

2021

Populism's Historical and Contemporary Manifestations

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POPULISM'S HISTORICAL AND CONTEMPORARY MANIFESTATIONS IN AMERICAN
POLITICS

by

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A.S. Florida Southwestern State College, 2019

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Bachelor of
Political Science
in the Department of Political Science
in the College of Sciences
at the University of Central Florida
Orlando, Florida

Fall Term

2021

ABSTRACT

In the following thesis, American populism's many manifestations throughout American history as well as its current forms in contemporary politics will be analyzed mainly through the lens of Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders, who are two prominent political figures that have managed to amass a considerable degree of support. In Trump's case, his populist rhetoric and authoritarian slant has allowed him to garner enough support to ascend to the position of President of the United States of America, arguably one of the most powerful political positions on planet Earth. Current trends such as dissatisfaction amongst the voting constituencies of Democrats and Republicans, rises in authoritarian attitudes amongst voters, neoliberalism, and free trade's implications on the American worker, and more will be analyzed in order to understand the popularity of these two political figures and the populist language they employ in their policies and rhetoric.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I'd like to thank Professor Knuckey and Professor Marien for challenging me constantly, having engaging and fascinating conversations with me, broadening my perspective on a range of issues, helping me think critically in nuanced ways about my preconceived notions, and helping to improve my skills as a student and a learner.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

In 2016, Donald Trump was elected as the 45th president of the United States of America without support from the Republican establishment, which up until that point, was an almost unheard-of phenomenon in American politics. In the 2020 Democratic Primary, Bernie Sanders, a self-proclaimed Socialist, performed exceptionally well while also campaigning without support from the Democratic Establishment, which saw him as too radical to win a presidential election. Outside of policy differences, the major difference between both candidates' campaigns was that the Republican establishment was unable to stop Donald Trump's ascension to the office of President while the Democrats were able to basically handicap Sanders' campaign after Super Tuesday, and the subsequent endorsements for Joe Biden that it led to. Although there are many similarities between the two political parties, this stark disparity in the success of two popular outsiders highlights the differences between the two parties that could lead to these differing outcomes. This could possibly be attributed to a variety of factors, such as differing voting constituencies, party mechanisms, distances between outsider policy platforms and the policy platforms of the established political parties, corporatist interests, donors, differences in primary election mechanisms, etc. Why was the Republican Party so susceptible to a hostile takeover led by a populist political outsider? Is the Democratic establishment a more powerful and institutionalized faction than the Republican establishment? Is Trump's brand of authoritarian populism more appealing to a plurality of voters all over the country than Sanders's brand of populism? Is there a rise in public support for authoritarian populism that has allowed

candidates such as Trump to acquire widespread, unprecedented support? Needless to say, the parties are very different, and the successes and failures of Trump and Sanders offer an interesting insight into the fundamental differences between the Republican Party and the Democratic Party.

Many people who aren't particularly knowledgeable about or interested in contemporary American politics would struggle to find any commonalities between the two candidates. On the surface, they seem to be two polar opposites existing on the conventional left-right political spectrum. However, a more in-depth and detailed analysis will quickly reveal that both candidates have adopted the rhetoric and messaging of populism, and both candidates share a lot of common ground in their empirical analysis of the institutions and problems plaguing the American political system. Populism is a political logic that exists outside of the conventional left-right political spectrum that many use to analyze American politics (Judis, 2016). Rather than being tethered to one end of the political spectrum, populism has a chameleon-like nature that allows politicians of all political persuasions and ideologies to utilize populist messaging and rhetoric. This unique facet of populism has allowed this political logic to have been adopted by a variety of candidates and movements throughout American history, from The People's Party to Huey Long to the Tea Party, and eventually, to Donald Trump. Throughout American history, however, populist candidates and political movements would rarely garner enough support for them to ever be elected to any influential positions of power and they were regularly seen as protest candidates, but never as serious political contenders. Until recently, that is. Bernie Sanders and Donald Trump both exist and operate outside of their respective party establishments, and both are seen as alternative candidates that offer a different policy platform

and outlook than the conventional candidates that have emerged from the interior of the Democrat and Republican parties. Trump differs from many establishment Republican neocons in his condemnation of the Afghanistan and Iraq wars and his push to bring American troops back home. Sanders differs from many establishment Democrats in his “socialist” policy platform and his condemnation of the late 20th-century liberal consensus and all the problems it brought with it, such as outsourcing, global economic competition, declining wages, etc. Outside of Sanders’s endorsement of “democratic socialism”, he has shared many positions with Trump, including the examples previously mentioned of non-interventionism (resembling Trump’s “America First” messaging) and his condemnation of the neo-liberal consensus and the subsequent decline of American manufacturing that it led to.

What is Populism?

Populism makes two core claims about the manner in which societies should be governed. The first is a heightened skepticism of the legitimate authority of the ‘establishment’. It claims that the epicenters of power in any given country are corrupt and operate in self-interest, commonly attributing blame to a variety of institutions such as the media, politicians, lobbyists, political parties, intellectuals, etc. Legitimacy can best be understood as the capacity for a political system to engender and maintain the belief that existing political institutions are the most appropriate and proper ones for society (Lipset, 1959). Legitimacy is what causes citizens to voluntarily follow the laws of their respective countries rather than doing so simply to avoid punishment. Given this definition, one can infer that a rise in populism indicates a decline of public trust in legitimate sources of political power.

The second claim is that the only legitimate source of authority in a functioning democracy flows directly from ‘the people’ (Norris, Inglehart, 2019). This claim serves almost as a prioritization of the voices of regular citizens over expert judgments, which happen to usually come from established sources of power (‘the establishment’). In this sense, populist rhetoric tends to erode trust in the governmental systems and elected representatives of liberal democracies. The decline in trust for the status quo politicians that favor incremental reforms rather than radical changes has led to a rise in popularity for more far-left and far-right alternative candidates such as Sanders and Trump while simultaneously exacerbating political polarization.

The neoliberal consensus between the two political parties has caused cultural issues to be at the forefront of the American political dialogue, and this only causes more divisiveness and political polarization. Economic policy discussions allow for compromise and negotiation, as tax rates, welfare spending, and other adjacent economic policies are issues that can be negotiated incrementally. Cultural issues, however, tend to divide people into ‘Us-versus-Them’ groups, and any sign of compromise is seen by either side as a moral weakness (Norris, Inglehart, 2019). This political polarization and the cycle of divisiveness has pushed both parties toward their ideological poles, moving Democrats to the left and Republicans to the right, and this, in turn, leads to even less compromise and results in political gridlock whenever either party tries to pass legislation. Thus, both party’s inefficiencies in passing meaningful and impactful legislation have allowed party outsiders to garner an incredible amount of support in recent years, leading to a Trump presidency.

Although populism's rhetoric can be adopted by a plethora of different candidates and movements with differing ideologies and political persuasions, there are two major forms of populism. The first is authoritarian populism. This kind of populism merges populist rhetoric with authoritarian values, which prioritize three main components. The first component of authoritarian values is the importance of security against instability or disorder. The second component is the value of group conformity to preserve the established traditions and ways of life of a culture. This component serves as an elevation of the group over the individual, sacrificing higher levels of individualism and creativity for tradition and group conformity. The third component is the need for loyal obedience toward strong leaders who protect the group and its way of life (Norris, Inglehart, 2019). The second and less common major form of populism is libertarian populism. It is similar to authoritarian populism in the sense that it also attacks epicenters of power and targets corruption, conventional political parties, and international corporations, but it deviates from its authoritarian counterpart in its acceptance of socially liberal values and progressive social policies (Norris, Inglehart, 2019). This form of populism prioritizes individualism as opposed to group conformity, and it is less focused on tradition and more focused on social innovation and progress.

Donald Trump and the Republicans

Chapter two will focus on Donald Trump's ascension to office in 2016, the inner workings of the contemporary Republican Party, the recent failings of the Republican Party, his brand of populism, and Trump's failed 2020 campaign in which he lost to Joe Biden. Although many might consider his ascension to the office of president in 2016 an unprecedented

phenomenon that seemed the least likely of all possible scenarios in 2016, it is important to note that the Republican Party's behavior and policies in recent decades played an impactful role in creating a situation where an outsider like Trump could effectively take control of the party without any help from the inner establishment of the party.

Both the Reagan and Bush administrations didn't heed warnings calling for protectionist industrial policies that would help protect American workers and expand American manufacturing in an increasingly competitive global market. Instead, they embraced a neoliberal economic plan that fully embraced globalization and ultimately led to the decline of American manufacturing, subsequently replacing it with a more service-based economy more reliant on financial services (Judis, 2016). This series of economic policies have led to a precipitous decline in employment within the industry, and this, alongside several trade agreements that proved to be less than favorable for middle-class Americans, has led the standard of living for many Americans to decline as a direct result of globalization (Houseman, 2018). The GOP establishment's support of increased American involvement in Iraq, Afghanistan, and other conflicts abroad also proved to be unpopular amongst many voters, who rallied behind Trump and his calls to "bring the troops back home." The conglomeration of these policies alongside others has pushed voters away from the usual options that operate within the established Republican Party, and toward an alternative option in the form of Donald Trump.

Although Trump's policies were obviously appealing to voters and allowed for his success, the failures of the Republican party also greatly contributed to this phenomenon. The high number of Republican candidates who were seeking the nomination in 2016 made it so that Trump could win several primaries in important states with only 30% of the vote, which suggests

that institutional and structural factors have an important impact on how and who gets elected in the Republican primary. Regardless of the GOP establishment's opposition to Trump, the large number of candidates combined with the infighting amongst the Republicans in 2016 made it so that the Republicans never ended up rallying behind one opposing candidate to combat Trump, which subsequently led to his nomination and eventual ascension to office. Chapter two will delve into greater detail regarding the Republican Party, its failings in recent years, and its complicated relationship with Donald Trump and his policy platform.

Bernie Sanders and the Democrats

Chapter 3 provides information on Bernie Sanders's campaign, his policy platform, his brand of populism, and the Democrat Party's relationship with this establishment outsider.

Although the Republican Party has demonstrated a considerable degree of infighting and fragmentation in recent years, the Democratic Party, notwithstanding the fact that there isn't full consensus within the party, seems to be more unified, which has been exemplified in their successful efforts to push away candidates such as Bernie Sanders from presidential elections. Historically, the inverse seemed to be true. Republicans were seen as ideological purists that would quickly disqualify any potential candidates if they didn't check all of the necessary boxes, and Democrats were more of a coalition group made up of several different factions with different objectives, which led to infighting and disagreement within the party (Grossman, Hopkins, 2015). This historical precedent must now undergo a reevaluation, as Democrat coalitions have united effectively in recent years to pass large legislative packages, including impactful policies such as the Affordable Care Act in 2009-2010 (Grossman, Hopkins, 2015).

This reunification of the Democratic Party in recent years (not to say that there isn't any conflict within the party) after a historical precedent of infighting and ideological conflict has allowed for the Democrats to do what the Republican Party failed at; to quickly halt the ascension of an establishment outsider to the office of the presidency. Bernie Sanders campaigned unapologetically as an outright, self-proclaimed socialist, which severely damaged his electability in any general election in the eyes of the established Democrat Party. The rationale behind this was that the voting constituency involved in the Democratic Primary was much more liberal and left-leaning than the general population of American voters, meaning that Sanders doing well in the primary was in no way an indication that he would do well in a general election, especially considering the fact that the majority of Americans have a negative impression of socialism (Pew Research). In this sense, Sanders's language and rhetoric played an integral role in the failure of his campaigns in 2016 in 2020. Sanders, like Trump, also had a policy platform that operated outside of the interests of many of the powers that be in the established faction of both parties. For example, Sanders strongly supported a troop withdrawal out of the Middle East, which agitated people operating within the American military machine, and thus ensured that powerful actors within that faction would not support him and instead would actively attempt to handicap his campaign. Sanders was also very critical of PNTR with China, globalization's effects on the American middle class, the decline of American manufacturing, and several other facets of the status quo consensus that has been arrived at by both Democrats and Republicans. Sanders also supported increased taxes for wealthy Americans and big corporations as well as campaign finance reform, which damaged the interests of many established politicians who rely on the generous donations frequently given to them by large

corporations. These policy proposals caused many people operating within the established Democrat Party to paint a target on the back of Sanders, in order to preserve their interests and uphold the status quo that is working very effectively for them, but not for millions of Americans.

The institutional framework of the Democrat primary also played an integral role in Sanders's failures in both 2016 and 2020. The role that delegates and super-delegates play in the primary is incredibly impactful on the outcome of the primary election, and Sanders knew this.

Although Sanders performed better than many of his counterparts in both primary elections, his failure to capture certain voting constituencies crippled his campaigns in 2016 and 2020. In the 2016 primary election, Sanders performed exceptionally well amongst rural and working-class whites, and his plan was to uphold this trend in 2020 while also capturing more votes from non-white working-class people. However, establishment democrat Joe Biden's important win by an immense margin of about 29 percent of the vote exemplified one of Sanders's biggest problems; his failure to attract the black vote (Beauchamp,2020). Black political identity in the United States is strongly tied to the Democratic Party institution, which may have repelled them away from Bernie considering his position within the party as an "outsider" and the large number of established democrats that disavowed his campaign and labeled him a radical candidate (White, Laird, 2020). Chapter 3 will delve deeper into the nuances of Sanders's campaigns in 2016 and 2020, as well as his relationship with the Democratic Party, the institutional mechanics of the Democrat primary, and the reasons why they were able to stop "outsider" populist.

Conclusion

The recent ascension of populist candidates to mainstream popularity in American politics is an impactful phenomenon that has vast implications for the future of the American political system. For decades, entrenched political party establishments have run the country with little to no challenges from outside the status quo orthodoxy that has been deeply institutionalized into the political system. Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders are both populist outsiders that challenge the standard factions that have assumed an almost monopolistic grip on the governmental system. They offer many policy proposals and that run counter to the goals of their respective political party establishments, and this is what has allowed both candidates to garner an unprecedented amount of support. Their successes and failures have exemplified the similarities and differences between the Republican and Democratic parties, and they have shown that the messaging of populism is now able to capture a significant portion of American voters. Populism's recent ascension strikes at the root of American political institutions and their legitimacy. As previously stated, populism makes two core claims. The first is that the epicenters of power in any given country are operating outside of the public interest and that they are corrupt and self-serving institutions that are upheld by the powerful. The second is that the only legitimate source of power in any functioning democracy must come directly from the people. Populism's rise indicates a decline of public trust in the conventional political institutions that run the country (including the established Democratic and Republican Parties), and this has grave implications for the future. The subsequent study will analyze this resurgence of populism in recent years, the ways populism manifests itself into different movements and candidates (particularly in Trump and Sanders), the relationship between populist outsiders and established

party orthodoxies, and the impactful consequences that these phenomena have on the political institutions and systems of the United States of America.

CHAPTER 1: AN OVERVIEW OF AMERICAN POPULISM

Defining Populism

There are three major defining characteristics of a populist movement, candidate, party, etc. The first two characteristics are the two core claims that populists make about the manner in which societies should be governed. The first claim is that the established epicenters of power in any given country are subject to corruption and can oftentimes operate in self-interest. Populists commonly attribute blame to a variety of institutions such as the media, politicians, lobbyists, political parties, intellectuals, etc. They commonly refer to these established epicenters of power as ‘the establishment’. These are typically institutions that are grounded in traditional legitimacy and that have withstood the test of time but have ultimately been co-opted by malicious actors that seek to further their own personal agendas at the expense of the rest of society, commonly referred to as ‘the people’. Donald Trump, for example, one institution that he relentlessly attacks is the mainstream media, commonly levying accusations that the media is biased, political, and unfair in their reporting of him and other Republicans. Bernie Sanders attacks corporate lobbyists and the billionaire class. This claim being made by populists basically serves as an outright attack on the legitimacy of these established institutions. Legitimacy can best be understood as the capacity for a political system to engender and maintain the belief that existing political institutions are the most appropriate and proper ones for society (Lipset, 1959). Legitimacy is what leads citizens to voluntarily follow the laws of their respective countries rather than being coerced to do so under the fear of retribution or punishment. Given this

definition, one can infer that a rise in populism can oftentimes correlate with a decline of public trust in legitimate sources of political power.

The second claim is that the only legitimate source of authority in any functioning democracy flows directly from ‘the people’ (Norris, Inglehart, 2019). This claim serves almost as a prioritization of the voices of regular citizens over expert judgments, which happen to usually come from established sources of power (‘the establishment’). This claim has manifested in many populist movements, such as the rise of Trumpism, with anti-intellectualism. In this sense, populist rhetoric tends to erode trust in the governmental systems and elected representatives of liberal democracies, but it can also oftentimes dissuade people from trusting public intellectuals and academia. This has been exemplified in Trump’s base and their distrust of public health officials in the handling of the COVID-19 pandemic as well as Sanders’s base and their distrust of economists that disavow socialism.

The third and final main characteristic of populism is that it has no allegiance to any particularly political ideology, and it instead is a political logic, or a way of thinking about politics (Judis, 2016). This chameleon-like nature allows the messaging and central ideas of populism to be adopted by a variety of different political movements from all ends of the political spectrum, which has culminated in populist parties on the rightwing, leftwing, and center. A functional definition of populism was eloquently purveyed in the book *The Populist Persuasion*, where Michael Kazin defines populism as “a language whose speakers conceive of ordinary people as a noble assemblage not bounded narrowly by class; view their elite opponents as self-serving and undemocratic; and seek to mobilize the former against the latter” (Kazin, 2017).

Varieties of Populism

Although populism's rhetoric can be adopted by a range of varied candidates and movements with vastly differing ideologies and political persuasions, there are a few major forms of populism that differ from one another. The first is authoritarian populism. This kind of populism merges populist rhetoric with authoritarian values, which can be organized into three main components. The first component of authoritarian values is the importance of security against instability or disorder. This can often culminate in a hostility to different cultures, traditions, and peoples, which authoritarians tend to conflate with instability and disorder. The second component is the value of group conformity to preserve the established traditions and ways of life of a culture. This component serves as an elevation of the group over the individual, sacrificing higher levels of individualism and creativity for tradition and group conformity. The third component is the need for loyal obedience toward strong leaders who protect the group and its way of life (Norris, Inglehart, 2019). This persuasion is what often leads people to support candidates and politicians that erode their liberties while replacing them with promises of security and safety.

Rightwing populists, who are similar to authoritarian populists but not synonymous, tend to champion 'the people' against the epicenters of power commonly labeled 'the elite', but they are different than leftwing populists in the sense that they often levy accusations that 'the elite' is coddling a third group, known as an out group. Out groups tend to be immigrants, Islamists, or any other faction that makes for a convenient scapegoat for many of society's problems. This is what makes rightwing populism triadic as opposed to leftwing populism, which is dyadic (Judis,

2017). This is exemplified by Sanders's pointed criticism of the billionaire class and Trump's criticism of the 'swamp' and their coddling of illegal immigrants. Trump, however, doesn't limit his 'out' group in an exclusionary way, and therefore he tends to set his sights on different groups such as Islamic migrants whenever this might prove advantageous to him.

Another less common form of populism is libertarian populism. It is similar to authoritarian populism in the sense that it also attacks epicenters of power and targets corruption, conventional political parties, and international corporations. It also aims to elevate the voice and power of ordinary people. However, it deviates from its authoritarian counterpart in its acceptance of socially liberal values and progressive social policies (Norris, Inglehart, 2019). This form of populism prioritizes individualism as opposed to group conformity, and it is less focused on tradition and more focused on social innovation, the protection of individual rights such as freedom of speech, and progress.

Populism's Significance

More than anything, populism's emergence represents a departure in satisfaction with the status quo politics of the Republican and Democrat establishments. The recent successes of Trump's candidacy and Sanders's impressive (albeit unsuccessful) performance in the Democratic Primaries signal that the prevailing political ideology is flawed and doesn't work, therefore it needs correction (Judis, 2016). It's important to note that although Donald Trump is a rightwing figure in many ways, even his brand of populism represents a rebuke to the neoliberal consensus and a departure from the traditional idea of free trade. This exemplifies just one example of populism rebuking the standard way of doing things. Both Trump and Sanders have

embraced the idea of protectionism and they both regularly cite the decline of American manufacturing to justify their positions on protectionist trade policies such as tariffs. This phenomenon is particularly salient because in the past, free trade was generally agreed upon by the established political factions in America, although support of free trade was unsymmetrical and skepticism most often came from the prominent democrats. Free trade had more support from traditional power wielders within both parties of legislators, (although many democratic legislators were vocal in their skepticism of neoliberalism) so this departure within large factions in both political parties from free trade and towards protectionism represents a more general departure from prevailing political norms that have been proposed, implemented, preserved, and guarded by the elite leaders of society (Judis, 2016). This supposed distancing from elite interests has been exemplified by both politicians on several fronts aside from their positions on free trade such as their similar noninterventionist positions on America's involvements in Iraq and Afghanistan. In the past, there were plenty of populists that attempted to provide alternative options to the policy platforms of the established and entrenched parties, but never has the messaging of populism allowed candidates to receive the extent of attention and support of people like Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders.

American Populism's History

The Peoples Party

Populism's inception within American politics came from an alliance between the Kansas Farmers Alliance and the Knights of Labor in 1892. There were several impactful phenomena that culminated in this alliance. At the time, a self-regulating market and laissez-faire economics

was commonplace in America, and there was a broad consensus amongst both parties that government's role in regulating and guiding the economy should be minimized to the furthest extent possible (Judis, 2016). In the same time span, however, farmers were struggling due to large decreases in agricultural prices and predatory railroad companies (which acted as monopolies) that increased the transportation costs of produce (McCarty, 2003). Data from the U.S. Department of Agriculture shows that within just about three decades from 1870 to 1897, wheat prices fell from \$1.06 a bushel to 63¢ a bushel, corn from 43¢ to 30¢ a bushel, and cotton from 15¢ a pound to 6¢ a pound. The following excerpt from a magazine titled *The Progressive Farmer* from April 28th, 1887, accurately captures the attitudes of many agrarian communities in this time.

“There is something radically wrong in our industrial system. There is a screw loose. The wheels have dropped out of balance. The railroads have never been so prosperous, and yet agriculture languishes. The banks have never done a better or more profitable business, and yet agriculture languishes. Manufacturing enterprises never made more money or were in a more flourishing condition, and yet agriculture languishes. Towns and cities flourish and ‘boom’ and grow and ‘boom,’ and yet agriculture languishes. Salaries and fees were never so temptingly high and desirable, and yet agriculture languishes.”

The People's Party represented a large coalition of farmers and blue-collar workers from around the country that were increasingly dissatisfied with the systems in which they operated, claiming that the government was controlled by the wealthy elites and that it was indeed a “plutocracy”. In The People's Party's early days before their formal formation, the alliances that would eventually become TPP advocated for mild reforms such as railroad regulation and demands for recognition of labor unions, but there was never consensus amongst them that

capitalism had to be abolished, only that some reforms were necessary (Johnson and Porter, 1977).

These alliances eventually called for more fringe and unpopular policy proposals such as the nationalization of railroads and a graduated income tax, which caused the major political parties to reject their populist demands (Johnson and Porter, 1977). This predictably led to accusations being thrust from populists toward Democrats and Republicans that they were corrupt actors controlled by the plutocracy and it created more distance between populists and the mainstream political factions that ruled the country.

In 1892, the populists decided to run their own candidate, James K. Weaver, to run for president. At a party convention within this timeframe, Ignatius Donnelly created a preamble to their populist platform with themes that would be replicated for decades to come in many other populist movements. One quote from this preamble said, “We seek to restore the government of the Republic to the hands of the ‘plain people,’ with whose class it originated.” The themes Donnelly purveyed in this statement weren’t uncommon but what was uncommon was that he (alongside the other populists) believed that to restore the government’s power into the hands of the people, there needed to be more government intervention within the economy (Judis, 2016). This rebuttal to the laissez-faire economic worldview that was so common at this point in American history would provide the groundwork for populist movements for decades to come, and it can be seen in contemporary candidates such as Sanders’s disdain for capitalism or Trump’s support of protectionism over the free-trade principles that typically dominate American politics.

The populists performed fairly well in the 1892 presidential election, with their candidate earning about eight percent of the vote. The 1894 elections spelled the end for The People’s

Party, however, as the major parties tactfully neutralized their populist opponents. Several prominent Democrats and Republicans adopted populist platforms. The most notable was the Democratic nominee, William Jennings Bryan, who coopted the populists by endorsing railroad regulation and restrictions on foreign pauper labor. That election, the populists chose to endorse Bryan rather than run their own candidate and this caused the populist vote to migrate toward the major political parties in subsequent elections (Judis, 2016).

Huey Long

One of the most beloved populist figures amongst the endorsers of populism in all of American politics is Huey Long. He structured himself from the get-go as a champion of the downtrodden and he regularly attacked big business. He was elected governor of Louisiana in 1928 where he worked tirelessly for the poor populace by funding infrastructure (specifically the roads), funding the schools and healthcare, and even exempting Louisiana's poor from having to pay taxes. Long even managed to enact an extraction tax on oil companies, which he had a particularly contentious relationship with (Judis, 2016). This policy among others exemplified Long's adversarial relationship with big business, which is a staple in many populist movements. On one occasion, Long even compared an oil company called Standard Oil Corporation to the Klu Klux Klan (Leavitt, 2014). Rather than pursuing a political ruling class of elites like Trump did with his "drain the swamp" messaging in his 2016 campaign, Long pursued an economic elite in a similar fashion to Bernie Sanders.

Long endorsed many policies such as redistributionism, limits on family wealth, and guaranteed annual income that presented a significant departure from the capitalist laissez-faire

principles that dominated American politics in his time. Due to Long's popularity and the attention be brought to economic inequality, Roosevelt joined forces with Democrats and passed the Social Security Act as well as progressive tax reforms that helped to mitigate the rampant inequality mentioned by Long repeatedly. He was one of the first major figures in American politics to begin to speak about economic inequality and the problems that it can create for the country. Many populists ever since then have followed suit, with the most obvious example that comes to mind being Bernie Sanders.

The Tea Party

A more recent and salient example of an influential populist movement is The Tea Party, which was formed in response to the 2008 global financial crisis. This crisis didn't happen in a vacuum however, as many deep-rooted systemic problems that were created and upheld through neoliberal policies eventually culminated in the financial crisis. Many Asian countries were sending dollars back to the US that they acquired from trade surpluses. These dollars were then exacerbating consumer debt, which was primarily being used for housing due to the housing boom. The artificial demand in this housing boom was being sustained in an economy that might have slowed otherwise. Eventually this led to the 2007 burst of the housing bubble, and this culminated in millions of Americans losing their homes and many financial institutions (particularly banks) being put at risk (Judis, 2016). This, of course, led to a bad recession. It's important to note, however, that what made much of this possible was the neoliberal consensus that took place for decades prior (which included lax regulations, financial deregulation, etc.) as

well as several trade policies that allowed Asian countries to have these large surpluses in the first place. Crack downs on unionization coincided with these policies and it led many Americans to challenge their preconceived notions about capitalism, regulation, and neoliberal economics.

Although tensions had been rising long before Obama's inauguration, the Obama administration's response to this crisis is what eventually culminated in the inception of the Tea Party. After the crisis unfolded, in his inaugural address Obama attributed blame equally to regular people as well as financial institutions such as Wall Street. Also, Obama's DOJ didn't prosecute even one of the major players in the financial crisis. What seemed to infuriate voters the most was that Obama's administration prioritized bailing out enormous banks over helping regular homeowners that had lost their homes during the burst of the housing market (Judis, 2016).

It seems CNBC commentator Rick Santelli's attacks on Obama's mortgage plan proved to be the final catalyst that created the Tea Party. In response to the financial crisis, the Obama administration quickly began pushing the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (which costed about \$1 trillion) shortly after his inauguration. Santelli was already frustrated with the Bush administration and its fiscal irresponsibility throughout their multi-billion-dollar bailouts and spending packages, so this new bill being presented by Obama infuriated Santelli (Hawkins, 2019). While at the Chicago Stock Exchange, Santelli stated the following.

"The government is promoting bad behavior... This is America! How many of you people want to pay for your neighbor's mortgage that has an extra bathroom and can't pay their bills? Raise their hand."

He then called for a “Chicago Tea Party” to protest the Obama administration’s economic plan. His plea was answered and shortly after this clip began to disseminate throughout the country, the first Tea Party protests took place in February in about 50 American cities, where tens of thousands of protestors showed up to protests not only Obama’s policies, but Bush’s too. Although the Tea Party wasn’t a single organized faction but rather many local groups independent of each other, there were several unifying ideals that established a sense of cohesion amongst the groups. The ‘Us versus Them’ theme commonly expressed in populist rhetoric was exemplified by the Tea Party’s messaging regarding the “makers” and “takers” of America. They loosely define the “makers” as the productive people that work and pay taxes and the “takers” as freeloaders that live off entitlement programs funded by their productive counterparts. They viewed the Affordable Care Act through this prism, as seniors on Medicare who paid the bulk of the insurance would see their benefits decreased to pay for the program (Judis, 2016). All in all, the Tea Party served as a repudiation of the status quo regarding federal budgets, financial institutions, banking, economic inequality, and the fiscal irresponsibility exemplified by the Bush and Obama administrations.

Occupy Wall Street

Another populist movement that happened within the same timeframe as the Tea Party was Occupy Wall Street. In February 2011, a website called AapedStatus.com published a report on the US economy called “The Economic Elite vs. the People of the United States.” It’s author, David DeGraw claimed in this report that the two major political parties have been corrupted by a well-connected, rich group of elites. After the report was posted to the website,

the website was inexplicably taken off line until the hacker group called Anonymous created a new website in which they joined with the AmedStatus organizers to create a new movement entitled A99 (Judis, 2016). This new effort quickly put out a call to action, encouraging demonstrators to occupy a park near Wall Street. The demonstration didn't end up being very large or impactful, so the organizers partnered with a group called New York City General Assembly that had previously been protesting city budgets. Then, an anti-capitalist publication called Adbusters put out a call to action on its website for protestors to demonstrate on September 17th at Zuccotti Park near Wall Street. That day, over a thousand protestors showed up and about 300 camped there overnight (Judis, 2016). In the coming days, thousands more came to demonstrate, and the movement diffused into hundreds of demonstrations all over the country.

The main sentiment of the Occupy protestors was that they were dissatisfied and infuriated by the neoliberal policies that enabled the rampant economic inequality that plagued the nation. A slogan for the movement was posted on a new Occupy Wall Street website and it read as follows.

“We are the 99 percent that will no longer tolerate the greed and corruption of the 1 percent.”

The movement structured their core sentiments in populist terms by framing the 99 percent as ‘the people’ and the one percent as the ‘economic elite’. This vague expression of discontent with the wealthy elite is what allowed the movement to garner so much expansive support from all around the country, as many Americans were beginning to call attention to economic inequality. This appeal to what can be called ‘open-source populism’ is not

uncommon, as many populists movements throughout history have structured their concerns as a struggle between regular people and a small wealthy elite (Lowndes, Warren, 2011). Occupy Wall Street provided substantive proof that many Americans (perhaps a majority) were frustrated and dissatisfied with the system in which they operated, which had been misguided by neoliberalism for decades, and the resulting economic and political inequality.

CHAPTER 2: DONALD TRUMP AND THE REPUBLICANS

Is Donald Trump a populist? If so, what kind?

Although Donald Trump may be categorized by his contemporaries as blatantly right-wing due to his flagrant and constant attacks on left-wing opponents and his identification as a Republican, Trump's policy positions defy neat and convenient categorization. Trump has been in the public sphere for decades, but he only began to dabble in politics in the late 1980s, when he ran a full-page ad in several newspapers including the New York Times regarding American foreign policy decisions (Judis, 2016). In the late 1990s, he actively sought out the Reform Party nomination, which was created by fellow populist, Ross Perot. Although many were interested in a Trump 2000 campaign, he was ultimately unsuccessful and he conceded to his far-right opponent, Pat Buchanan (who was also considered a populist by many), who he accused of being a "Hitler lover" (Helmore, 2017). This offensive and insulting jab at his opponent would prove to be a consistent strategy that Trump would later employ against countless other opponents.

Trump's views throughout these two decades reflect the difficulty in neatly defining him as strictly right-wing or conservative. In 1999, Trump said "I'm very pro-choice." He also wanted to protect Social Security and Medicare from cuts, he backed some form of universal national health insurance, and he also supported infrastructure spending that was opposed by many conservatives and Republicans (Judis, 2016). For his 2016 campaign, he had to change his positions on several issues such as abortion considering the fact that a pro-life stance is necessary to successfully run as a Republican. Trump's malleability regarding several key positions such as abortion illustrate one facet of populism that he accurately reflects, and that is the chameleon-

like nature of populism that allows a variety of candidates from different political ideologies to adopt its rhetoric and logic. He did, however, stand by his defense of Social Security, Medicare, infrastructure spending, and he even flirted with the idea of replacing the Affordable Care Act with some form of national health insurance. Many of Trump's flagship policies (which are what got him elected) served as a repudiation of neoliberal policies regarding trade deals, investment, immigration, and foreign policy.

Regarding his stance on defense and foreign policy, Trump's "America First" agenda reflects the populist notion that elites acting in self-interest (often referred to as beneficiaries of the military industrial complex) are the ones that want endless wars and overseas conflicts and that the US should instead focus on the myriad of domestic problems that remain unaddressed which reflect the wants and needs of 'the people'. Trump has regularly argued that the United States pays far more than it should on defense for foreign nations that are wealthy enough to defend themselves (Judis, 2016). Trump is essentially a non-interventionist, and his stance has remained relatively untouched for decades. The following quote from a CNN townhall encapsulates his overall position effectively.

"We're paying too much! You have countries in NATO, I think it's 28 countries – you have countries in NATO that are getting a free ride and it's unfair, it's very unfair. The United States cannot afford to be the policemen of the world anymore, folks. We have to rebuild our own country. We have to stop with this stuff."

Trump was very critical of Bush's invasion of Iraq, and he continues to proclaim that the United States regularly overextends itself abroad in a myriad of ways. All in all, Trump deviates

from many mainstream Republicans in his opposition to various military involvements overseas that he sees as unnecessary and costly.

Donald Trump's positions on free trade also deviate from many of his conservative, Republican colleagues. He has been very outspoken in his opposition to NAFTA and the previous most-favored-nation trading status that was previously awarded to China before the establishment of the World Trade Organization, claiming these deals had cost American jobs (Judis, 2016). Trump was also highly critical of the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), as he claimed it would accelerate the decline of manufacturing employment in the US, decrease worker wages, and increase the trade deficit. Because of this, Trump withdrew from the deal in his first day in office (McBride, Chatzky, Siripurapu, 2021). Trump's major focus regarding trade has been not only to reevaluate America's former trade deals and their impacts on American workers, but also to change the economic relationship between America and China, which he sees as inherently exploitative due to differences in labor laws and variety of other factors that allow China to mass-produce goods at a much cheaper rate. In fact, he has even proposed several hefty tariffs on Chinese exports. In 2011, Trump told the Wall Street Journal that a 25% tariff on Chinese goods would be necessary because they unfair trade advantages. More recently in 2016, Trump flirted with the idea of a 45% tariff on Chinese goods (Fleury, 2016).

Donald Trump's embrace of protectionist trade policies as opposed to the free-market, neoliberal policies that were employed by his predecessors seems to reflect the populist notion that 'the people' aren't having their interests served by legislators, and that instead, a wealthy political establishment is choosing to pass legislation that enriches themselves and their donors.

In this sense, Trump frames his policies through a populist framework that is apparently catered to regular American workers, or as he would describe them, “the people.”

Immigration is perhaps that most salient example of Trump’s right-wing, triadic populism. Left-wing populism is instead dyadic, meaning it frames politics issues within a vertical framework in which the middle and bottom of society ought to be arrayed against the top, which they see as inherently exploitative to their less affluent contemporaries. Right-wing is triadic, meaning this form of populism champions the people against an established elite, which they accuse of coddling a third group, which in Trump’s case tends to be Mexican migrants most often (Judis, 2017). He makes the claim that many other right-wing populists have made, which is that a well-connected group of elites (oftentimes legislators) is coddling illegal immigrants in order to serve their own self-interests at the cost of the American citizen and the American worker. The following quote from his 2011 book effectively conveys his overall position on illegal immigration.

“Illegal immigration is a wrecking ball aimed at U.S. taxpayers. Washington needs to get tough and fight for ‘We the People,’ not for the special interests who want cheap labor and a minority voting bloc.”

Trump’s framing of the illegal immigration issues is typical of a right-wing populist, as he clearly established an ‘in-group’ (American citizens) and an ‘out-group’ (illegal migrants, typically Mexican Americans). This ‘Us-versus-Them’ mentality is typical of authoritarian populists, as it utilizes dormant feelings of xenophobia and racism to direct ire towards out-groups. In Trump’s case, the out-groups tend to be Muslim Americans and Mexican Americans. Trump’s rhetoric regarding Mexican Americans has been referred by many as overtly

xenophobic and bigoted, as he regularly capitalizes on nativist sentiments within the population to garner support. This was exemplified during one of Trump's speeches in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania when Trump recited a poem called 'The Snake' to draw parallels between the deceptive snake of the poem and illegal migrants and their behavior (CBS News, 2017). Trump's staunch opposition to illegal immigration was in part economic, as he frequently claims that it depresses wages and increases competition among low-skill American workers, but it is also cultural, as he also regularly makes the claim that illegal migrants increase crime and damage the safety of American cities (Judis, 2017).

Regardless of a preponderance of research that shows that illegal immigrants have lower crime rates than legal migrants and native citizens, Trump repeatedly makes this claim (Light, He, Robey, 2020). This illustrates a broader distrust that many populists tend to have of expertise in general. It also demonstrates Trump's ability to construct a false reality or an alternate dimension in which illegal migrants are stealing thousands of jobs from Americans and committing crime at higher rates. He also said that his inaugural address had the highest attendance in history, which is demonstrably false. This may seem like a harmless, boastful lie, but it is part and parcel of a broader tendency that Trump has to bend the truth in order to serve his ends. Using the false narratives that he spreads like wildfire through social media, Trump effectively creates a different dimension for his voters where the only reasonable solution to the problems he mentions (many of them disingenuous or misrepresented) are his policies. This has contributed to an epistemological crisis in America where tens of millions of Americans can't tell what is and isn't true, as misinformation continues to be peddled by politicians, social media, news networks, and the president. The populist tendency to doubt expertise is nothing new, as

many populists throughout American history have employed this strategy. What is new however, is social media and its ability to amplify a message to the tune of hundreds of millions. Trump has used this tool to bypass the conventional method past candidates and presidents used to communicate with the American people; journalists and news networks. He regularly refers to the American mainstream media as “the fake news media” and because of his perception of American journalists as unfair ideologues that hate him, Trump has chosen to speak directly to the American people through mediums such as Twitter, which allow him a considerable degree of freedom (up until recently, that is). In the following quote, Trump illustrates social media’s importance in his ascension to office, highlighting Twitter in particular (Barber, Sevastopulo, Tett, 2017).

“Without the tweets, I wouldn’t be here . . . I have over 100m followers between Facebook, Twitter [and] Instagram. Over 100m. I don’t have to go to the fake media.”

Donald Trump’s brand of populism can be accurately described as both right-wing and authoritarian. In similar fashion to his populist predecessors in the People’s Party and their xenophobic views of Chinese laborers, Trump’s triadic populism capitalizes on latent feelings of xenophobia and nativism in order to categorize different demographics into ‘in-groups’ and ‘out-groups’ and to then galvanize an ‘us-versus-them’ narrative in which Americans are under constant attack from Mexican migrants, Muslim migrants, globalist trade deals, global competition, a corrupt ruling class, etc. He, like many other populists that came before him, is an expert at utilizing the politics of fear to appeal to a strong voting bloc of reactionary conservatives within the United States.

Trump's 2016 Campaign

In the leadup to the 2016 election, Donald Trump made many vague promises to voters regarding a variety of different issues such as trade, immigration, national security, etc. Many forces have allowed for his ascension to office in 2016, such as the institution of the electoral college, the general disdain voters felt for both candidates in 2016, the Republicans' failures in their primary, and Trump's many unattainable promises that appealed to a strong voting bloc of reactionary conservatives.

Regarding his policy platform, Trump campaigned as a strong, right-wing figure who aimed to restore America's dignity on the global stage through a variety of different policies, many of which were unattainable or at least unlikely to be fulfilled.

In typical right-wing, triadic populist fashion, Trump promised to crack down on illegal immigration by building a large wall on the southern border and making Mexico pay for it. He also promised to enact a ban on Muslim immigrants entering the country after a horrific shooting in San Bernardino, California (Qiu, 2016). Both positions were in line with his brand of right-wing populism, as these two positions clearly categorized the 'in group' as American citizens and the 'out-group' as Mexican and Muslim immigrants.

Trump did however, distance himself from many of his Republican colleagues in his positions on free trade. He promised to bring back millions of manufacturing jobs by withdrawing from the Trans-Pacific Partnership and by re-negotiating NAFTA. He also proclaimed that he would put hefty tariffs on goods from Mexico and China (Qiu, 2016). These policies were aimed at insulating many industries within America from global competition, which represents a departure from the neoliberal policies of the past few decades. The distance

that he created between himself and much of the traditional Republican leadership culminated in a conservative ‘Never Trump’ movement to be formed, but the dissatisfaction that Republican voters felt toward the GOP leadership in recent years caused the movement to fizzle out and become obscured by the overwhelming support Trump got.

Trump’s ambiguity and lack of precision in his policy platform may seem like a hinderance or setback in some ways, but it can actually be quite the advantage. As mentioned previously, Trump has demonstrated a considerable degree of malleability and imprecision in his positions on some key topics, with abortion being the main issue he has completely changed his position on to maximize his electability. This chameleon-like nature is common amongst populist figures, as populism is a political logic that can be utilized in a right-wing, left-wing, or centrist policy platform or worldview rather than a political ideology tethered to a particular end of the political spectrum (Judis, 2017). A 2009 paper from political scientists at UC Berkley found that voters tend to prefer ambiguity over precision in partisan elections, the reason being because this allows voters to see what they want, in a way shielding themselves from the uncomfortable complexity of nuanced issues (Tomz, Houweling, 2009). This ambiguity and the preferences of voters for this lack of precision in policy positions is exactly what allows Trump and his voters to weave together narratives out of whole cloth. This is, of course, not unique to Trump as many politicians tend to manipulate the truth in order to frame themselves as the only viable solution to the problems they mention that may or may not exist, but Trump’s usage of this ‘alternate reality’ tactic is particularly potent considering the enthusiasm and loyalty of his base and his ability to spread his rhetoric in a fast and incredibly expansive manner using social media.

One of the major factors that allowed for Trump's eventual ascension to his presidency was the complete and utter failure of the Republican party to settle the infighting and fragmentation that plagued the 2016 Republican primary. Because of the incompetency of the Republican party in 2016, there were an unusually large number of candidates competing for the nomination, allowing Trump to win several states with only 30% of the vote or less. Once the less popular candidates began to drop from the race, the Republican party couldn't agree on one candidate to consolidate their efforts behind due to purity tests and infighting about which candidate would be suitable for the monumental task of beating Donald Trump, who was quickly gaining traction amongst Republican voters. Basically, no one was suitable enough for the GOP leadership to agree on, and because of this indecisiveness, Trump rose in popularity and eventually won the nomination, effectively capitalizing on the impotence of the GOP and the dissatisfaction Republican voters had with their party in recent years due to a myriad of factors such as the decline in manufacturing employment, neoliberal trade policies that they believed were harmful to American workers, overly lenient immigration policies, and other issues that Trump claimed he could resolve.

Using the help of platforms like Twitter and support from prominent conservatives such as Ann Coulter, Rush Limbaugh, and Sean Hannity, Donald Trump won the Republican nomination by capitalizing on growing feelings of disillusionment with the way the country had been run in recent decades (Cassidy, 2016). Using the dissatisfaction voters felt toward the traditional leadership of the GOP and the help of these conservative pundits, Trump framed himself as a right-wing populist cut from the same cloth as the Tea Party movement, which effectively appealed to Republican voters and allowed for him to garner more support than any

other Republican in 2016. Trump won the primary and eventually the presidency not by running as a status quo Republican, but by distancing himself from the traditional GOP positions on several important positions and by framing his message within the prism of populism, which proved to be an incredibly popular and successful strategy.

Trump's Presidency

When it comes to Trump's campaign promises and his fulfillment of them, like all presidents, he did some of the things he promised he would do such as banning travel from several Muslim-majority countries where terroristic activity is prevalent and he failed to accomplish some of his other promises, such as building a large wall on the southern border and somehow making Mexico pay for it. In reality, the Trump administration oversaw about 452 miles of new border wall construction, however the vast majority of this replaced already existing structures and Mexico did not, in fact, pay for the wall. Only about 80 miles of new wall were built where there were no structures before (Giles, 2020).

The failure to complete all campaign promises is typical of any presidency, as political gridlock is a constant obstacle for presidents in their pursuit of their policy agendas. One thing that is particularly interesting, however, regarding Trump's presidency is the fact that loyalty to Trump amongst Republicans remained relatively consistent throughout his entire presidency, including both impeachment trials and even after the capitol riot on January 6th, 2021.

A recent NBC News poll found that about 87% of Republicans approve of Trump's presidency, only about two percentage points lower than those who said the same before the 2020 election. Amongst Republicans who consider themselves more loyal to him than to the

GOP, he touts a 98% approval rating, basically unmoved by his actions regarding the capitol riot. For those who prioritize the GOP over Trump himself, his approval rating was still relatively high at about 81% (Dann, 2021).

This high level of loyalty remained constant irrespective of Trump's failures to deliver on several campaign promises, his personal attacks on rivalrous politicians, or his rhetorical contributions to the capitol riot, and it illustrates the incredible amount of enthusiasm and loyalty amongst his political base. It seems that many Trump voters are willing to support their candidate regardless of how many people he relentlessly insults, how many campaign promises he breaks, or how damaging his rhetoric becomes to national discourse. This is indicative of a broader trend in American politics, and that is a recent resurgence in authoritarian attitudes, thus culminating in a strong preference among millions of voters for 'strong leaders' who are willing to sidestep democratic norms in order to achieve policy goals. Recent national polling data from the University of Massachusetts Amherst suggests that authoritarian values and fear of terrorism can predict with statistical significance whether someone will support Trump (MacWilliams, 2016). It seems that authoritarian attitudes amongst voters are what hold the key to Trump's success and are what allow him to retain broad support amongst his base regardless of his actions. Many Republicans have claimed that the loyalty that voters show Trump is not in spite of the distance between him and status quo Republicans, but because of it. Some argue that his messaging is more in line with the average, working class Republicans (which are more plentiful) rather than the more affluent Republicans that are more likely to support free trade as opposed to protectionism, are more open to immigration, and still support many of the trade agreements that Trump relentlessly criticizes. The following quote from Republican

Representative Patrick McHenry of North Carolina illustrates this point effectively (Martin, Haberman, 2021).

“He has a complete connection with the average Republican voter and that’s given him political power here. Trump has touched the nerve of my conservative base like no person in my lifetime.”

Another notable hallmark of Trump’s presidency are the massive implications he has had on the Republican party. Many political scientists have said that Trump’s impact on the Republican party is akin to a hostile takeover, as he has successfully circumnavigated the ‘Never Trump’ conservative movement and much of the Republican establishment to rise to power at the behest of his voters against the status quo, neocon Republicans. Republicans now fear defying Trump publicly, as this can quickly end whatever aspirations they may have for any sort of future in Republican politics.

For example, Dave Trott, a two-term Republican congressman from Detroit criticized Trump’s public behavior and his attempts to repeal the Affordable Care Act in a closed-door GOP meeting. He was quickly warned by colleagues that he should avoid doing so, as this is akin to political suicide in the modern-day Republican Party. Ultimately, this culminated in Trott deciding not to run for re-election (Martin, Haberman, 2021).

Another indicator of Trump’s tight grip on the Republican party was the House Inquiry on Trump’s impeachment, which was built upon charges of abuse of power and obstruction of justice regarding a phone call Trump had with the president of Ukraine. Not a single Republican supported either article of impeachment, and in all of the trials regarding his dealings with Ukraine, House Republicans defended him fervently while claiming that the entire impeachment

was nothing but partisan theatre orchestrated by Democrats to attack Trump (Martin, Haberman, 2021). Even though some Republicans initially criticized Trump's language in the infamous phone call, they quickly walked back their comments after Trump began to defend himself publicly.

Loyalty to Trump is incentivized not only through punishment, but also through very advantageous rewards. Trump's endorsements have boosted support for a myriad of candidates and have helped elect many Republicans in districts all over the country. For example, Ron DeSantis made many appearances praising Donald Trump on Fox News while he was campaigning against Andrew Gillum for the 2018 Florida gubernatorial election. This caught the eye of President Trump and ultimately culminated in an endorsement from Trump, which led to DeSantis winning the election and assuming the office of Governor of Florida (Martin, Haberman, 2021). In many ways, DeSantis echoes much of Trump's populist rhetoric and his ascension to the office of Governor illustrates the fact that populism is a winning strategy not only on the national scale, but also in local elections all over the country.

All in all, Trump has effectively taken over the Republican party by connecting with Republican voters in a way that the GOP leadership has failed to do in decades. He has distanced himself from 'establishment' Republicans on many issues, and this has helped him captivate voters in a unique way that few could have predicted. His hostile takeover of the Republican Party has caused many up-and-coming Republicans to bow to him, as not doing so has become political suicide, and doing so has proven to be lucrative and effective not just for Ron DeSantis, but for many Republicans all over the country.

Trump's 2020 Campaign

It is no surprise that Trump's presidency is seen by most Republicans as wildly successful and by Democrats as a disaster that has damaged American credibility internationally, as is exemplified by his approval ratings within the respective parties. Regardless of the general public's opinion of him, Trump unsurprisingly decided to run for re-election in 2020, which was very much expected considering the high approval rating he boasted within the Republican party and the unprecedented amount of loyalty Republicans have shown him throughout his presidency.

Regarding Donald Trump's policies that he ran on in the 2020 election, many of them were relatively unchanged from his 2016 platform. Thus, his new slogan for his 2020 campaign was 'Keep America Great', implying his presidency achieved his reactionary goal of bringing America back to its vague former glory he has alluded to time and time again. His stances on immigration that he ran on echoed many of the same sentiments as in 2016. Trump's platform included the goals of reducing illegal immigration, reforming the immigration system, and continuing construction on the wall while once again using the right-wing populist language of 'us-versus-them' by claiming that illegal migrants drain social services, take jobs away from Americans (the 'us'), and bring crime with them into America (Bush, 2020). When it came economic policies, Trump's stance on the economy throughout his 2020 campaign was that the country needs to return to its former economic glory before the disaster that was COVID-19, as the pandemic crippled the economy. The route necessary to do so in his eyes was through tax cuts and through ending trade deficits, which he saw is inherently harmful to the U.S. economy, which is very much in line with his protectionist stances (Bush, 2020). Trump's 2020 stances

were basically the same as his 2016 stances, but he bolstered his stances using the successes of his presidency.

Ultimately, Trump's 2020 campaign ended in failure, largely due to Trump's inflammatory public behavior, COVID, the Trump administration's mishandling of the crisis, and its implications on the U.S. economy. Trump seems to have performed fairly well in the 2020 election if you only look at his numbers considering the fact that he earned about 10 million more votes in 2020 than he did in 2016, and he performed better with minority groups than he did in 2016. Donald Trump got the second highest total amount of votes in American history, with his competitor Joe Biden taking the top spot (Bryant, 2020). Although Donald Trump did increase his total vote count by 10 million and earn more votes than any incumbent president in American history, he was still beat by Joe Biden (a moderate Democrat who beat Sanders in the Democrat primary), or perhaps more so by his own rhetoric and behavior.

Once election day came around, Trump initially thought that he had won on November 4th considering the fact that he had a lead in enough states to comfortably win the election and mail-in ballots (which he discouraged his voters from using claiming they were more prone to fraud) had not been counted. When he came to the harsh realization that Joe Biden had won the election, Trump immediately began to stitch together a narrative in which the election was stolen through fraud. This authoritarian behavior is typical of an authoritarian populist such as Trump, as he has no moral qualms about eroding democratic norms in order to push unsubstantiated misinformation. The president's ability to not only create and disseminate a narrative, but also to make his followers believe it is exemplified by a May, 2021 Reuters Poll. In this poll, 56% of Republicans said that they believe that the 2020 election was a result of election fraud, illegal

voting, or election rigging. About 6 of 10 Republicans agreed with the statement that “the 2020 election was stolen from Donald Trump” (Edwards-Levy, 2021). This conspiratorial tendency is common in populist discourse and it is oftentimes characterized by a general distrust in established institutions, in this case one of the most important institutions in America, the American presidential election.

It seems that the boisterous, outspoken nature that proved to be an advantage for Trump in 2016 also proved to be a disadvantage in 2020, as many voters didn’t necessarily vote for Biden, but instead voted against Trump, settling for whoever had the Democratic nomination. In an NBC News/Wall Street Journal poll conducted one year before election day, almost half of all registered voters had declared that they were going to vote for whoever the Democratic nominee is to damage Trump’s chances of reelection. To be precise, 46% of voters in this poll said that they are a “certain vote against Trump in 2020” (Chinni, 2019).

The downplaying of the COVID virus by President Trump and the mishandling of the crisis, which led to negative economic implications also played a substantial role on his 2020 defeat. The crisis in and of itself wasn’t necessarily a signifier that Trump’s chances of reelection were severely damaged, and crises can oftentimes bolster support for presidents depending on their handling of the crisis in question. However, when information about the COVID virus began to get more public attention at the beginning of the pandemic, Trump repeatedly downplayed the severity of the virus and how serious the situation could become. He repeatedly claimed that his administration had it “under control” and even said that the virus might “disappear” almost like a “miracle” (Summers, 2020). In hindsight, the misrepresentation of the pandemic is likely to have damaged his chances of reelection due to the hundreds of thousands of

Americans who have now died from COVID and the severe economic implications that this had on unemployment, GDP, the stock market, and other metrics by which we typically use to gage the success of the American economy.

It seems that in an effort to retain his original base of voters, Donald Trump isolated himself from the rest of the country (the majority in terms of raw numbers) by doubling down on his inflammatory and offensive public behavior. Because many of his voters found this ‘say what you think’ style desirable, Trump continued to personally attack members of the media, political rivals, and anyone critical of him. This made it very easy for him to be demonized (as there is so much subject material) as opposed to Joe Biden, whose moderate and generally calm nature makes demonizing him more difficult. Although Trump increased his base of support by the tune of about 10 million, his behavior throughout his presidency also substantially empowered an opposing coalition of American voters to beat him in the ballot box.

Summary

Donald Trump’s classification as an authoritarian right-wing populist might have seemed like a handicap in previous years, but discontent amongst Republican voters with the traditional leadership of the GOP has led this voting constituency to seek alternatives, thus making the GOP a party ripe for a hostile takeover. Trump capitalized on decades of voter dissatisfaction with neoliberalism, illegal immigration, globalization, trade policies, foreign aid, outsourcing, the overextension of the US military abroad, and the decline of manufacturing employment.

He did so by appealing to latent attitudes of xenophobia, nativism, and exclusionary nationalism by employing the language of a typical triadic populist, pitting the American

working class against a corrupt ruling class of elites (which he labeled “The Swamp”), claiming they have been coddling a third group, in this case being illegal immigrants (more specifically, Mexican illegals). By framing the country’s issues within this ‘Us versus Them’ paradigm, Trump has used the politics of fear to craft a narrative in which the country is under attack from every direction (both upwards via the establishment and downwards via illegal immigrants) and the only viable path toward success or victory is his presidency. The combination of declining trust in the GOP’s leadership (and the reign of neoliberalism it lead to) and Trump’s appeal to latent feelings of nativism and authoritarianism amongst the American populace is what allowed him to ascend to the presidency.

Once Trump arrived at the Oval Office, he continued to force the Republican party into bending the knee to him, thus converting the GOP into the party of Trump. Anyone who dared to oppose Trump during his tenure risked losing any potential future in Republican politics. Anyone who publicly supported him with enthusiasm, such as Ron DeSantis, was met with advantageous rewards, such as explicit endorsements from the president, or positive tweets or social media statements that acted as soft endorsements in a way, helping to boost exposure and support for up-and-comers within the ranks of the Republican party. He successfully captivated the Republican voting bloc in a way that previous candidates amongst the party’s status quo leadership couldn’t, and this led to Trump having one of the most supportive and enthusiastic voting constituencies in recent memory. However, his behavior during his tenure pushed many potential Trump voters in 2020 away, as many found his constant personal attacks and lack of professionalism to be very repellant. This, alongside many of his policies and his handling of the COVID-19 pandemic led Trump to lose the 2020 election, even though he gained 10 million

votes from 2016 and he got more votes than any incumbent president in American history. Trump's flamboyant and explosive behavior, which seemed to be one of his biggest strengths according to his voters, also proved to be one of his biggest weaknesses in his pursuit of new voters. Although Trump continues to deny the legitimacy of the 2020 election, he has continued to publicly flirt with the idea of running again in 2024. Trump's ascension to presidency has proven to be one of the most salient issues in recent history. He has proven that populism's viability was previously underestimated, or at least his strand of right-wing, authoritarian populism. Although he is no longer president, Trump remains one of the most influential political figures in contemporary American politics, and every indication seems to point towards the possibility that Trump will once again run for president. If so, the implications could be felt for decades to come.

CHAPTER 3: BERNIE SANDERS AND THE DEMOCRATS

Is Bernie Sanders a Populist? If so, what kind?

Bernie Sanders is, of course, a very different political figure than Donald Trump in a myriad of ways. To most, the most blaring example of their differences is the distance between both candidates' position on capitalism, taxes, and free trade more broadly. Although there is more overlap than one might think regarding their economic policy proposals as both have embraced protectionism to a certain extent (which will be examined later), Donald Trump's framing of himself as a fierce capitalist and Bernie Sanders's self-identification as a 'socialist' is exemplary of the vast ocean of distance between the two on the economy. However, the usage of populist rhetoric by both politicians is incredibly salient as it portends to this thesis, and it exemplifies the wide chasm of differences between the two. Their distinguished styles of populism and the rhetoric they employ to advance their respective causes provides a useful framework from which to differentiate and compare the two politicians.

Sanders describes himself as a 'socialist' and he has been an unmistakable progressive for his entire political career. Although many politicians tend to engage in a form of demagoguery in which they sculpt their malleable positions and values (or lack thereof) to properly reflect the whims of ever-changing public opinion, Sanders breaks from that mold. Throughout his political career, Sanders has made his focus the American economy, the income inequality that exists within it, and the plight of the American worker. However, the studies, statistics, and numbers he cites have changed throughout his decades in American politics, his

prevailing message has not. The concentration of wealth in America amongst the upper strata of income earners is something that Sanders has repeatedly mentioned throughout the years, as exemplified in the following quote from a 1976 Vermont gubernatorial debate (Keith, 2015).

“The fundamental issue facing us in the state is that ½ of 1 percent of these people — the richest ½ of 1 percent — earn as much as the bottom 27 percent and the top 3 percent earn as much as the bottom 40 percent.”

He once again called attention to this same problem about fifteen years later in a C-SPAN interview using different statistics, but his messaging remained unchanged (Keith, 2015).

“What we have seen in the last 10 years is the richest 1 percent of the population have seen an 86 percent increase in their real income, OK? The richest people are becoming much richer. Meanwhile the working class, the middle class, are becoming poorer.”

Although certain trends in income distribution tend to change throughout time in America, as they do in any country, Sanders has repeatedly brought attention to the issue of income inequality in the American economy because it doesn't seem to be getting any 'better' in his eyes. The statistics he has repeatedly cited throughout his political career seem to indicate that the distribution of income is becoming increasingly centralized into the hands of a wealthy few. In a recent Pew Research Center study on wealth and income inequality in America, researchers found that income inequality in the U.S. has risen since 1980, and in comparison, to similar, generally affluent countries such as the UK and France, the U.S. has a much higher rate of income inequality, as measured by the Gini coefficient. The Gini coefficient is a common unit of measurement used to measure income inequality on a scale of zero to one. In 2017, the U.S. stood at 0.434 while the UK had a 0.392 and France had a 0.326 (Horowitz, Igielnik, Kochhar,

2020). This issue of income inequality and the government's failure to properly address it in Sanders's eyes is where his populism operates most commonly and most effectively.

Bernie Sanders, like any populist, divides America into two groups with interests that are at odds with each other. These two groups are commonly referred to in populist discourse as 'the people' and 'the elite' or 'the establishment'. However, Sanders differs from Trump in his classifications of who belongs to which group. His major focus throughout his political career has been income inequality, thus his perception of who exists within 'the establishment' is the billionaire class. In other words, Sanders considers 'the people' to be the 99 percent and he considers the 'establishment' to be the one percent. He has repeatedly employed this framework to describe America's problem, regularly regarding the bulk of the nation's struggles as a struggle between the rich, well connected billionaire class that influences policy through campaign donations and hoards wealth and opportunity and the poor and middle-class Americans who struggle to make ends meet. This utilization of class-based conflict is common amongst self-proclaimed socialists, and it also fits the mold of populism in the sense that it creates a simple dichotomy between two groups (the people and the elite) locked into a contentious battle of opposing interests.

Sanders has employed populist rhetoric throughout his career on various occasions, as exemplified by the following quote from his Facebook page (Bennet, 2020).

"Now is the time to have the guts to take on the corporate and financial elite of this country that controls so much of our economy and our government."

Within that quote was the obvious implication that power (in regards economic and political power) is unfairly concentrated in the hands of a small number of people, which he

labels ‘the corporate and financial elite’. This is a direct critique of the legitimacy of the government, as he is accusing government officials of catering their legislative decisions toward a rich faction of elites while neglecting the American people. The following quote is another statement made on Sanders’s Facebook page.

“What we have done tonight in New Hampshire is nothing short of the beginning of a political revolution. Let's win this primary. Let's defeat Donald Trump. And then let us begin the work of transforming this country when we are in the White House.”

Here, Sanders suggests that a revolution of sorts must take place for true political and economic power to be restored into the hands of ‘the people’. He frames his political movement as a righteous fight for the American middle class from the greedy, corporatist elites existing inside and outside of Washington. Sanders’s usage of the word “revolution” in this instance seems to be rhetorical rather than literal, yet this sort of discourse still serves as a critique of the prevailing norms regarding the pursuit of power in the U.S., thus suggesting that an overwhelming surge of support is necessary for political victory. His usage of the word ‘we’ also positions himself as a member of the people, therefore distancing himself from the wealthy elites that draw most of his ire.

Regarding Sanders’s policies, many are, of course, left-wing in political orientation which is unsurprising as Sanders does describe himself as a ‘democratic socialist’. However, he is leftward of many of the status quo positions held by the Democratic part, generally. For example, his official website shows that Sanders is a strong proponent of Medicare for all, increased taxes (on the rich in particular), the Green New Deal, housing for all, free childcare

and pre-K for all, etc. He also shares a lot of Trump's views on trade treaties and foreign investments, as exemplified by the following quote (Judis, 2016).

“My understanding, talking to many economists, is that NAFTA, PNTR [permanent normal trade relations] with China, other trade agreements have cost this country millions of jobs. I don't think it is appropriate for trade policies to say that you can move to a country where wages are abysmal, where there are no environmental regulations, where workers can't form unions.”

His distance from the rest of the Democratic party on his more progressive policy positions as well as his condemnation of neoliberalism put him at odds with many of the party's more established, entrenched members. Sanders's position as an outsider within the Democrat party has allowed him and his base to frame parts of the Democratic establishment as part of the 'corporate and financial elite'. Therefore, Sanders has framed his political career as a fight for the American working class in which he has to actively combat the interests of a small group of established elites with access to a disproportionate amount of economic and political power.

The populist discourse that Sanders employs as well as his position as an outsider within the Democratic party indicate that Sanders is, in fact, a populist given the conventional definition of the term. His populism, however, is much different than Trump's authoritarian, right-wing populism. Sanders is a leftist, as mentioned previously, and he avoids much of Trump's nativist rhetoric. Rather than identifying illegal immigrants or Muslims as 'out-groups', Sanders identifies the corporate elite. His form of populism is more inclusive, encapsulating the entire American working class as well as anyone who believes in the general notion that the corporate elite possess a disproportionate amount of power. Therefore, Sanders's populism can accurately be defined as a form of left-wing populism wherein his 'in-group' encapsulates poor and working-class Americans, and his 'out-group' includes the corporate/economic elite. This group

of economic elites also includes government officials that he claims legislate on their behalf. Also, his in-group doesn't just include poor and working-class Americans, as anyone supporting his policy agenda, including wealthy Americans, can be included within his in-group, but less affluent Americans are Sanders's major focus as he claims their interests are damaged most by the wealthy elite and their subversion of government.

Sanders's 2016 Campaign

Bernie Sanders ran for president in 2016 on the same policy platform that he has pushed for throughout his entire political career, socialism. According to his own rhetoric, his definition of socialism (or at least his public perception of it in his advocacy) seems to be malleable as it has changed form throughout the years. In past years, Sanders has publicly praised aspects of several leftist, socialist regimes such as Fidel Castro's Cuba, Daniel Ortega's Nicaragua, and the USSR (Krieg, Kaczynski, Steck, 2020). Although he has given these regimes praise regarding certain programs they employed, such as Cuba's literacy program, Sanders has also called attention to the human rights abuses perpetrated by these regimes. Regardless of this, Sanders has undoubtedly and enthusiastically praised brutal, despotic regimes and this has damaged his electability amongst the general populace. In 2016, he distanced himself from these violent regimes and ran on a form of democratic socialism that he and his supporters frequently compared to the successful social democracies within the Scandinavian countries such as Sweden, Denmark, Norway, etc. Although these countries utilize market economies and some even offer more market protections than even the U.S., Sanders and his supporters still regularly

label these countries ‘socialist’ and this has caused socialism’s perception amongst the American populace to change.

This rebranding was necessary, as comparisons to the USSR’s socialism or Cuba’s socialism don’t exactly provide for the most seductive policy platform, and vast swaths of the American public still has a generally negative perception of traditional socialism, although this has been changing in recent years, presumably in large part due to Sanders’s movement. A 2019 Pew Research poll found that overall, Americans have a much more positive perception of capitalism (65%) than they do of socialism (42%) (Hartig, 2019). Just about a decade earlier in another Pew Research poll, only about 29% of the populace expressed positive views of socialism, demonstrating a notable increase in positive public perceptions of socialism in just a decade.

Sanders’s 2016 campaign was targeted toward the billionaire class (his out-group) as he advocated for higher taxes on the upper strata of income earners, which he saw as necessary so that he could pass several policies aimed at helping working class Americans (his in-group), such as a national \$15 an hour minimum wage, free public college, and universalized healthcare. When Sanders originally announced his bid for presidency in April 2015, few thought that his candidacy would amount to anything, as he wasn’t even a Democrat at the time (Detrow, 2020). After a few months, Sanders’s chances of winning the Democratic primary grew exponentially, as his large rallies full of enthusiastic, young voters began to draw crowds of thousands of people. Then, in 2016 Sanders shockingly tied Hillary Clinton in Iowa and then beat her by about 22 percentage points in New Hampshire (Detrow, 2020). He beat Clinton in a few other states, but her delegate lead continued to grow as the months went on, and she won several key southern

states with large black populations, which are essential to win any Democratic primary.

Ultimately, Sanders's failure to capture the black vote culminated in him conceding the race to Hillary Clinton shortly before the Democratic National Convention.

As previously stated, the biggest factor that led Sanders to lose the nomination in 2016 was the preference amongst black Americans for Hillary Clinton. Exit polls showed that amongst white voters, Sanders basically tied Clinton. When it came to African Americans, however, Clinton boasted a 50-percentage point advantage, exemplifying black Americans' attachment to their party and their aversion to outsiders like Bernie Sanders (Zitner, Chinni, McGill, 2016). Clinton also greatly outperformed Sanders when it came to Democrats, which is obviously very important in a Democratic primary, beating him by almost 30 percentage points. Sanders did better with independents, but they only made up about 25% of the vote. Although Sanders performed exceptionally among voters under 30 years of age (winning about 70% of those votes), Clinton outperformed him with seniors, which represent a larger group of voters. Younger voting cohorts are certainly very important, as they represent the future of the country, but older voters tend to have higher turnout. Another advantage Clinton enjoyed in the primary was the fact that she was perceived as a much more moderate candidate, and moderate voters greatly skewed towards Clinton. She tied Sanders when it came to voters who considered themselves "very liberal", but Clinton won by large margins with voters who considered themselves "somewhat liberal" or "moderate" (Zitner, Chinni, McGill, 2016).

After Sanders's defeat at the hands of Hillary Clinton, many progressive supporters of Sanders were quick to administer blame onto the Democratic National Committee due to leaked emails published on WikiLeaks that revealed that several DNC staffers demonstrated an obvious

preference for Clinton over Sanders, likely because his identification as a socialist damaged his chances of beating Donald Trump in a general election (Detrow, 2020). Sanders supporters also pointed to the structure of the Democratic primary and the supposed unfairness of the superdelegate system. Although it is possible that this system could potentially be abused if the right conditions were in place, this did not happen in the case of the 2016 primary, as exemplified by the votes. The preference for Clinton wasn't only held by DNC operatives or superdelegates, but by vast swaths of the country. Clinton won the biggest states, such as Texas, Florida, New York, and California and in terms of total votes, she outperformed Sanders by about 3.7 million votes (Zitner, Chinni, McGill, 2016).

The conspiratorial nature of Sanders's progressive supporters' claims that the nomination was stolen from Sanders by the Democratic establishment is exemplary of a broader trend in populist discourse. The common populist skepticism of established epicenters of power extends not only to the billionaire class in Sanders's case, but also to the established political parties and their respective leaders. This can culminate in anti-intellectualism (as in the case of right-wing populists' rejection of climate change), but it can also erode democratic norms and institutions, such as faith in elections. This was most obviously exemplified when Trump denied the efficacy of the 2020 election, as was discussed in chapter two. In the case of the 2016 Democratic Primary, faith in the election process for the Democratic nomination was eroded by Sanders's supporters, but on a smaller scale and a much different way than that of the 2020 general election. There is an important distinction to be made between these two phenomena. Trump's rejection of the 2020 election results acted as a direct subversion of democracy, simply because he didn't like the result. When Sanders's supporters critiqued the efficacy of the primary after his

loss, the general consensus among his progressive supporters was that the Democratic Primary needed to be democratized further due to their perceived unfairness regarding some of the mechanics of the primary such as the role of superdelegates. In this sense, Trump's attack on the 2020 election served as an attack on democracy (in line with his right-wing authoritarian populism) and the critiques that came from Sanders's supporters didn't seek to subvert democracy but instead to further democratize the primary in order to make it more fair in their eyes.

Anyhow, Sanders's position as a socialist outsider within the Democratic party may have boosted support amongst progressive voters, young people, and independents around the country, but it also cost him the black vote, which is essential in a Democratic primary.

Sanders's support (like Trump's) demonstrated how much the neoliberal consensus and the great recession radicalized large swaths of the voting population. Vast numbers of American voters were pushed further right or left after these two phenomena, leading them to turn away from more bipartisan, moderate candidates and toward more fringe candidates like Trump and Sanders. Of all the voting constituencies, Sanders's voters were demonstrably the most critical of the economic system in America (Judis, 2016). In a Pew poll, 91% of his voters agreed with the statement that the "U.S. system unfairly favors the powerful". This voting group's pessimism on the American economy was also exemplified by a Pew survey that showed that 57% of his voters believed that hard work was no guarantee of success" (Judis, 2016). This is no surprise considering Sanders's identification as a socialist, which serves as a direct repudiation of the U.S. economic system and the supposed unfair advantages it awards the 'economic elite'.

Although the perception of socialism has begun to improve in recent years amongst Americans, its political viability has yet to be proven on the national stage and running as a self-proclaimed socialist most certainly damages almost any candidacy. This also isolated Sanders from moderate voters and Democrats who still had a considerable degree of faith in their party. In similar fashion to Trump's loss in 2020, it seems one of Sanders's biggest strengths may also have played a significant role in his downfall in 2016.

Sanders's 2020 Campaign

In terms of his policy positions, Sanders's 2020 campaign was basically no different than his 2016 campaign. The issue of economic inequality remained paramount to him and his voting constituency, and he continued to frame the problems of the country as a righteous battle between the interests of the greedy economic elite and the American working class. The Sanders campaign basically re-employed the losing strategy that lost him the 2016 primary in hopes that four years of a Trump presidency would push enough moderate Democrats leftward enough to vote for Sanders, a populist, socialist, party outsider. However, Sanders actually performed much worse than he did in 2016, likely because voters feared he wouldn't be able to beat Trump in a general election while running on a 'socialism'. Sanders's performance worsened in 2020 by wide margins in the first four caucuses and primaries. This trend continued into the Super Tuesday where he worsened his numbers from 2016 by an average of 19.4% (Hudak, 2020).

A common defense of Sanders that emerged from his supporters when he underperformed was that the crowd of candidates was much more crowded than it was in 2016, thus making it a race between multiple candidates rather than a two-person race like in 2016.

However, in Vermont (Sanders's home state), Sanders barely managed to grab a majority (50.6%) in 2020, dropping about 35 points from his total in 2016. Also, Sanders continued to underperform after Elizabeth Warren (his biggest progressive competitor) dropped from the race, thus making it once again a two-person race between him and Joe Biden, his moderate competitor. There were nine primaries after Warren dropped from the race, and Sanders underperformed by an average of 16%, losing three states he had previously won in 2016 (Hudak, 2020). Ultimately, Sanders performed much worse in 2020 than he did in 2016, and there are a few major reasons why.

Firstly, Hillary Clinton wasn't necessarily the most appealing candidate for Democratic voters in 2016. After the 2016 election in a USA Today/Suffolk University poll, 62% of Democrats and Independents surveyed said that she shouldn't run in 2020, with only 23% of voters surveyed saying they would be excited by her campaign (McCaskill, 2016). For many reasons, such as her record as former Secretary of State, allegations regarding her time as Secretary of State, her policies, etc., voters weren't particularly fond of Clinton, meaning it is very possible that Sanders was looked at by many as nothing more than a Clinton alternative. This means that it is very possible that a considerable amount of Sanders's voters in 2016 were reluctantly choosing him because he was the only Clinton alternative rather voting for him based off deep convictions tethering them to his policies.

Sanders's campaign did make some changes from 2016 to 2020 to obtain the black vote, which was essential for him to even come close to obtaining the Democratic nomination. He hired a more diverse staff, attended several events at historically black colleges (HBCUs), and spoke to black members of the media more often (Harris, 2020). Regardless of his efforts,

however, Sanders did as badly with the African American community as he did in 2016. Rather than voting for Sanders, black voters flocked to their party's standard bearer in the 2020 election, Joe Biden. After South Carolina Representative Jim Clyburn, who's arguably the most influential African American in congress, endorsed Joe Biden ahead of the pivotal South Carolina primary, Biden went on to outperform Sanders by a wide margin and win the primary (Enten, 2020).

African Americans are not only Democrats, but strong Democrats. This demographic has voted in an almost monolithic manner for decades, as no Republican presidential candidate has received more than 13% of the black vote ever since 1968 and surveys show that upwards of 80% of African Americans identify as Democrats (White, Laird, 2020). This may be why the black voting bloc is more resistant than other groups to party outsiders such as Sanders, as they have been steadfast democrats for about half a century. African Americans are also surprisingly a very conservative voting bloc, as exemplified by political scientist Tasha Philpot's book titled "Conservative but Not Republican" (White, Laird, 2020). This makes African American voters not only more resistant to party outsiders, but even more resistant to outsiders like Sanders that come from the left. There is a myriad of reasons why black voters are such steadfast Democrats, many of them rooted in a long and complicated history that black Americas has had with party politics, but the fact of the matter is that black Americans are very strong Democrats and this damages Sanders's chances of capturing their votes as a leftist outsider within the Democratic party, regardless of how many black universities he speaks at.

Sanders's position as an outsider may potentially strengthen the bond between him and his young, socialist, progressive base, but it also caused him to receive very few endorsements in 2020, as he did in 2016. Operating outside of the Democratic establishment, which is almost

inevitable when you label yourself a socialist, caused Sanders to only receive nine endorsements in 2016 and ten in 2020 (Enten, 2020). There were a few other factors that led to Sanders's 2020 loss, such as the absent 'youth turnout surge' that he had hoped for, but his radicalism, socialism, and failures to obtain the black vote are ultimately what led to his concessions in 2016 and 2020.

Summary

A few decades ago, Bernie Sanders's brand of socialist populism may have seemed to be an incredibly fringe set of beliefs held only by small pockets of the country, but in the 2016 and 2020 elections, he proved that one can organize and empower an expansive and powerful political movement by employing the populist discourse that Sanders utilized so effectively. Dissatisfaction amongst both Republican and Democrat voters with the prevailing policies of the past few decades has led voters to lose faith in the traditional power-wielders within both parties, thus leading them to turn to populist outsiders that share their ire with 'the establishment' or 'the elite' such as Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders. Voters seem to increasingly feel like their interests aren't shared by the traditional leadership within the GOP of the Democrat party. This willingness of voters to turn away from their parties and toward outsiders is a potentially dangerous phenomenon, as it is leading to more fringe candidates amassing support and power. This trend could become very ugly if unchecked, as history has demonstrated. However, Sanders's failed campaigns in 2016 and 2020 seem to indicate that there might be different levels of dissatisfaction amongst Republican voters and Democrat voters. Perhaps Sanders's failures are indicative of a Democratic establishment that is simply more entrenched, unified, and

powerful than the Republican establishment. These notions will be expanded upon further in the conclusionary chapter.

CONCLUSION

Trump and Republicans

Donald Trump won the 2016 Republican nomination and subsequently won the 2016 presidential race as a political outsider who connected with voters in a way that the GOP leadership hadn't in years. His victory acted effectively as a hostile takeover of the Republican Party, as exemplified by the GOP's total capitulation to him (with a few exceptions) after he took office and up until the date in which this is being written. Unlike most past administrations, both Republican and Democratic, Trump forced complete and utter loyalty, rewarding those who followed him with endorsements and positive social media posts and punishing those who publicly indicted him on his many mistakes (such as his public behavior, generally) by disavowing their candidacies and disparaging them publicly. He capitalized on latent attitudes among vast swaths of the populace of authoritarianism, xenophobia, nativism, exclusionary nationalism, and racism to launch himself into the Oval Office. Not only did Trump effectively weaponize regressive beliefs that still act as salient political tools, but he also effectively utilized a general feeling of dissatisfaction amongst voters (Republican voters more so than Democrats) regarding the prevailing policies of the past few decades. Many voters became disenchanted with neoliberalism, some of the major trade deals passed in the last few decades, outsourcing, non-essential and costly foreign wars, and the resulting economic crisis caused by these phenomena.

Data highlighting historical trends regarding the Republican and Democrat parties from Gallup suggests that voter satisfaction with both political parties has decreased in the last few decades. From 1992 to 2020, the percentage of voters who expressed favorable views of the

Democrat Party dropped from 54% in 1992 to 43% in 2020 while Republicans dropped from 53% in 1992 to 40% in 2020 (Gallup, 2020). This suggests that there has been a general decline amongst American voters regarding their satisfaction and faith in both political parties, making alternative options such as Donald Trump a more viable option regardless of his rambunctious behavior and lack of political experience. What is also interesting about this data is that the decrease in favorable views of Republicans is about a thirteen-point difference while the decrease for Democrats is about eleven points, which suggests that although skepticism of both parties has increased, the negative perception of the Republican Party is stronger than that of Democrats, which could be why the party was so ripe for the seizure of Donald Trump.

Pew Research published a 2015 study in late August that demonstrates a steady decline in the American public's perception of both political parties. In 2008, 12% of those surveyed expressed unfavorable views of both parties. In 2004, 10% did so and in 2000, only 7% of those surveyed expressed negative views of both political parties (Smith, 2015).

What seems most salient to the topic of populism and Trump's ascension to office in 2016, however, is that this increase in negative views of both parties is largely concentrated among Republicans and Republican-leaning independents, who have become increasingly frustrated with the Republican Party (Smith, 2015). What's incredibly fascinating about this is that the percentage of Republicans who viewed the GOP unfavorably in 2015 had more than doubled from 12% to 27% from January to late August in a span of only about eight months. Regarding voters who are on the fence, meaning independents that lean toward either party, 66% of Democratic leaners viewed the Democratic Party favorably, while just 27% didn't. Voters

leaning Republican, however, were far more critical of the GOP with 44% who said they have a favorable view of the Republican Party, while 50% view the party negatively (Smith, 2015).

In many ways, Donald Trump's ascension to the Oval Office in 2016 serves as a populist repudiation of the GOP's policies and behavior in the last few decades, as exemplified by the data compiled by Gallup and the Pew Research Center mentioned above. Republican voters have become frustrated with their party, and Donald Trump's candidacy provided them with the perfect attack vector from which to punish the GOP leadership, as Trump's position as an outsider provided a compelling alternative for millions of unsatisfied Republican and Republican leaning voters. In many ways, Trump's candidacy and policy platform served as an indictment of the GOP leadership on a variety of topics. For example, Trump's embrace of protectionist trade policies served as a critique of the GOP's decisions regarding neoliberalism and trade deals and Trump's discourse regarding the need for troop withdrawals from the middle east served as a critique of the GOP's decisions to overextend America's military duties abroad while neglecting domestic problems. In many ways, Trump's presidency was a problem, but it seems more so that Trump was a symptom of broader, more widespread problems such as latent regressive attitudes amongst the American populace and ineffective leadership and its consequences on the American people.

Sanders and Democrats

As the data from Gallup and the Pew Research Center suggest, dissatisfaction with both political parties has risen in the past few decades in response to poor leadership and the results of said leadership (or lack thereof). Although the long-term difference seems to be relatively small

according to the Gallup data, in recent years, as suggested by the Pew data, general disillusionment with the Republican Party has far outweighed that of the Democratic Party, which culminated in Trump's presidency and Sanders's losses in the 2016 and 2020 Democratic Primaries. Both Democrats and Republicans have grown to be more skeptical of their respective political parties, but it seems that Republican voters have been far more frustrated and disappointed with the leadership of their own political party, thus allowing for a greater summation of support for Trump than that of Sanders with Democrat voters. It seems both parties are waning in terms of voter satisfaction, but this phenomenon has been accelerated with the Republicans more so than with the Democrats. Because Democrat voters seem to have more faith in their political party (although it is also declining), the party has been more resistant to outsiders like Bernie Sanders, which is one of the many reasons why he didn't win either primary.

However, Sanders did come relatively close on both occasions to becoming the Democratic nominee, even while running as a self-proclaimed 'socialist'. This in and of itself demonstrates how unsatisfied millions of Democrat voters have become with their party, as many felt like turning to a party outsider like Sanders was a viable alternative to the status quo leadership of the Democrat Party. Sanders's position as an outsider acting outside of the interests of the party leadership in many ways strengthened his connection to his young, progressive base. However, this also damaged his prospects of becoming president because he failed to receive support from much of the Democratic establishment, as exemplified by his small number of endorsements. Sanders's branding of himself as a 'socialist' also damaged his electability on a national stage as most Americans still have a generally negative perception of socialism. This is

also particularly damaging to his prospects because the black vote is necessary for the Democratic nomination, and this group tends to be less liberal or left leaning than Sanders's progressive base.

Although Bernie Sanders didn't achieve his goal of becoming President of the United States of America, his movement has been incredibly impactful, especially amongst young voters. He has shined a national spotlight on economic inequality in a way that many politicians haven't been able to do, and he changed the perception of socialism in America by comparing his proposals to liberal, capitalist regimes such as Denmark and Sweden rather than actual socialist regimes such as the former USSR. In many ways, he succeeded, but not enough to ascend to the Oval Office. As mentioned in chapter three, Sanders lost for a variety of reasons, such as his advocacy of socialism, his lack of endorsements, his failures to capture the black vote, etc. How much each of these phenomena contributed to his two defeats would be an interesting question to investigate, but this is outside the breadth of this study. What is, however, imperative to understand, is that regardless of his defeats in the Democratic Primaries, Sanders successfully utilized left-wing populism by pitting the American working class against the economic elite to organize an incredibly popular movement. He did so knowing that it hadn't been done before (or at least not successfully), and the success of his movement (especially amongst young voters) seems to have pushed the Democratic Primary leftward, as conversations about wealth redistribution, higher taxes on high income earners, and universal healthcare have become much more common in recent years. It's important to note the difference between Sanders and Trump here in so far as Trump's impact has been that of a strangle-hold on the Republican Party ever since his ascension to office, while Sanders has had a softer impact on the

Democratic Party. The major difference seems to be that Trump's impact was more so rhetorical than anything, (as in he demanded and received loyalty from most GOP members but he employed many typical Republican policies such as tax cuts) and Sanders's impact seems to have influenced the Democratic policy agenda. In short, most Republicans feel much more compelled to bow to Trump while a relatively small number of Democrats feel like they must endorse Sanders's brand of progressive socialism in order to perform well politically. His constant critiques of the neoliberal orthodoxy have resonated with millions of voters who feel cheated or betrayed by the system when they find out that billion-dollar corporations such as Amazon commonly pay no income taxes while regular citizens struggle to make ends meet (Huddleston, 2019). Although Sanders is unlikely to run for office again due to his age, his movement's impacts are far from done. What this means for the future is uncertain. If progressive, socialist candidates like Sanders, Alexandria Ocasio Cortez, or Ilhan Omar continue to push the Democratic Party leftward, then it is reasonable to assume that eventually one of them will become president. Managing a congressional district, however, is very different from managing an entire country, so the subsequent effects on the country are tough to predict. One thing that isn't so tough to predict, however, is that fringe, leftist candidates like Sanders are likely to be more and more common as time progresses. Whether this is good or bad is for history to decide.

Why this is Significant?

Voters have become increasingly disenchanted with the American political system and the dominant parties that act within it, as exemplified by a preponderance of evidence

demonstrating a decline in voter satisfaction. This has allowed populist candidates from the margins, both right and left, to gain massive amounts of support by offering a populist critique of many of the established centers of power that dictate policy for the rest of the country. Voters seem to feel less connected to the people that lead them, as they feel they have been failed by their leaders for decades. This is due to a myriad of phenomena such as the rising costs of living, stagnant wages, the outsourcing of jobs, costly (and seldom beneficial) foreign wars, and the concentration of wealth in the hands of an increasingly small group of elites. Much of populist discourse suggests that a small group of corrupt individuals with disproportionate access to economic and political power use such power in selfish ways that advance their interests while neglecting the needs of the rest of America. This notion seems to be gaining traction, thus making it politically viable in ways that it previously hadn't been because many Americans are increasingly perceiving this to be true. In a lot of ways, it is, as exemplified by the staggering wealth inequality in America. It seems that one of the reasons populist rhetoric has become more feasible is because many of the general ideas expressed by populists seem to reflect reality, as many Americans have begun to notice problems like lax campaign finance laws and the influence of money in politics.

As exemplified by Pippa Norris's and Ronald Inglehart's 'Cultural Backlash', however, declining faith in political parties and their faulty leadership isn't the only viable explanation for the shift toward populist candidates such as Trump. There is an important cultural element to all of this, as brought up in Chapter two's mention of authoritarian attitudes amongst Trump voters. Survey data from 1970 to present day indicate a large shift away from materialist values to post-materialist values (Norris, Inglehart, 2019). Up until around 1970, most people in high-income

Western societies prioritized materialist values such as economic growth and maintain order, but after WWII, an unprecedented level of prosperity and affluence was achieved in these high-income societies, thus leading to an intergenerational shift toward post-materialist values such as ethnic/racial diversity, environmentalism, gender equality, etc. (Inglehart, 2007). This shift has, in many ways, represented a shift away from traditional values and cultural norms, and Norris and Inglehart argue that this immense change has led to a cultural backlash (hence the name of the book) amongst social conservatives that are generally upset at the pace of this societal change and the cultural distance between the world they grew up in and the world they inhabit today (Norris, Inglehart, 2019).

In this sense, Trump may possess a very distinct advantage over Sanders. Trump's reactionary rhetoric appeals to this large faction of discontent social conservatives by employing regressive discourse that appeals to latent attitudes such as racism and xenophobia that still act as salient, powerful political tools. His appeal to authoritarian attitudes seems to be what has allowed Trump to gain a level of support that Sanders hasn't been able to capture. In many ways, authoritarianism didn't win because of Trump (as it existed long before him and will exist long after), rather Trump won because of authoritarianism. He successfully captured voters who prioritized security, tradition, religiosity, and conformity over socially liberal values, and this proved to be a winning strategy.

The authoritarian populist discourse employed by Trump isn't unique to the United States, however, as this phenomenon has been replicated in many other countries such as in the cases of Marine le Pen of France and Viktor Orban of Hungary. This seems to imply that discontent with the rapid shift in cultural values in the last half-century is a widespread trend that

affects Western, affluent societies most. Perhaps the pace of change has been too fast or revolutionary (in the metaphorical sense) and this backlash would not have happened if the shift in values was more long-term and incremental. It could be that amongst older cohorts, socially liberal values originally represented a welcome shift toward individuality and personal freedom, but in recent years, they perceive many of the socially liberal values now being embraced to be too distant from their value system, thus representing an attack on their way of life and the countries they've grown up in and helped build. These questions are outside the purview of this study, but the value of the answers to these questions could help one better understand many of the issues discussed here.

In short, populism seems like it's here to stay. Authoritarian populism currently seems to be more politically viable in Western societies than left-wing populism considering the resurgence of latent attitudes of authoritarianism. Trump has weaponized these latent attitudes in an incredibly effective way, thus allowing him to ascend to the Oval Office. Sanders's left-wing populism has not allowed him to capitalize on these latent attitudes, thus culminating in his two losses in the 2016 and 2020 Democratic Primaries. Although both politicians have some things in common, more so in their economic stances (although there is considerable distance between the two, obviously), they deviate greatly on cultural issues. In recent years, cultural issues have become much more salient than the discussions regarding tax rates (which are more negotiable) that made up much of the political discourse a few decades ago. Thus, Trump has weaponized dissatisfaction amongst Republican voters with the GOP, latent authoritarian attitudes in the populace, general discontent among voting cohorts with neoliberalism, and appeals to racism, xenophobia, etc. to capture the Republican Party and make it bend to his will. What this means

for the future is uncertain. One need only look toward history to see what happens when political power is concentrated in individuals more so than parties, ideas, or systems. This could indeed be incredibly dangerous for democracy, but Trump doesn't care because it is good for him. This is precisely why Donald Trump won and Bernie Sanders lost.

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