this the case, Republicans would probably feel the need to offer a policy agenda in keeping with Republican voters’ preferences. In any case, understanding the radicalization of the Republican Party, and the Party’s future, remains the key to understanding the deficits of U.S. democracy.

If Populism Doesn’t Endanger U.S. Democracy, What Does?

Here I want to point to two longer-term trends—congressional polarization and negative partisanship—that are in my view responsible for the current threats to U.S. democracy. Both have emerged together, and both have at their roots racial conflict.

America has been a democracy for less than a half-century. Only in the early 1970s—once the civil rights movement and the federal government managed to stamp out authoritarianism in southern states—did the country truly become democratic. Beginning in the 1890s, after the Civil War and the failure of Reconstruction, Democrats in each of the eleven states of the old Confederacy built single-party, authoritarian enclaves. They did so because the failure of Reconstruction, while destroying biracial Republican majorities across the region, left behind parties, movements, and voters opposed to the political-economic project of conservative Democrats. Having wrested some room to maneuver from the Supreme Court, the executive branch, and their national party, these Democrats disenfranchised blacks and many poorer white voters, repressed opposition parties, and imposed racially separate—and significantly unfree—civic spheres. Their goal was to ensure cheap agricultural labor and white supremacy, and they used state-sponsored violence and severe legislative malapportionment favoring large landowners to achieve it. For half a century, southern states capitalized on their influence in Congress and the national Democratic party to shield themselves from outside reform efforts.

But in 1944, the U.S. Supreme Court struck down the region’s “white-only” Democratic primaries. Beginning with that decision, black insurgents inspired, compelled, and capitalized on federal judicial rulings, and congressional legislation to dismantle disfranchisement, segregation, and state repression. The transition ended as it began—with important restrictions on the activities of southern ruling parties. Party reforms reversed the one-and-a-half-century-long tradition of autonomous state parties, and emanated not from the central state but from the national party itself. The Democrats’ McGovern-Fraser reforms mandated the full incorporation of non-white Democrats into the national party and thus destroyed the last vestige of enclave rule. They also unintentionally launched presidential primaries, without which party elites would still “decide” (and would’ve likely not decided on Trump). By the early 1970s, the southern authoritarians had been defeated; today, some 6,000 black elected officials serve southern constituencies.

Polarization

Scholars have long identified political polarization as a central factor behind democratic breakdown. Extreme polarization leads politicians and their supporters to view their rivals as illegitimate and, in some cases, as an existential threat. The result is often an erosion of democratic norms, as politicians become willing to break the rules, cooperate with anti-democratic extremists, and even tolerate or encourage violence in order to keep their rivals out of power. As Juan Linz warned, few democracies can survive for long under such conditions.⁸³

“The roots of the modern trend to greater polarization can in part be found in the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the 1965 Voting Rights Act.”⁸⁴ With the passage of the Civil Rights and Voting Rights Acts in the 1960s, the Democratic Party (long the guarantor of white supremacy) and the Republican Party (“the party of Lincoln”) quickly finished a gradual realignment of national politics along racial lines. Southern blacks entered the electorate as Democrats, and southern whites became increasingly Republican. Many white southerners voted Republican for class reasons: the region’s incomes were rising, thus enhancing the appeal of the G.O.P.’s economic policies. But many chose the Republicans for their conservative stances on racial issues and “law-and-order” appeals.

This realignment helped change the composition of Congress. In the ensuing decades, the South transformed from a one-party Democratic region into a Republican-dominated one. Whereas it once sent moderate Democrats to Congress, today it elects either black or Hispanic liberal Democrats or, much more commonly, very conservative white Republicans. The ideological polarization of Congress has other sources, to be sure, but the democratization of the South is a critical one. The result has been two much more ideologically homogenous—and disciplined—parties. Gone are cross-cutting issues that temper partisan conflict, along with moderate members within each party critical for crafting legislative deals.

Partisan polarization has been reinforced by the weakening of the establishment news media, a critical component of democratic accountability. Until the 1990s, most Americans got their news from a limited number of trusted television networks. Politicians themselves relied heavily on the press to get the public’s attention, and so they could ill afford to alienate journalists. But over the last 30 years, media has become increasingly polarized. The rise of Fox News kicked off the era of partisan television news channels. The Internet, meanwhile, has made it easier for people to seek out news that confirms existing beliefs and, along with changing corporate ownership patterns, has led to the widespread closure of local and regional newspapers. Today, Americans consume news from starkly different sources, and the traditional media’s leverage has declined precipitously. As a result, they have grown more receptive to fake news and more trusting of party spokespeople. When events are filtered through a fragmented and polarized media, voters view almost all political events through purely partisan lenses. In the current environment, few politicians or institutions can lead bipartisan challenges to autocratic behavior. Media distrust fuels partisan voting and negative partisanship by leading the distrustful to rely more on partisan attachments than campaign news.⁸⁵ It also helps polarize perceptions of the regime.⁸⁶ In this situation, state officials’ actions suffer from a much larger legitimacy deficit, as confirmed by a recent study that found that, in 2010, only ten percent of Republican supporters trusted the federal government most of the time or almost always.⁸⁷

The growing gap between the richest Americans and the non-rich has also accentuated polarization. U.S. income inequality has reached its highest level since the onset of the Great Depression, and it closely tracks the ideological polarization in Congress. The explosion of top incomes spurs support for conservative economic policies, especially on taxes, and has moved Republican legislators to the right both in state legislatures and in Congress.⁸⁸ Growing inequality has also led to growing differences in voting by class, and, some argue, decreasing policy responsiveness to the non-rich.⁸⁹ The richest ten-thousandth of American households now makes more than forty percent of congressional campaign contributions.⁹⁰ Economic shocks further partisan polarization. Across congressional districts, the negative (and persistent) impact on local employment of the boom

in Chinese exports has exacerbated political polarization. Those districts exposed to this shock moved further to the right *or* the left, depending on which way they were leaning in the first place. Elected Republicans became more conservative, while elected Democrats became more liberal.⁹¹

Democratic policy elites have sought to sideline questions of political economy, especially when policy research and discourse clash with the interests of donors. This was captured well by the controversy over the “Open Markets” initiative that Google seems to have successfully kicked out of the New America Foundation. (It’s perhaps telling that the program considered too leftist for New America was called Open Markets).⁹² More recently, the stagnation of working-class wages has triggered a right-wing populist reaction with racial overtones, especially, as Kathy Cramer has shown, among rural whites, who have directed their anger at liberal spending programs devoted to urban minority populations.⁹³

Finally, growing political differences over identity have extended beyond the traditional black-white binary. Increased immigration since the 1970s has added a growing share of Americans of Hispanic and Asian descent to the electorate, largely as Democrats, further hardening partisan polarization among whites and non-whites. These trends have exacerbated anxieties among many white voters about losing their numerical, cultural, and political preeminence. Similar fears among the white majority were of course prevalent in the South before it democratized. In many respects, then, the South’s racial politics have gone national.⁹⁴ Populist movements can clearly worsen these dynamics. As Gelman and Azari write, “a significant segment of the electorate, maybe 20 percent, have always been waiting for its authoritarian champion on what we now call the alt-right dimension.”⁹⁵

Negative Partisanship

The triumph of democracy in the South not only polarized Congress ideologically; it also helped polarized voters along party lines. From the late 1960s, Republican and Democratic candidates began staking out increasingly distinctive views on public policy, first on racial matters (such as affirmative action and anti-poverty policies) and then on a wider range of issues. As Michael Tesler argues, campaign appeals heighten the association in voters’ minds between government policies and the social groups that might benefit from them, especially African Americans. Over time, white voters’ racial attitudes increasingly shape their views about public policy, even issues that seem unrelated to race, such as health care, Social Security, and taxes.⁹⁶

Taking their cues from polarized party leaders, voters are increasingly well-sorted into the ideologically “correct” party: few center-left Republican or center-right Democratic voters remain. The racial difference in partisan attachment is the largest in the six-decade history of the American National Election Study.⁹⁷ This racial polarization in voting is not limited to presidential elections. In 2014, 62% of whites backed Republican congressional candidates. In effect, Trump successfully exploited an emerging trend: a growing share of whites expressing a strong “in-group identity” that has been hand in hand with a corrosion of the “norm of racial equality,” which punished politicians for delivering racially explicit campaign appeals.⁹⁸ And non-college whites most likely not to be bothered by such appeals.⁹⁹

Although only a small share of the American electorate is highly ideological (unlike their representatives in Congress), voters now exhibit heightened animosity toward politicians and voters of the other party—what Alan Abramowitz and Steven Webster call “negative partisanship.”¹⁰⁰

In her memo, Julia R. Azari notes (pg. 1) that “the populist label functions as a way of concealing the white ethno nationalism and historically anchored racism that also undeniably contributed to Trump’s appeal.” She is right. Indeed, the unhelpful notion of “backlash,” whether referring to the period since the late 1960s, or to Trump voters’ disdain for “multiculturalism,” greatly underestimates the degree to which the politics of racial division is a fifteen-round heavyweight fight marked more by continuity than normal operation with occasional breakdowns.¹⁰¹ Continuity, not a discontinuity driven by the most recent populist moment, is most responsible for the dangers the U.S. now faces.

CONCLUSION

At its best, anti-populism gives us a sense of what to watch for during our “chronic, rolling crisis in governance.”¹⁰² The Cornell working group’s paper rightly notes that, in consolidated democracies, it is the combination of authoritarian populism and hyperpolarization that threatens democracy.¹⁰³ Still, I think the evidence as of this writing sides more with Sheri Berman’s point that populism is a “a symptom rather than a cause” of what ails us.

At its worst, anti-populism seems to justify an unconcern with popular participation in politics. Worrying so much about popular sovereignty that it can be safely ignored simply poses different risks for democracy. Our current problems, as Schlozman and Rosenfeld write, are rooted in failures of the two major parties to effectively respond to economic and cultural trends, to effectively mobilize publics, and to effectively aggregate and channel popular preferences. Massively important in structuring vote choice, and in structuring political conflict—and often dysfunction—in political institutions in Washington and across the states, parties “seem inadequate to the tasks before them—of aggregating and integrating preferences and actors into ordered conflict, of mobilizing participation and linking the governed with the government.” The parties also fail programmatically in a way that leaves the door open to symbolic and inter-group conflict. As they write, “our polarized era features a grand partisan battle over public purposes from which the parties themselves have receded.” Perhaps they are right that national party reform and centralization “hollowed out the very organizations...that did the parties’ work on the ground.”¹⁰⁴ And the major parties still have not pivoted to address, substantively or stylistically, working-class income stagnation and collapse in wealth after financial crisis—a collapse that leaves working poor and working-class much, much worse off than in early 1980s.¹⁰⁵ There are no easy solutions here; however, solutions to U.S. democracy must be rooted in building anew our parties, not in bemoaning popular participation in politics.

¹ This memo builds on and steals from Robert Mickey, Steven Levitsky, and Lucan Way, “Is America Still Safe for Democracy? Why the United States Is in Danger of Backsliding,” *Foreign Affairs* 96 (May/June 2017), 20-29.

² American Psychological Association, *Stress in America Survey* (Nov. 1, 2017), <http://www.apa.org/news/press/releases/2017/11/lowest-point.aspx>.

³ *Democracy for Realists: Why Elections Do Not Produce Responsive Government* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016).

⁴ One attempt to enumerate populism’s virtues is Phillippe C. Schmitter in “A Balance Sheet of the Vices and Virtues of ‘Populisms,’” European University Institute Working Paper (2006). A more historical exercise limited to the U.S. is Ronald P. Formisano, *For the People: American Populist Movements from the Revolution to the 1850s* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2008). Formisano concludes that populist movements have enriched American democracy more than they’ve endangered it.

⁵ Jan-Werner Muller, *What Is Populism?* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016). See also Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, *Populism: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017); Noam Gidron and Bart Bonikowski, “Varieties of Populism: Literature Review and Research Agenda,” Weatherhead Center Working Paper 13-0004 (Harvard University, 2013).

⁶ Benjamin Moffitt, *The Global Rise of Populism: Performance, Political Style, and Representation* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016), 57-63.

⁷ Bart Bonikowski and Noam Gidron, “Multiple Traditions in Populism Research: Toward a Theoretical Synthesis,” *Comparative Politics Newsletter* 26 (2016), 7.

⁸ Matthew Motta, “The Dynamics and Political Implications of Anti-Intellectualism in the United States,” *American Politics Research* (published online July 11, 2017).

⁹ Michael Kazin, *The Populist Persuasion: An American History* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998); John B. Judis, *The Populist Explosion: How the Great Recession Transformed American and European Politics* (New York: Columbia Global Reports, 2016).

¹⁰ Bart Bonikowski and Noam Gidron, “The Populist Style in American Politics: Presidential Campaign Discourse, 1952–

1996,” *Social Forces* 94 (2016), 1593-1621.

¹¹ Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, “Populism and (Liberal) Democracy: A Framework for Analysis,” in Mudde and Kaltwasser, eds., *Populism in Europe and the Americas: Threat or Corrective for Democracy?* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 16.

¹² Kenneth M. Roberts, “Populism as Epithet and Identity: The Use and Misuse of a Contested Concept,” *Comparative Politics Newsletter* 26 (2016), 66.

¹³ Bart Bonikowski and Noam Gidron, “Multiple Traditions in Populism Research: Toward a Theoretical Synthesis,” *Comparative Politics Newsletter* (Fall 2016), 12.

¹⁴ Noam Gidron and Bart Bonikowski, “Varieties of Populism,” 12.

¹⁵ Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way, “Why Democracy Needs a Level Playing Field,” *Journal of Democracy* 21 (2009), 57-68.

¹⁶ Ron Formisano, “The Populist Tsunami of the Second Gilded Age,” 282; Edmund S. Morgan, *Inventing the People: The Rise of Popular Sovereignty in England and America* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1988).

¹⁷ On populist movements during the Revolutionary, Founding, and Antebellum eras, see Ronald P. Formisano, *For the People: American Populist Movements from the Revolution to the 1850s* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2008), chaps. 2-3.

¹⁸ “People’s Party Platform of 1892” (July 4), Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*, accessed online at <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=29616>.

¹⁹ Elisabeth S. Clemens, *The People’s Lobby: Organizational Innovation and the Rise of Interest Group Politics in the United States, 1890-1925* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997).

²⁰ Sanders, *Roots of Revolt: Farmers, Workers, and the American State, 1877-1917* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999); Robert C. McMath, Jr., *American Populism: A Social History* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1993).

²¹ Alexander Saxton, *The Indispensable Enemy: Labor and the Anti-Chinese Movement in California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975).

²² See Richard White’s magisterial *The Republic For Which It Stands: The United States during Reconstruction and the Gilded Age, 1865-1896* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017); Alexander Keyssar, *The Right to Vote: The Contested History of Democracy in the United States* (New York: Basic Books, 2000). J. Morgan Kousser describes in the early years of the century a “growing sense of distrust in universal suffrage.” Renowned social scientists mocked it, and a survey in 1918 revealed that “the theory that every man has a natural right to vote no longer commands the support of students of political science.” Kousser, *The Shaping of Southern Politics: Suffrage Restriction and the Establishment of the One-Party South, 1880-1910* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974), 57 and 250-257; also see Kirk Harold Porter, *A History of Suffrage in the United States* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1918).

²³ Walter Dean Burnham, “The Changing Shape of the American Political Universe,” *American Political Science Review* 59, 7-28; Burnham, *Critical Elections and the Mainsprings of American Politics* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1970).

²⁴ Michael Kazin, “Trump and American Populism,” *Foreign Affairs* 95 (2016); Janice Fine and Daniel J. Tichenor, “A Movement Wrestling: American Labor’s Enduring Struggle with Immigration 1866-2007,” *Studies in American Political Development* 23 (2009), 218-48.

²⁵ “Democratic Party Platform of 1928,” Jun. 26, 1928. *The American Presidency Project*, accessed online: <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=29594>.

²⁶ A balanced budget was also the first policy commitment made in the 1932 Democratic Party Platform. “1932 Democratic Party Platform,” June 27, 1932. <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=29595>; “1928 Democratic Party Platform,” June 26, 1928. Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*.

<http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=29594>. On contemporaneous contested interpretations of the 1932 election, see Julia R. Azari, *Delivering the People’s Message: The Changing Politics of the Presidential Mandate* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2014), 70-74.

²⁷ As Kazin points out, Coughlin helped block U.S. participation in the World Court at the Hague. Almost six decades later, Pat Robertson’s Christian Coalition in the 1990s warned against “the one-worlders of the . . . moneyed trust.” Kazin, “Trump and American Populism.”

²⁸ Franklin D. Roosevelt, “Acceptance Speech for the Renomination for the Presidency,” Jun. 27, 1936, *American Presidency Project*, accessed online at <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=15314&st>.

²⁹ Tim Barker writes that, for Alan Brinkley, Long and Coughlin “were *neither* ‘leaders of irrational, anti-democratic uprisings’ *nor* ‘vanguards of a great progressive social transformation.’ It was not that they blended the two or shifted from revolution to reaction; rather, Long and Coughlin—like the Populist Party of the 1890s—were fighting a battle on different terms, not accurately captured by contemporary notions of right and left. It was a struggle against the impersonal power of bureaucratic government and market dependence, inextricable from the direct relationship of households to agricultural

production, which according to Brinkley was ‘already lost’ by the 1930s, and therefore incapable of being meaningfully compared to the politics of the late 20th or early 21st century.” Barker, “Calmly on the Universal Bugbear” (review of John Judis’ *The Populist Explosion*), *New Left Review* 156 (2017), 105.

³⁰ Richard Pearson, “Former Ala. Gov. George C. Wallace Dies,” *Washington Post*, Sept. 14, 1998, A1; Monroe Lee Billington, *The Political South in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Charles Scribners Sons, 1975), 149. In 1972, Wallace declared, “Drugs. Riots. Bureaucrats. Contempt for the Average Citizen, taxes that crush them and leave them no freedom. We have already become a government-fearing people instead of a God-fearing people.” Michael A. Cohen, *American Maelstrom: The 1968 Election and the Politics of Division* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 340.

³¹ Rick Perlstein, *Nixonland: The Rise of a President and the Fracturing of America* (New York: Scribner, 2008).

³² As governor of Georgia (1970-74), Carter was, if anything, a technocrat; he called on the services of management consultants to shrink and reorganize the state apparatus. At this time, his Lieutenant Governor, segregationist Lester Maddox, was the more convincing populist, though Carter made sure in his 1970 gubernatorial bid that he was photographed shaking hands with George Wallace in Alabama. Gary M. Fink, *Prelude to the Presidency: The Political Character and Legislative Leadership Style of Governor Jimmy Carter* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1980). On Reagan, see Rick Perlstein, *The Invisible Bridge: The Fall of Nixon and the Rise of Reagan* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2014).

³³ Larry Bartels, *Unequal Democracy*, second revised ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016).

³⁴ Theda Skocpol and Vanessa Williamson, *The Tea Party and the Remaking of Republican Conservatism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012); Christopher S. Parker and Matt A. Barreto, *Change They Can't Believe In: The Tea Party and Reactionary Politics in America*, revised ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014).

³⁵ Joseph E. Lowndes, “White Populism and the Transformation of the Silent Majority,” *The Forum* 14 (2016), 32.

³⁶ Janet Byrne, ed., *The Occupy Handbook* (New York: Little, Brown, and Company, 2012); Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, “The Fight for ‘Real Democracy’ at the Heart of Occupy Wall Street,” *Foreign Affairs* 11 (2011), 301-20.

³⁷ Kevin Arceneaux and Stephen P. Nicholson, “Who Wants to Have a Tea Party? The Who, What, and Why of the Tea Party Movement,” *PS* (Oct. 2012), 700-710.

³⁸ Quoted in John Kenneth White, “Donald Trump and the Scourge of Populism,” *The Forum* 14 (2016), 266; John B. Judis, *The Populist Explosion* (New York: Columbia Global Reports, 2016), chap. 3.

³⁹ Ronald P. Formisano, “The Populist Tsunami of the Second Gilded Age,” *The Forum* 14 (2016), 281-294, at 282.

⁴⁰ Nate Silver, “The Mythology of Trump’s ‘Working Class’ Support,” *New York Times*, May 3, 2016.

⁴¹ Nelson Lichtenstein, “Twenty-First Century ‘Populism’: Not for the Unions and a Good Thing Too,” *The Forum* 14 (2016), 241-42.

⁴² Eric J. Oliver and Wendy M. Rahn, “Rise of the *Trumpenvolk* Populism in the 2016 Election,” *ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 667 (2016), 189–206.

⁴³ Jan Werner-Muller, *What Is Populism?* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), 22.

⁴⁴ Kazin, “Trump and American Populism.”

⁴⁵ Donald J. Trump: “Address Accepting the Presidential Nomination at the Republican National Convention in Cleveland, Ohio,” July 21, 2016. Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, The American Presidency Project. <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=117935>.

⁴⁶ Trump’s speaking style was (is) a word salad of norm violations, and he has been likened to a “strong-man” populist-authoritarian in part for his clear preference for (male) leaders who exhibit similar characteristics (from the Philippines, Turkey, Russia, and other backsliding regimes).

⁴⁷ Donald J. Trump: “Address Accepting the Presidential Nomination at the Republican National Convention in Cleveland, Ohio,” July 21, 2016. Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, The American Presidency Project. <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=117935>.

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