

Donald Trump and American Populism



New Perspectives on the American Presidency

DONALD TRUMP AND AMERICAN POPULISM



Richard S. Conley

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Populist disrupter-in-chief

The corrupt establishment knows that we are a great threat to their power. They know if we win their power is gone, and it's returned to you the people . . . But it all depends on whether we let the corrupt media decide our future, or we let the American people decide our future.

—Donald Trump, October 13, 2016

I. Introduction

On November 8, 2016 Republican standard-bearer Donald J. Trump shook the American political landscape to its foundations, from the peninsula of the Sunshine State north to Coal Country and west across the fruited plain. In light of Democrats' relative advantage in delegate-rich states in the northeast and California, his Electoral College victory was tantamount to drawing an inside straight at a poker table somewhere at a remote, Native-owned casino in "flyover territory." Indeed, bettors in Las Vegas and abroad staked the odds *against* a Trump victory at five to one on Election Day.¹ Written off by pundits, disdained by the media, derided by Democrats, and scorned by so-called "establishment" primary rivals in the Grand Old Party (GOP) for whom he invented flippant and insulting sobriquets, the idiosyncratic and irascible business mogul seemingly surprised everyone—save perhaps himself—by narrowly prevailing in key swing states including Florida, Michigan, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin to carry the Electoral College 304–227 over rival Hillary Clinton.

¹ Lucinda Shen, "Here's how much you could have won betting on Trump's presidency." *Fortune*, November 9, 2016. <http://fortune.com/2016/11/09/donald-trump-president-gamble/>

Trump dismissed critics who immediately called into question the legitimacy of his victory. His detractors underscored that he lost the popular vote by nearly 2.9 million ballots, the largest margin in U.S. history.² Holding steadfast in the Machiavellian messaging that characterized his campaign, the president-elect ignited a Twitterstorm within days of his victory by drawing upon a central component of his populist political instincts, conspiracy theory, to provide an alternative narrative to Clinton's future book *What Happened*. Rejecting the thesis of Russian interference in the election, dismissing the impact of the late October reopening of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) inquiry into the former Secretary of State's handling of emails, and shrugging off allegations of collusion between members of his campaign and the Kremlin in Moscow, Trump contended instead, without any empirical evidence, that "[i]n addition to winning the Electoral College in a landslide, I *won the popular vote* if you deduct the millions of people who voted illegally."³

Several months later in January 2017, during his first White House interview, the president doubled down on his belief in rampant voter fraud by illegal immigrants, particularly in Democratic states such as New York and California that overwhelmingly backed Clinton and were essentially responsible

² Of the four other presidents who won the Electoral College but lost the popular vote, John Quincy Adams prevailed in the Electoral College in 1824 with 38,000 fewer popular votes than Andrew Jackson, who won a plurality; in 1876 Samuel Tilden culled 254,000 more popular votes than Rutherford B. Hayes, who won the Electoral College when the delegations for Florida, Louisiana, South Carolina and Oregon cast ballots for him in exchange for an end to federal troops in the South, thus ending Reconstruction in the Compromise of 1877; in 1888 Benjamin Harrison lost the popular vote to Grover Cleveland by nearly 91,000 votes; and in 2000 George W. Bush lost the popular vote to Al Gore by nearly 544,000 votes.

³ @realDonaldTrump, "In addition to winning the Electoral College in a landslide, I won the popular vote if you deduct the millions of people who voted illegally." *Twitter*, November 27, 2016, 12:30 p.m. <https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/802972944532209664>. Emphasis added.

for the popular/electoral vote disjuncture.⁴ Trump's unsubstantiated and widely refuted allegations were apparently tied to an *Infowars* story claiming that three million illegal aliens had cast votes unlawfully in 2016.⁵ Whether Trump believed the uncorroborated report was perhaps less significant than the immediate furor his comments created. The media became instantaneously distracted and suspended discussion of front-page newspaper stories questioning the president's business income in light of prohibitions under the Emoluments Clause in Article I, Section 9 of the Constitution.⁶ Trump clearly did not consider the costs of vilifying illegal immigrants without facts. But the president's red herring had successfully, if temporarily, sidetracked the media from the expanding Russia collusion narrative of his critics, derailed public attention from pressing legal questions, and rallied his supporters by indicting his old political opponent "Crooked Hillary" anew—even if the election had been over for nearly three months.

Trump's specious chronicle of the 2016 popular vote for the presidency represents paramount elements of a populist political

⁴ Philip Bump, "Why did Trump lose the popular vote? Because he didn't care about it. And because they cheated." *Washington Post*, January 26, 2017. https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/politics/wp/2017/01/26/why-did-trump-lose-the-popular-vote-because-he-didnt-care-about-it-and-because-they-cheated/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.6353f3f54e11

⁵ Katie Forster, "Donald Trump's false claim about illegal votes based on unverified tweet posted on conspiracy website." *The Independent* (UK), November 28, 2016. <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/donald-trump-millions-illegal-aliens-voted-greg-phillips-three-million-tweet-infowars-alex-jones-a7443006.html>

⁶ Andrew Restuccia, "Trump's baseless assertions of voter fraud called 'stunning'." *Politico*, November 27, 2016. <https://www.politico.com/story/2016/11/trump-illegal-voting-clinton-231860>. Maryland and the District of Columbia filed a lawsuit regarding Trump's international hotel in Washington, DC. See Ann E. Marimow and Jonathan O'Connell, "Trump can profit from foreign government business at his hotel, if he doesn't do favors in return, Justice Dept. says." *Washington Post*, June 11, 2018. https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/public-safety/obscure-no-more-the-emoluments-clause-is-back-again-in-a-federal-court/2018/06/09/cf052832-6a72-11e8-9e38-24e693b38637_story.html?utm_term=.8d31666b1862

style that he plays like a finely tuned instrument. The recurrent themes include the unending recrimination of elites and political foes, unseemly personal invectives, the misrepresentation of facts tied to anti-intellectual discourse, calculated semiotics focused on the abjection of the “foreign” or “other” as he defines it, and conspiracy narratives and the invention of bogeymen to rationalize challenges, setbacks, and defeats. Improvisational and unpredictable, Trump’s unapologetically truculent and imperious approach to governance, often via instantaneous phone messaging and unilateralism, generates optics of chaos while fostering ample uncertainty and angst, especially for those who find themselves in the president’s oratorical crosshairs.

Extended repartees on Twitter are often electronic salvos fired by the thin- (if nicely tan-) skinned chief executive in the early morning hours after presumably stewing about perceived personal slights. As the president explained years before, “When someone attacks me, I always attack back . . . except 100x more. This has nothing to do with a tirade but rather, a way of life!”⁷ Indeed as Trump biographers Charlie Laderman and Brendan Simms suggest, Trump’s worldview is such that life is “combat,” and an interminable struggle without a clear victory—for him personally or for the nation—is intolerable.⁸ Social media posts, press conferences, and post-election rallies bordering on the Founders’ worst fears of demagoguery are replete with verbal assaults *du jour* on the media, including allegations of unfair coverage and “fake news” reporting by individual journalists and entire networks, notwithstanding Fox News until August 2019.⁹ No one—from cabinet secretaries, judges, and members of Congress on either

⁷ @realDonaldTrump, “When someone attacks me, I always attack back . . . except 100x more. This has nothing to do with a tirade but rather, a way of life!” *Twitter*, November 11, 2012, 5:56 a.m. <https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/267626951097868289?lang=en>

⁸ Charlie Laderman and Brendan Simms, *Donald Trump: The Making of a World View* (New York: I. B. Tauris, 2017), pp. 4–5.

⁹ Caitlin O’Kane, “‘Fox isn’t working for us anymore’: President Trump promises to find a new outlet.” *CBS News*, August 29, 2019. <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/fox-news-donald-trump-tweet-fox-isnt-working-for-us-anymore-2019-08-28/>

side of the aisle to despots like Kim Jong-Un and longstanding allies in Europe or Canada—escapes the president’s rhetorical wrath if he senses an affront to his character or self-proclaimed mission to “Make America Great Again.” Elites of any stripe are the low-hanging fruit for Trump’s strategic rants.

At first glance, some of the president’s social media tactics appear as ad hoc as they are inexplicable. Examples include his impromptu involvement in controversies such as the national anthem in the National Football League (NFL) that are peripheral to his policy agenda to the bizarre reposting of a tweet by a British extremist party leader featuring a Muslim migrant assailing a Dutch boy that prompted outrage in the United Kingdom.¹⁰ Closer analysis, however, reveals another dimension to Trump’s populist style: a focus on challenging not only political elites but also cultural elites. Attacks on cultural elites are aimed at galvanizing his base as much as promises to restore economic prosperity to those who have suffered decades of abuse by inept leaders.

Three years into Trump’s presidency, one observation is straightforward: A central component to his populist campaigning and leadership style is the *spectacle*, in which “particular details stand for broader and deeper meanings,”¹¹ gestures overshadow results, and performance outweighs and often obfuscates facts. “The artifice of his authenticity and infantilization of discourse,” writes Robert Singh, “were integral to his appeal. The very characteristics attracting obloquy—insults, assaults on ‘politically correct’ taboos, genitalia references, violent language—testified to his outspoken credentials as credibly effecting ‘change’ to an ossified politics-as-usual.”¹² Often as disorienting, discordant, and confounding in

¹⁰ Elizabeth Landers and James Masters, “Trump retweets anti-Muslim videos.” CNN, November 30, 2017. <https://edition.cnn.com/2017/11/29/politics/donald-trump-retweet-jayda-fransen/index.html>

¹¹ Bruce Miroff, “The Presidency and the Public: Leadership as Spectacle.” In Michael Nelson (ed.), *The Presidency and the Political System*, 4th edition (Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly Inc., 1995), pp. 274, 278.

¹² Robert Singh, “‘I, the People’: A Deflationary Interpretation of Populism, Trump, and the United States Constitution.” *Economy and Society* 46, no. 1 (2017): 26.

logic and syntax as a script from Eugène Ionesco's theater of the absurd, Trump's histrionics are deliberately calculated to lend legitimacy to his populist panache. "Populist trust," Maxine Molyneux and Thomas Osborne contend,

can be generated by idiocy in that such a personal style is both an individualizing yet also hard-to-fake device for signaling trust on the lines of "if I am this absurd (or, if Trump, this out of line), I must be genuine".¹³

If the president's assaults on decency and his politically incorrect discourse leave the Washington patriciate breathlessly discomfited, the malodorous plebeians condemned for shopping at Walmart by uppity, if now-disgraced, FBI agents like Peter Strzok wryly clamor that Trump is doing exactly the job they elected him to undertake: upsetting the apple cart of the entrenched elite, lambasting a putatively dishonest media, and taking aim at a supposedly self-interested permanent political class that manipulates institutional rules to the detriment of the forgotten voter. As a result, little if anything in the president's quiver of rhetorically sharp arrows, including personal demonization of political foes and the delegitimization of democratic processes and political institutions, formal or informal, is off-limits. As *Wall Street Journal* correspondent Gerald Seib asserts,

Disruptor-in-chief is a title Mr. Trump likely would accept, with pride. Disrupting the status quo is what he does. He set out to disrupt the Republican Party, then the presidential-election process, and, ultimately, Washington. He has done it all.¹⁴

¹³ Maxine Molyneux and Thomas Osborne, "Populism: A Deflationary View." *Economy and Society* 46, no. 1 (2017): 6.

¹⁴ Gerald F. Seib, "On the world stage, Trump remains disruptor-in-chief." *Wall Street Journal*, June 7, 2017. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/on-the-world-stage-trump-remains-disruptor-in-chief-1496677230>

II. The populist phenomenon in perspective: comparative and historical challenges to the political establishment

Populism, Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser assert, “is a label seldom claimed by people or organizations themselves. Instead, it is ascribed to others, most often with a negative connotation.”¹⁵ Critics of populism frequently characterize the phenomenon as the politics of grievance focused less on problem-solving and more on assigning blame to elites or scapegoating some disadvantaged group for the ordinary citizen’s woes.

If populism is a disruptive force in the political arena as the Trump presidency suggests, it is because the approach focuses on the politics of conflict and privileges polarization rather than consensus-building. The political style dichotomizes society into two opposing groups, elites and ordinary citizens, and pits them against one another. Populists claim to represent the “people” outside the prevailing governing structure, which they view as corrupted. They clamor for direct democracy, favor majoritarianism, deprecate mediated institutions, and are prone to de-emphasize if not directly challenge minority rights in both the Madisonian sense and in terms of race and ethnicity. They are inclined to reduce complex problems to some least common denominator and lure supporters with simplified solutions. With an anti-intellectual tendency to abnegate facts, science, and reason, populists often descend into the realm of conspiracy theory to explain complex social, economic, and political challenges. Nostalgia for the past, or a preoccupation with the return to some golden moment in time, may also inform populist rhetoric. Nativism is also a frequent hallmark of the populist narrative and can pivot variably on religiosity and/or racial and ethnic differentiation. Populist nationalism concentrates on the articulation of national identity and the construction of claims to represent some component of “the people” as an underdog within

¹⁵ Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, *Populism: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), p. 2.

the nation.¹⁶ Populists may employ ultra-nationalist rhetoric as a means of scapegoating and excluding certain groups (e.g., ethnic, racial) from the nation-state and decisionmaking power within it. Finally, populist nationalists may accentuate national sovereignty and the inviolability of the nation-state within the international order.¹⁷

Such common, though not mutually exclusive, features of populism are discernible contemporaneously within a comparative frame. Trump's victory in the United States in 2016 represented one of many swells in the storm surge of grassroots discontent that catapulted successful populist candidates to victory elsewhere around the globe. In the last decade the populist wave, and its unevenly destabilizing effects on governing institutions, economic markets, and state–society relations, has washed ashore in both established democracies and developing nations. The tsunami effectively left established political orders in the flotsam and jetsam of an undulating tide of disillusioned and disgruntled voters. Populists' particularism, Joseph S. Nye, Jr., posits, “makes it an unlikely candidate for a broad ideological movement that enthusiasts proclaim.” Yet the contemporary vanguards of populism share one fundamental element of cohesion first and foremost: the “common denominator is *resentment* of powerful elites.”¹⁸

Let us consider briefly the comparative context. Across the Atlantic Emmanuel Macron, despite his technocratic roots in the French *appareil politique*, transformed a fledgling candidacy into a mass, independent populist movement, unprecedented since

¹⁶ Benjamin de Cleen and Yannis Stavrakakis. “Distinctions and Articulations: A Discourse Theoretical Framework for the Study of Populism and Nationalism.” *Javnost—The Public: Journal of the European Institute for Communication and Culture* 24, no. 4 (2017): 301–19.

¹⁷ Benjamin de Cleen, “Populism and Nationalism.” In Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, Paul Taggart, Paulina Ochoa Espejo, and Pierre Ostiguy (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Populism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), pp. 342–62.

¹⁸ Joseph S. Nye, Jr., “Populism is likely to continue in the United States.” “Symposium: Why Is Populism on the Rise and What Do the Populists Want?” *The International Economy* (Winter 2019): 12. Emphasis added.

Charles de Gaulle's victory in 1960, to conquer the Élysée in 2017. Macron claimed to "speak directly for 'the people,' eschewing the role of democratic intermediaries" and painting other parties as detached, self-interested, and corrupt. "Macron was able to succeed because such views were common in France, as they are in many countries experiencing a populist revolt."¹⁹ From the very moment he assumed the presidency of the Fifth Republic, however, Macron seemingly abjured his populist campaign by pursuing "austerity measures that directly affected everyday French citizens,"²⁰ including social security taxes and cuts to housing subsidies. The result was a dramatic loss in public support just three months into his term. The backlash culminated in widespread social unrest and spontaneous riots in the fall of 2017 by the radical *gilets jaunes* or yellow vest movement. The proximate cause for the civil disorder was a hike in fuel taxes that galvanized opposition to Macron's policies as out of touch with the voters he courted just months before.²¹

A year earlier in 2016, across the Channel from *douce France* to the white cliffs of Dover, a different populist saga had already begun to unfold in the United Kingdom (UK). The island nation voted narrowly in a referendum, 52–48 percent, to leave the European Union (EU) in the so-called Brexit vote. The balloting cast a long shadow on the future prospects for British unity, as England and Wales voted to sever ties with the Continental economic and political project while Scotland and Northern Ireland voted to remain. Regardless, the outcome was undeniably a redoubtable slap at the British elite. "Voters thought politicians, business leaders, and intellectuals had lost their right to control the system.

¹⁹ Harvey Feigenbaum, "Macron the populist." *Social Europe*, February 5, 2019. <https://www.socialeurope.eu/macron-the-populist>

²⁰ Maxence Lambrecq, "Pourquoi Emmanuel Macron s'effondre dans les sondages." *Europe1*, August 27, 2019. <https://www.europe1.fr/politique/pourquoi-emmanuel-macron-seffondre-dans-les-sondages-3419846>. Translated by author.

²¹ See Yann Algan *et al.*, "Qui sont les Gilets jaunes et leurs soutiens?" *Observatoire du Bien-être* 3, February 14, 2019. <http://www.sciencespo.fr/cevipof/sites/sciencespo.fr.cevipof/files/-Qui-sont-les-Gilets-jaunes-et-leurs-soutiens-1.pdf>

Voters thought the elite had contempt for their values—for their nationalism and interests.”²² Economic stagnation in the Euro-zone, combined with the rise of nationalist sentiment connected to the EU’s response to refugee crises precipitated by human catastrophes such as the Syrian Civil War, contributed to the outcome.

Indignation at political elites in the UK only deepened following the referendum as Prime Minister Theresa May sought unsuccessfully to negotiate an exodus with intransigent European leaders and a recalcitrant opposition in Westminster. She was ultimately forced to resign in July 2019 amidst domestic and international stalemate. Mounting exasperation with the political class was evident in the stunning gains for Nigel Farage’s Brexit Party two months earlier in the 2019 European Parliament elections. Farage, a firebrand nationalist, cobbled together the party just six weeks before the vote and gained 32 percent of the ballots in Britain with the promise to confront the Conservative and Labour parties domestically if a “no deal” exit from the EU were not implemented.²³ Regardless, with May’s resignation the task of negotiating Brexit fell, however briefly, to Boris Johnson, a flamboyant conservative leader known for his gaffes and no-holds-barred offensive commentary. His nationalist rhetoric at times resembles elements of Trump’s populist style as much as his uncanny hairstyle. Echoing Trump’s call to “Make America Great Again,” in his first speech to Parliament in July 2019 Johnson vowed that Brexit would make Britain the greatest place on earth.²⁴ Johnson’s pledge to withdraw the UK from the EU by October 31, 2019, if necessary without securing a settlement with Continental leaders, led to the crumbling of his majority and

²² John Mauldin, “3 reasons Brits voted for Brexit.” *Forbes*, July 6, 2016. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/johnmauldin/2016/07/05/3-reasons-brits-voted-for-brexit/#1a286d501f9d>

²³ Tom Kibasi, “Nigel Farage’s victory gives him the whip hand over British politics.” *The Guardian*, May 27, 2019. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/may/27/nigel-farage-brexit-party-elections>

²⁴ Guy Faulconbridge and Kylie MacLellan, “I’ll make Britain great again, PM Johnson says, echoing Trump.” *Reuters*, July 25, 2019. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-britain-eu/ill-make-britain-great-again-pm-johnson-says-echoing-trump-idUSKCN1UK0OG>

a call for new elections just six weeks after assuming the prime ministership—the third such national election since the Brexit referendum, which ultimately gave the Tories the majority needed for Johnson to make good on his promise. The UK formally exited the European Union on January 31, 2020.

From Eastern and Central Europe to South America the populist wave proved more alarming for its challenge to democratic norms and the scapegoating of minorities for economic and social challenges. While in the Ukraine in 2019 voters elected a comedian, Volodymyr Zelenskiy, “as an anti-establishment gesture, or simply as a joke,”²⁵ the populist onslaught in Poland and Hungary was scarcely a laughing matter. Illiberal “reforms” undertaken at the behest of the Polish Law and Order Party and Hungarian Prime Minister Victor Orbán’s Fidesz Party raised the specter of authoritarianism in two countries struggling to consolidate democracy since the fall of the Berlin Wall thirty years ago. As Anna Grzymala-Busse notes, “after populists gained power, they proceeded to politicize and neuter the constitutional courts, limit media access and freedoms, rewrite electoral laws, and divide society into ‘better’ and ‘worse’ sort of citizens.”²⁶ Similarly, in Latin America, Jair Bolsonaro’s victory in Brazil in 2018 provoked angst about a new anti-democratic spirit gripping one of the most ethnically diverse countries in the Western Hemisphere. Dubbed the “Trump of the Tropics,” Bolsonaro drew upon the theme of corruption, seized on the disintegration of the Left, and fed off political scandals that resulted in the impeachment of President Dilma Rousseff in 2016 to garner support.²⁷ He openly attacked political elites and threatened

²⁵ Katya Soldak, “Ukrainian humor: A comedian is elected president.” *Forbes*, April 21, 2019. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/katyasoldak/2019/04/21/ukrainian-humor-a-comedian-is-elected-president/#4129dffcd140>

²⁶ Joshua Tucker, “Will global populism continue to erode democracies?” *Washington Post*, September 13, 2017. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2017/09/13/will-global-populism-continue-to-erode-democracies/>

²⁷ Daniel Gallas, “Dilma Rousseff impeachment: How did it go wrong for her?” *BBC News*, May 12, 2016. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-36028247>

the arrest of adversaries, called minorities lazy and criminal, took aim at homosexuals by contending that Brazil should not become a “gay tourism paradise,” and argued he would not recognize any electoral outcome other than his own victory.²⁸

A. Trump, populism, and American political eras

Whatever Trump’s rhetorical or other bonds to contemporary populist homologues abroad, the president’s populist mold is an amalgam of similar themes his American predecessors have emphasized since the 1800s. The stylistic inheritance includes movements and/or individuals seeking to capitalize on anti-elitism and socio-economic angst dating to the Second Party Era. Most individual populist candidates have failed in their bids for the presidency and most movements have proven ephemeral. Still, as Nye asserts:

Populism is not new and it is as American as pumpkin pie. Some populist reactions are healthy for democracy (think of Andrew Jackson in the nineteenth century or the Progressive era at the beginning of the last century), while other nativist populists such the anti-immigrant Know-Nothing Party in the nineteenth century or Senator Joe McCarthy and Governor George Wallace in the twentieth century have emphasized xenophobia and insularity. The recent wave of American populism includes both strands.²⁹

Indeed, anti-elitism and nativism are two key elements of the populist style as it has been expressed intermittently over the Republic’s 230-year political history, complemented by majoritarian tendencies, a focus on the common man and claims to

²⁸ See Danielle Brant, “Bolsonaro Uses Same Fascist Tactics as Trump, Says Yale Professor.” *Folha de S. Paulo* (English version), October 4, 2018. <https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/internacional/en/world/2018/10/bolsonaro-uses-same-fascist-tactics-as-trump-says-yale-professor.shtml>; Tom Phillips and Anna Jean Kaiser, “Brazil must not become a ‘gay tourism paradise’, says Bolsonaro.” *The Guardian*, April 25, 2019. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/apr/26/bolsonaro-accused-of-inciting-hatred-with-gay-paradise-comment>

²⁹ Nye, “Why Is Populism on the Rise, and What Do the Populists Want?,” p. 13.

grassroots support, and anti-intellectual discourse. It is vital to emphasize that American populism is not wedded solely to the left or to the right of the political spectrum. “While populist ire is typically aimed at wealthy elites,” argues Joseph Lowndes, “populists tend to prefer the language of popular sovereignty to class, blurring distinctions in a broad definition of *the people*.”³⁰ The tie that binds populists across time—and figures and movements with motivations as different as Andrew Jackson, William Jennings Bryan and the People’s Party of the 1890s, to Ross Perot and Donald Trump—is the articulation of the concept of the ordinary, hardworking “people” facing an entrenched elite at odds with their interests. There is also a predisposition by populists to revert to the rhetoric of nativism and identify a scapegoat to blame for the woes of the down-trodden. As Lowndes further elaborates,

American populism dwells ambivalently in the discursive lineage of the classical/grotesque binary as it has always been couched in beliefs in Enlightenment ideals of progress, and in celebration of more bourgeois understandings of the production of wealth than the redistribution thereof . . . Populist identity thus distinguishes itself against those seen as exploitative elites above and parasitic dependents below, which are depicted as imprudent, excessive, wasteful, and indolent.³¹

The key to understanding the variant of American populism is the way in which its protagonists frame the nature of the conflict and seek to polarize the electorate. For example, in the progressive era populists like Bryan and the People’s Party defined the “people” as farmers and small merchant producers whose diminishing fortunes had been overlooked by a government whose “functions have been basely surrendered by our

³⁰ Joseph Lowndes, “Populism in the United States.” In Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, Paul Taggart, Paulina Ochoa Espejo, and Pierre Ostiguy (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Populism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), p. 232.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 237.

public servants to corporate monopolies.”³² In recent decades, for Ross Perot (and Donald Trump) elites sold out farmers and steelworkers with bad trade deals like the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). The alleged benefactors comprised Mexicans working in *maquiladoras* south of the border and illegal immigrants who traversed that border to take jobs away from Americans stateside.

In the post-World War II era, populism on the political right has manifested frequently as a reaction to social change. As Berlet and Lyons assert, this strain of populism “posits a noble hard-working middle group constantly in conflict with lazy, malevolent, or sinful parasites at the top and bottom of the social order.”³³ In attacking a privileged elite populists take aim at marginalized segments of population who do not qualify as members of the “people,” more commonly identified with white workers and small businessmen. To elaborate,

the populist world view sees a division not between rich and poor but between producers and parasites. And that’s why Trump’s supporters hold in equal contempt Wall Street financiers who got a bailout and undocumented immigrants who broke the law.³⁴

It is also why two decades earlier Ross Perot lambasted elites in Washington for selling ordinary Americans short with deficit spending and free trade deals while intimating that blacks on welfare were freeloading off hardworking taxpayers.

One may reach back into time to consider the only populist prior to Trump to accede to the nation’s highest political office to compare these dynamics historically. Andrew Jackson—a towering icon of nineteenth-century politics to whom Trump

³² “People’s Party Platform, 1896.” http://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/dispatch_textbook.cfm?smtID=3&psid=4067

³³ Chip Berlet and Matthew N. Lyons, *Right-Wing Populism in America: Too Close for Comfort* (New York: Guilford Press, 2000), p. 348.

³⁴ Mara Liasson, quoting Michael Lind of the New America Foundation, “Nativism and economic anxiety fuel Trump’s populist appeal.” *NPR*, September 4, 2015. <https://www.npr.org/sections/itsallpolitics/2015/09/04/437443401/populist-movement-reflected-in-campaigns-of-sanders-and-trump>

clumsily attempts to compare himself—took up the mantle of the common man following the “corrupt bargain” perpetrated by a cabal of crooked elites, including House Speaker Henry Clay, in the smoke-filled parlors of Congress to rob him of the presidency in 1824.

Politically Andrew Jackson’s Democratic Party coalition was made up of farmers, emergent industrial wage workers, and slave owners—all depicted as the “producing classes” of society. “Producers” understood themselves in contrast, on the one hand, to the idle rich such as bankers and land speculators, and on the other, to people of color, stereotyped as parasitic and/or predatory figures at the other end of the economic spectrum.³⁵

Upon winning the White House in 1828, Jackson’s subsequent war on the Bank of the United States, an institution he characterized as a representation of favoritism toward foreign and domestic economic elites against the common man, solidified his electoral base. The longer-term effect of Jackson’s politics of conflict was the rise of a new political party, the Whigs, founded essentially on personal contempt for the Tennessean as the nation edged ever closer to civil strife over slavery.

Apart from his diatribes against corrupt elites in Washington, Trump’s hardline stance against illegal immigration also brings to mind a time and political movement over a century-and-a-half ago notable for anti-immigration, nativist fervor linked to socio-economic fears. If Trump’s critics suggest that his pledge to build a wall at the southern border with Mexico and his intemperate and uncharitable comments about illegal immigrants are reflective of a deeper narrative of racism and xenophobia he fomented via coded language, the Know-Nothing Party (formally the American Party) of the 1850s did not mince words in its virulent disdain for foreigners—especially Irish Catholics—attempting to build a life in America. Drawing support from disaffected Whigs, the American Party nominated Millard Fillmore as its unsuccessful

³⁵ Joe Lowndes, “Populist Persuasions.” *The Baffler*, October 31, 2018. <https://thebaffler.com/latest/populist-persuasions-lowndes>

nominee for the presidency in 1856. Its platform included the mandate that “Americans must rule America” and proposed a “change in the laws of naturalization, making a continued residence of twenty-one years . . . and excluding all paupers or persons convicted of crime from landing upon our shores.”³⁶ While avoiding the slavery issue, the Know-Nothings attracted support from anti-Catholic, anti-immigration elements of the electorate in opposition to unresponsive politicians.³⁷ At the core of the Know-Nothings’ foreboding was a Papist conspiracy bent on changing the social fabric of the nation by inundating the United States with immigrants loyal to the Catholic Church and not to the Constitution. White Anglo-Saxon Protestants would be overrun eventually, altering the character of the nation forever.

Such an admixture of anti-elitism and nativism is evident in Trump’s populist style, though Irish and German immigrants are not his target. And it is not always the president himself who hatches conspiracy theories about those who oppose his policies on the southern border. But he lays the groundwork for speculation and provides ample fodder for imagination. Trump casts efforts to halt illegal crossings with reference to the enforcement of existing law while simultaneously highlighting the damage that undocumented workers, particularly illegals with criminal records, cause to the economy, the body politic, and grieving “angel families” who have been victimized by the loss of loved ones. The president belittles his immediate predecessors for failing to address border security. Some conservative media figures have taken Trump’s comments and run with them into a different realm to resurrect nativist sentiments reminiscent of Know-Nothingism. With the apparent blessing of the president’s advisors, commentators on Fox News, including Laura Ingraham, peddle the conspiratorial “great replacement theory” whereby Democratic politicians

³⁶ American Party Platform, 1856, Articles III and IX. *HistoryHub*, <http://historyhub.abc-clio.com/Support/Display/2144524?sid=2146163&cid=31&view=8&tab=3>

³⁷ Bruce Levine, “Conservatism, Nativism, and Slavery: Thomas R. Whitney and the Origins of the Know-Nothing Party.” *Journal of American History* (September 2001): 456.

“want to replace you, the American voters, with newly amnestied citizens and an ever increasing number of chain migrants” as a means of creating a permanent majority. For his part, Fox News host Tucker Carlson opined that “Latin American countries are changing election outcomes here by forcing demographic change on this country.”³⁸ To the degree that Trump employs anti-illegal immigration measures (largely through unilateral action) as a form of economic nationalism linked to an “America First” platform, it is a policy stance—as former chief strategist to the president, Steve Bannon, remarked—“that works for the vulgarians, that works for the hobbits, that works for know-nothings, that works for the peasants with the pitchforks” against elites who putatively regard working-class Americans who support Trump as intellectually inferior.³⁹

Nativism and nationalist revival in the populist narrative, whether on the left or the right of the political spectrum, is commonly linked to the idealization of the nation’s past in the bid to recover a real or imagined greatness in the halcyon days of a lost era. The restoration of American pre-eminence hinges on wresting power from political elites, attacking the administrative state, and empowering the forgotten voter. Trump’s focus on returning manufacturing jobs from overseas, resuscitating the coal, steel and energy industries, and nixing international trade deals unfair to the United States purposefully hearkens back to images of the grandeur of American industrial might in the nineteenth century. Who better to resurrect the successful exploits of those captains of industry with thousands of employees under their tutelage like J. P. Morgan, Andrew Carnegie, Henry Ford, and Andrew Mellon than the iconic New York real estate mogul

³⁸ Courtney Hagle, “How Fox News pushed the white supremacist ‘great replacement’ theory.” *MediaMatters*, August 5, 2019. <https://www.mediamatters.org/tucker-carlson/how-fox-news-pushed-white-supremacist-great-replacement-theory>

³⁹ Frances Stead Sellers and Aaron Blake, “Stephen Bannon’s apparent references to anti-immigrant Know-Nothing Party don’t seem so coincidental anymore.” *Washington Post*, February 2, 2017. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2017/02/02/stephen-bannons-apparent-references-to-anti-immigrant-know-nothing-party-dont-seem-so-coincidental-anymore/>

who rails against the economic ravages of globalization on the middle class? On the cultural side, Trump frequently emphasizes patriotism, reverence for the flag, and the nation's Christian heritage as a form of American exceptionalism that elites have attempted to unstitch from the seams of the nation's intricate weave. That narrative, including the president's staunch support for Israel, has bolstered his support among Evangelicals, despite their trepidations about his personal conduct.⁴⁰

At first glance a comparison of Trump to William Jennings Bryan's populism in the decade before and immediately after the turn of the twentieth century might seem curious. After all, Bryan's progressive agenda was squarely opposed to those emblematic "robber barons" (and the bankers who supported them) who he thought bore responsibility for the plight of the downtrodden. Unlike Trump, few questioned Bryan's commitment to Christian doctrines that he employed as a benchmark of moral authority. Yet the deeper theme of restoration of a glorious past connects Trump to Bryan, however oddly. For the latter, a return to an agrarian society—not industrialization—was the cornerstone of American wealth, progress, and social cohesion. Seizing upon the fervent debate over monetary policy in the 1896 election, Bryan trumpeted the cause of indebted farmers and small merchants against wealthy, moneyed elites with his opposition to the gold standard. "Bryan's populist rhetoric," argues Troy Murphy,

consistently defends a democratic ideal, expressed in part through the nobility of "plain people" and the moral fabric of agrarian communities, against the attacks of a rapidly changing world and the "force" of a supposed elite, whether those elites are the bankers of 1896 or the scientists of 1925.⁴¹

⁴⁰ Melissa Quinn, "Tony Perkins: Trump gets a 'mulligan' over Stormy Daniels from Evangelicals." *Washington Examiner*, January 23, 2018. <https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/tony-perkins-trump-gets-a-mulligan-over-stormy-daniels-from-evangelicals>

⁴¹ Troy M. Murphy, "William Jennings Bryan: Boy Orator, Broken Man, and the 'Evolution' of America's Public Philosophy." *Great Plains Quarterly* 40, no. 2 (2002): 85. Murphy's reference to 1925 regards the Scopes Monkey Trial involving the teaching of evolution in public schools to which Bryan was opposed on religious grounds.

Ultimately economic displacement and social anxiety drove support for the populist narrative of Bryan (unsuccessfully in 1896) as they did for Trump (successfully in 2016). Like Philippe Bridau in Balzac's *The Black Sheep*, one central and unflagging impulse in the populist style is to recover a vanished inheritance and restore the national family, or at least its forgotten siblings, to prominence and wealth.

Trump's bond to other twentieth-century populists underscores how *style* supplants substance in comparisons across time. Despite very different policy stances, Trump and the "Kingfish"—Huey Pierce Long of Louisiana—share qualities of "a politician of special character: a charismatic mass leader, one whose power exceeded the ordinary bounds of democratic politics, one who threatened to alter the very structure of American politics."⁴² Long's "Share Our Wealth" plan was the product of both his unbridled political ambition and quest for the presidency in 1936 stemming from the belief that Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal had failed to address sufficiently the predicament of the common man during the Depression. Long's redistributive program echoed exhortations now heard among Democrats jockeying for the White House in 2020, like Bernie Sanders or Elizabeth Warren: levying taxes on the highest wage earners, implementing a more progressive tax scheme, providing governmental health care benefits and free education, and guaranteeing paid vacation, among others.⁴³ As a major power broker, the Kingfish's threat to Roosevelt's re-election may well have prompted the president's efforts to cement a "second" New Deal in the summer of 1935.⁴⁴

Regardless, the strands of Long's populist narrative intertwine with Trump's insofar as they sew together the threads of economic

⁴² Alan Brinkley, "Huey Long, the Share Our Wealth Movement, and the Limits of Depression Dissidence." *Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association* 22, no. 2 (Spring 1981): 118.

⁴³ See Henry M. Christman (ed.), *Kingfish to America, Share Our Wealth: Selected Senatorial Papers of Huey P. Long* (New York: Schocken Books, 1985).

⁴⁴ See Edwin Amenta, Kathleen Dunleavy, and Mary Bernstein, "Stolen Thunder? Huey Long's 'Share Our Wealth,' Political Mediation, and the Second New Deal." *American Sociological Review* 59, no. 5 (1994): 678–702.

anxiety and anti-intellectualism. As Alan Brinkley notes, dissidents of the 1930s like Huey Long (and Father Charles Coughlin) were suspicious of an increasingly dominant corporate culture able to control their own lives and the lives of others. As outsiders themselves, they began “speaking for outsiders.”⁴⁵ They were particularly adept at

appealing to one of the fundamental anxieties of any modern, industrial society: the fear of lost autonomy, of powerlessness; the terrifying sense—and the more terrifying in a time of economic distress—of losing control, of discovering that one’s fate is in the hands of forces one cannot affect or even know. Virtually all members of modern society suffer such anxieties in some form, to some degree; Long and Coughlin, however, were appealing to those afflicted with such fears with special intensity.⁴⁶

To Long’s critics he was a “shameless demagogue” who “appealed to the wild unthinking radical fringe.”⁴⁷ The anti-intellectual component of his rhetoric dismissed socio-economic complexity and replaced specificity with promises that emphasized what his supporters would obtain in a transactional politics. “The Kingfish,” writes Ernest Bormann, “was vague about how the plan would work or how it would be translated into action. His explanation was always simple and plausible.” At the same time, “he could employ evidence, logic, ridicule, humor and pathos with skill and in ingenious proportion.”⁴⁸ Such a description of the slain senator from the Pelican State could be equally applied to Trump’s “Make America Great Again” rallies before and after the 2016 election.

Trump’s style connects emotively to contemporary populists like Barry Goldwater, George Wallace, and H. Ross Perot in both the realm of anti-intellectualism and matters of race.

⁴⁵ Alan Brinkley, “Comparative Biography as Political History: Huey Long and Father Coughlin.” *The History Teacher* 18, no. 1 (1984): 12.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

⁴⁷ Alden Hatch, *Franklin D. Roosevelt* (New York: Henry Holt, 1947), p. 221.

⁴⁸ Ernest Bormann, “Huey Long: Analysis of a Demagogue.” *Today’s Speech* 2, no. 3 (1954): 18–19.

Populists often float conspiracy theories onto which their supporters latch and subsequently embellish. Trump, of course, spoke of 2016 as a “rigged” election and thereafter “deep state” conspiracies to oust him from office. In 1964 Goldwater railed against the evils of big government and communism. Some in support of his presidential campaign, including members of the John Birch Society, ultimately interpreted such rhetoric in artful ways to advance the remarkable folly that President Dwight Eisenhower had been a shill for the Soviets. Goldwater spent significant time and resources combating a theme that gained traction like a runaway train and enabled the media to paint him further as part of the lunatic fringe. In 1968 Alabama Governor George Wallace viewed the civil rights movement as a chief component of a broader communist conspiracy that included the liberal establishment (judges, Congress, and the academy) and the national news media. Finally, Perot’s extensive history of engaging in conspiracy theory comprised not only plots by shadowy figures to assassinate him but also sabotage of his family by incumbent President George H. W. Bush in 1992. “Conspiracy theories were always part of his [Perot’s] appeal,”⁴⁹ writes John F. Harris. Yet,

Belief in conspiracies conveys at best poor understanding and at worst mental instability. Trump has displayed the same weakness, endorsing the “vaccines cause autism” myth, the “Obama born in Kenya” canard, the “ Clintons killed Vince Foster” rumor, the “Rafael Cruz involved in the JFK assassination” nonsense and many more crackpot theories.⁵⁰

Populists’ expression of nativist tendencies also frequently occasions charges of racism and xenophobia from veiled language or outright hostility toward minorities. Notwithstanding Wallace, an

⁴⁹ John F. Harris, “Ross Perot—The father of Trump.” *Politico*, July 9, 2019. <https://www.politico.com/story/2019/07/09/ross-perot-the-father-of-trump-1404720>

⁵⁰ Mona Charen, “Ross Perot’s lessons for today.” *RealClearPolitics*, September 2, 2016. https://www.realclearpolitics.com/articles/2016/09/02/ross_perots_lessons_for_today_131686.html

avowed segregationist, the truth is in the eye of the beholder. Following in the footsteps of Goldwater and Perot, Trump paints what psychologists describe as an “ambiguous image.” The rhetoric he employs may be conceptualized in a way similar to Rubin’s vase, where at one glance there appears to be a single flower container while at another glimpse one might perceive two faces as the vase fades into the background.⁵¹ The duck/rabbit illusion is another example of the illusion of reversible images in which one’s focus on the left- or right-hand side of the image determines which animal is perceived.⁵² The point is that both perceptions cannot be processed visually at the same time. The intersection of the populist style and racial rhetoric is sometimes as perplexing as these cognitive puzzles, since the interpretation of what the image *really* is must be left to the observer who attempts to make sense of it.

On the one hand it is difficult to typecast Goldwater as a racist and a sympathizer of white nationalists. He was a member of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored Persons (NAACP) and the Urban League. Unlike Trump, Goldwater was a conviction politician of a libertarian stripe. He opposed civil rights legislation on principled, Tenth Amendment grounds that federal intervention was unnecessary and the matter should be left to the states. On the floor of the Senate, Goldwater stated before his vote against the 1964 Civil Rights Act that

I am unalterably opposed to discrimination or segregation on the basis of race, color, or creed or on any other basis; not only my words, but more importantly my actions through years have repeatedly demonstrated the sincerity of my feeling in this regard.⁵³

On the other hand, his stance on civil rights earned him the unwelcome endorsement of the Ku Klux Klan. Richard Rovere

⁵¹ “Optical Illusion, Rubin’s Vase, 1915.” <https://www.sciencesource.com/archive/Optical-Illusion--Rubin-s-Vase--1915-SS2529214.html>

⁵² See “Duck-Rabbit.” <https://www.illusionsindex.org/i/duck-rabbit>

⁵³ *New York Times*, “Text of Goldwater speech on civil rights.” June 16, 1964. <https://www.nytimes.com/1964/06/19/archives/text-of-goldwater-speech-on-rights.html>

maintains that while Goldwater made no racist appeals during the 1964 presidential election, in the south the movement “appears to be a racist movement and almost nothing else” and Goldwater spoke of race “in an underground, or Aesopian, language—a kind of code that few in his audiences had any trouble deciphering.”⁵⁴ Such is a frequent charge against Trump.

In a similar vein, Perot’s various comments on the campaign trail in 1992 suggested the undertones of racism to some and overt racism to others, though there was no evidence he had ever expressed animus toward blacks or other minorities in his long career as an entrepreneur. Nevertheless his use of the phrase “you people” to African American voters resulted in “one of the most reviled racial epithets for Black people during his address to the NAACP’s annual convention in 1992.”⁵⁵ Moreover, at a debate with vice-presidential candidate Al Gore Perot railed against NAFTA by showing pictures of Mexicans living in cardboard boxes, a stereotype at which many took umbrage.⁵⁶ Finally, in a televised interview with David Frost, Perot used racial stereotypes to blame blacks for exploiting welfare programs paid for by hard-working Americans. Perot imitated the alleged thinking of African American men on the subject in a particularly offensive way:

I’m just kind of a dumb dude who never finished fourth grade. I’m wandering around the streets with my baseball hat on backward and \$150 tennis shoes I knocked another kid out to get. I’m looking for real trouble to prove that I am a man. Well, how do I define what a man is? I define what a man is from the rap music I hear . . . A man

⁵⁴ Richard H. Rovere, “The Campaign: Goldwater.” *The New Yorker*, October 3, 1964. <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/1964/10/03/the-campaign-goldwater>

⁵⁵ Bruce C. T. Wright, “Ross Perot dies 27 years after his infamous NAACP ‘You People’ speech.” *NewsOne*, July 9, 2019. <https://newsone.com/3881919/ross-perot-dies-you-people-naacp-speech/>

⁵⁶ Patrick J. McDonnell and Juanita Darling, “Perot’s debate statements strike raw nerve in Mexico. Reaction: Blunt exchange impresses many, but Texan comes under fire for what is seen as stereotypical descriptions of poverty.” *Los Angeles Times*, November 11, 1993. <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1993-11-11-mn-55573-story.html>

is defined in that culture as a breeder who gets the woman pregnant and then she gets welfare.⁵⁷

Despite the Texas billionaire's crude characterization of African American men, Steve Chapman contends that "Perot didn't make the blatant appeals to white racism that Trump does."⁵⁸ Critics of Trump suggest that the president's rhetoric speaks for itself, as the commander-in-chief paints images of Mexican illegal immigrants as "bad hombres," rapists, and drug dealers and lauds the "good people on both sides" of the 2018 Charlottesville, Virginia clashes between Antifa (anti-fascist) and white supremacist groups over the removal of Confederate statues. Democratic hopefuls in the 2020 election now routinely and reflexively call the president racist and a white supremacist.⁵⁹ Even before his election, detractors point to Trump's backing by the leader of the Ku Klux Klan (who, incidentally, endorsed George H. W. Bush, though Bush rejected his endorsement). According to David von Drehle, "[h]e'd do enough dog whistling to attract [David] Duke's endorsement—though he would pretend not to know who Duke was."⁶⁰ The president's supporters, of course, reject such arguments as

⁵⁷ Quoted in Kenneth J. Neubuck and Noel Cazenave, *Welfare Racism: Playing the Race Card against America's Poor* (New York: Routledge, 2001), pp. 156–7.

⁵⁸ Steve Chapman, "Ross Perot paved the way for Donald Trump." *Chicago Tribune*, July 9, 2019. <https://www.chicagotribune.com/columns/steve-chapman/ct-column-ross-perot-trump-chapman-20190709-4ihr3754xrgfhohle5jmg7z-vsi-story.html>

⁵⁹ Faris Bseiso, "Yang says 'no choice' but to call Trump a white supremacist." CNN, August 9, 2019. <https://www.cnn.com/2019/08/09/politics/yang-trump-white-supremacist/index.html>; Brett Samuels, "2020 Democrats feel more emboldened to label Trump a racist." *The Hill*, August 17, 2019. <https://thehill.com/homenews/campaign/457730-2020-democrats-feel-more-emboldened-to-label-trump-a-racist>

⁶⁰ David Von Drehle, "Ross Perot walked so Trump could run." *Washington Post*, July 9, 2019. https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/before-donald-trump-there-was-ross-perot/2019/07/09/284bf7e0-a27b-11e9-bd56-eac6bb02d01d_story.html

overblown hyperbole from the Left. Trump, from their perspective, takes aim at political opponents like the “Squad”⁶¹ via tweets or soundbites for the radical policy views of these members of Congress, including their embrace of platforms like the “Green New Deal,” not for their race.⁶² Their race or ethnicity is purportedly subordinate to their own outrageous commentary on matters like Israel—even as the president tells them to “go back to where they are from” and all but one member of the group was born in the United States.⁶³ Alas, Trump’s continual acclaim of economic gains for minorities, carefully crafted speeches celebrating minorities on special occasions,⁶⁴ and defense by those inside and outside the Beltway who flatly refute charges of racism against him fall on deaf ears among his detractors.⁶⁵ Survey data underscore that nine of ten Democrats believe he is a white supremacist. At the same time, an equal proportion of Republicans dismiss such allegations

⁶¹ The “Squad” includes freshmen Democratic members of the 116th Congress Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (NY-14), Ilhan Omar (MN-5), Rashida Tlaib (MI-13), and Ayanna Pressley (MA-7).

⁶² See Andrew C. McCarthy, “Trump and the ‘racist tweets’.” *National Review*, July 16, 2019. <https://www.nationalreview.com/2019/07/donald-trump-and-the-racist-tweets/>

⁶³ Bianca Quilantan and David Cohen, “Trump tells Dem congresswomen: Go back where you came from.” *Politico*, July 14, 2019. <https://www.politico.com/story/2019/07/14/trump-congress-go-back-where-they-came-from-1415692>

⁶⁴ See DeNeen L. Brown and Cleve R. Wootson, Jr., “Trump ignores backlash, visits Mississippi Civil Rights Museum and praises civil rights leaders.” *Washington Post*, December 9, 2017. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-politics/wp/2017/12/09/amid-backlash-trump-set-to-attend-private-gathering-as-civil-rights-museum-opens-in-mississippi/>

⁶⁵ See Michael Von Schoik, “Trump ‘is not a racist’ at all: Ben Carson.” *Fox Business News*, July 21, 2019. <https://www.foxbusiness.com/economy/trump-is-not-racist-at-all-ben-carson>; Philip M. Bailey, “Sen. Mitch McConnell: President Donald Trump ‘is not a racist’.” *Louisville Courier-Journal*, July 16, 2019. <https://www.courier-journal.com/story/news/politics/2019/07/16/mitch-mcconnell-president-donald-trump-is-not-racist/1746316001/>; Holman W. Jenkins, “Prove the tweets were racist.” *Wall Street Journal*, July 23, 2019. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/prove-the-tweets-were-racist-11563923093>

as fabrications and hysteria linked to “Trump Derangement Syndrome.”⁶⁶

To return to the ambiguous image metaphor, there are few who have problems discerning whether Trump is the rabbit or the duck, a vile racist or a champion of equal opportunity. To which “people” does he plead in his populist narrative? One segment of voters sees only the foreground image and shrugs off intemperate rhetoric as incidental to race; another segment focuses only on the background and concludes he is a white supremacist as evil as Hitler and contends that detention facilities for illegals on the southern border are equivalent to Nazi extermination camps like Auschwitz. The semantics of presidential rhetoric obviously solidify these perceptions through polarizing individual and collective interpretation.⁶⁷ Observations are filtered through the lens of partisanship, ideology, and normative conceptions of presidential leadership in a 50/50 nation unable to make the Gestalt switch.

III. Trump’s populist presidency: savior, Satan, or Samson?

There is certainly no dearth of opinion on the president’s inimitable job performance at the midpoint of his term. But in order to comprehend the polarizing effects and broader implications of Trump’s leadership approach, it is critical to assess how his populist campaigning and governing styles converge with long-standing perspectives of the modern presidency, per se. Across the spectrum of voters, journalists, scholars, and pundits, evaluations of Trump, like those of any individual president, naturally intersect not only with partisan inclinations but also with

⁶⁶ Ian Haney López, “Why do Trump’s supporters deny the racism that seems so evident to Democrats?” *Los Angeles Times*, August 13, 2019. <https://www.latimes.com/opinion/story/2019-08-13/trump-voters-racism-politics-white-supremacy>; David Smith, “‘Trump derangement syndrome’: The week America went mad.” *The Guardian*, July 22, 2019. <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2018/jul/21/trump-derangement-syndrome-putin-summit-republicans>

⁶⁷ On the role that semantic information may play in perception of ambiguous images, see Janet Davis, H. R. Schiffman, and Suzanne Greist-Bousquet, “Semantic Context and Figure-Ground Organization.” *Psychological Research* 52, no. 4 (1990): 306–9.

normative assessments of what the exercise of executive power *should be* within the American political structure. As scholar Michael Nelson suggests, three countervailing, allegorical models of presidential power have emerged across time since Franklin Roosevelt fundamentally altered expectations of the chief executive and ushered in the modern era of the presidency: Savior, Satan, and Samson.⁶⁸ Trump's populist leadership style, which defies ostensible ideological dogma and is founded in majoritarian eccentricity and limitless anti-elite narratives, rooted in a preoccupation with self-flattery, and grounded in a neo-nativism peppered with conspiracy theory, arguably reinforces each of these perspectives in a particularly exaggerated way.

A. Savior versus sage: Trump the populist and Madison the pluralist

Trump supporters are most likely to view the president's unorthodox comportment and policy goals through the lens of the Savior model. This perspective emphasizes the primacy of the presidential office in furtherance of the public good and general welfare. Its foundational roots reach back to the seminal debates about the Republic's formation at the Constitutional Convention, and are notably located in Alexander Hamilton's essay in *Federalist* #70. Hamilton posited that

Energy in the Executive is a leading character in the definition of good government. It is essential to the protection of the community against foreign attacks; it is not less essential to the steady administration of the laws; to the protection of property against those irregular and high-handed combinations which sometimes interrupt the ordinary course of justice; to the security of liberty against the enterprises and assaults of ambition, of faction, and of anarchy.⁶⁹

⁶⁸ Michael Nelson, "Evaluating the Presidency." In Michael Nelson (ed.), *The Presidency and the Political System*, 4th edition (Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly, Inc., 1995), pp. 3–28.

⁶⁹ *Federalist* #70, "The Executive Department Further Considered." From the *New York Packet*, Tuesday, March 18, 1788. http://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/fed70.asp

From the Savior standpoint the president acts as the primary custodian of the national interest. In foreign policy the president is endowed with key prerogatives due to his constitutional status as commander-in-chief and chief diplomat. Among those, as Hamilton asserted in a plea for a unitary executive in Federalist #70, are “secrecy and despatch.” In the contemporary era, the president is expected to act as “chief legislator” in the domestic realm and set the legislative agenda to promote the general welfare and support the overlooked, powerless citizens with little influence over policy outcomes. “Members of Congress,” explains Michael Nelson, “cater to wealthy and influential interests within their constituencies.” Sitting atop the political order at the other end of Pennsylvania Avenue from Capitol Hill, the president is able to “mobilize the unorganized and inarticulate and speak for national majorities against special interest groups.”⁷⁰

The Savior model takes a benign view of presidential power and favors action over the status quo, innovation over inertia. In the modern era, the concept very much is tied to the legacy of Franklin D. Roosevelt and his remarkable record of legislative leadership in his first “100 days” in office at a time of unprecedented socio-economic upheaval during the Great Depression.⁷¹ In “Song of the South,” the country music group Alabama captured the notion of FDR as redeemer-in-chief in the memorialization of the yellow-dog Democratic states of the old Confederacy that benefited mightily from the programs of the *New Deal*: “the cotton was short and the weeds were tall, but Mr. Roosevelt is gonna’ save us all.” All subsequent chief executives stand “in the shadow” of FDR in the search for greatness and in the quest to make an indelible imprint on the office in honor of the voters who elected them, despite vastly different governing contexts and leadership philosophies.⁷²

⁷⁰ Nelson, “Evaluating the Presidency,” p. 5.

⁷¹ Richard E. Neustadt, “The Contemporary Presidency: The Presidential ‘Hundred Days’—An Overview.” *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 31, no. 1 (2001): 121–5.

⁷² William E. Leuchtenburg, *In the Shadow of FDR: From Harry Truman to George W. Bush* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001).

How does the Savior model correspond to Trump's populist presidency? Among his core constituents, the Oval Office is viewed as the last, best hope of liberating the masses from an unshakable, corrupt elite in the swamp of Washington, standing up to dishonest media that are biased against Republicans and conservatives, reversing economic dislocation and socio-cultural change, and inhibiting foreign powers from taking advantage of the United States. There is a certain narrative of victimization that infuses the president's simplified rhetoric, rather ironically since conservatives often portray progressives and liberals as obsessed with unfair treatment and discrimination, particularly among minority groups. Nevertheless Trump supporters display a particular indignation against the "establishment," an ill-defined, catch-all notion of elites within government who putatively employ convoluted rules and procedures to advance self-serving policies anathema to the nation's well-being. If the president's overbearing rhetoric threatens the legitimacy of other branches of government, discredits informal institutions like the media charged with holding public officials accountable, or undermines international organizations and bilateral trade relationships, his fitful speechmaking, malicious tweets, and Delphic policy stances emphasize decades of the "little guy's" abuse by the permanent political class in Washington and nefarious foreign leaders bent on unfair international commerce practices. To achieve his ends, Trump employs a common feature of populist leadership that "mobilizes the antagonism of 'the people' against the established order, drawing for this purpose on rhetorical traditions of popular protest."⁷³

Most critically, Trump's bold proclamation at the Republican National Convention in Cleveland, Ohio in 2016 that "[n]obody knows the system better than me, which is why I alone can fix it" is a *prima facie* rejection of the tenets of *indirect* democracy and the Founders' confidence in the virtues of legislative government. Trump and his base of voters rebuff the fundamental notion of

⁷³ Margaret Canovan, "Two Strategies for the Study of Populism." *Political Studies* 30, no. 4 (1982): 549.

mediated power.⁷⁴ Such a perspective conflicts incontrovertibly with the Founders' emphasis on the balance of power between the branches and the virtues of channeling temporary, popular passions through elective institutions with intricate checks and balances. As James Madison noted eloquently in Federalist #51, "Ambition must be made to counteract ambition."⁷⁵

Distrustful of Congress and the courts, Trump and his supporters casually reject such foundational, republican theories and champion an institutional partisanship that elevates the presidency above other branches of government. Forswearing the idea of "separated institutions sharing powers,"⁷⁶ Trump and his proponents hold firmly that the chief executive can and should act, unilaterally through *direct action* if necessary and in the perceived national interest—and most disturbingly, even if the rules must be twisted or violated. During the 2016 Republican primaries, 90 percent of Trump supporters agreed that "public officials don't care much what people like me think"; 83 percent concurred that "the old way of doing things no longer works and we need radical change"; and most critically, 84 percent contended that "what we need is a leader who is willing to say or do anything to solve America's problems."⁷⁷ It comes as no surprise that once Trump took up residence at the White House in 2017, a survey by the American Values Project found that 66 percent of Republican backers of Trump agreed that "because things have gotten so far off track in this country, we need a leader who is willing to break some rules if that's what it takes to set things right."⁷⁸

⁷⁴ Molyneux and Osborne, "Populism: A Deflationary View," p. 3. Emphasis added.

⁷⁵ Federalist #51. http://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/fed51.asp.

⁷⁶ Richard E. Neustadt, *Presidential Power and the Modern Presidents* (New York: Free Press, 1964), p. 42.

⁷⁷ Quinnipiac University Poll, April 5, 2016. <https://poll.qu.edu/national/release-detail?ReleaseID=2340>

⁷⁸ David Smith, "Survey: Two in three Trump supporters want a president who breaks the rules." *The Guardian*, December 5, 2017. <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2017/dec/05/republican-trump-supporters-survey-american-values-rule-breaker>

B. Satan, psychology, and presidential pathology

By contrast, those who embrace the Satan view of the presidency share deep trepidations about, and profound suspicions of, executive power generally. From this perspective, Trump's singular behavior and populist rhetoric amplify fears, rational or otherwise, of impending tyranny. Such concerns of despotism in the executive are as old as the impassioned debates in Philadelphia in 1787 that were heavily influenced by the colonial experience under King George III. Cato (George Clinton of New York) wrote in *Anti-Federalist* #67 about the probable excess of executive ambition and opined "that he [the president] may be great and glorious by oppressing his fellow citizens, and raising himself to permanent grandeur on the ruins of his country."⁷⁹ Subscribers to the Satan model would gladly take their chances of foundering on Scylla's rocky shoals of institutional immobilism than be subsumed in Charybdis's whirlpool of despotism, war, and civic strife that accompanies presidential pre-eminence. "Our three 'greatest' Presidents," Nelson Polsby asserts, "were reputedly Washington, Lincoln, and Franklin Roosevelt. The service of all three is intimately associated with three incidents in American history when the entire polity was engaged in total war."⁸⁰

Fears of an out-of-control executive are scarcely unfounded in the post-World War II era. The calamitous and failed presidencies of Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon drove some scholars, including Arthur Schlesinger, who had once lauded the Savior model, to become increasingly concerned about the ascendancy of an "imperial presidency."⁸¹ Central to this apprehension were the excesses of the Johnson and Nixon presidencies in light of their contempt for constitutional limits

⁷⁹ *Anti-Federalist* #67. <http://www.thisnation.com/library/antifederalist/67.html>

⁸⁰ Nelson W. Polsby, "Against presidential greatness." *Commentary*, January 1, 1977. <https://www.commentarymagazine.com/articles/against-presidential-greatness/>

⁸¹ Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Imperial Presidency* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1973).

on executive power, both in the domestic and foreign policy realms. As Nelson explains:

In foreign affairs the power of these presidents sustained a large-scale war in Vietnam long after public opinion had turned against it. The power of the president as “chief legislator,” in Rossiter’s phrase, prompted such hasty passage of Great Society social welfare programs that their flaws, which might have been discovered between the president and Congress, were not found until later . . . Finally, in 1972 and 1973, a host of abuses of presidential power, which have been grouped under the umbrella term *Watergate*, occurred, forcing Nixon’s resignation in August 1974.⁸²

In the years following Nixon’s departure from the political scene in August 1974, a resurgent Congress passed a host of laws and engaged in significant internal restructuring in the quest to restore balance between the branches and curb presidential excess.⁸³ Yet, as Andrew Rudalevige highlights, the legal institutions of “Congress’s ‘resurgence regime’ proved to be built on sand—and, like sand, eroded away, leaving a new landscape.”⁸⁴ Apprehension about presidential arrogation of congressional authority, from the trampling of the war power to unilateral actions at home and abroad, was thrust to the forefront anew in debates about institutional balance following the terror attacks on the United States on September 11, 2001 and the subsequent wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and on terrorism more generally. To subscribers of the Satan model, presidents like George W. Bush circumvented Congress through claims of executive privilege,⁸⁵ signing statements defying congressional legislative intent,⁸⁶ and by continuing military operations beyond the scope of authorizations alongside “extraordinary rendition” of

⁸² Nelson, “Evaluating the Presidency,” p. 6.

⁸³ See James L. Sundquist, *The Decline and Resurgence of Congress* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 2002).

⁸⁴ Andrew Rudalevige, *The New Imperial Presidency: Renewing Presidential Power after Watergate* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005), p. 8.

⁸⁵ Mark J. Rozell, “Executive Privilege Revived: Secrecy and Conflict during the Bush Presidency.” *Duke Law Journal* 52 (2002): 403–21.

⁸⁶ Phillip J. Cooper, “George W. Bush, Edgar Allan Poe, and the Use and Abuse of Presidential Signing Statements.” *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 35, no. 3 (2005): 515–32.

suspected terrorists for interrogations tantamount to torture in the assessment of many.⁸⁷

The specter of autocracy is particularly pronounced among those who take Trump's rhetorical outbursts literally and shudder at his impertinent use of the bully pulpit that is notable for browbeating, bravado, and bluster. His continued rallying cries for Hillary Clinton to be jailed (i.e., "lock her up"), impetuous threats to revoke the credentials of news outlets critical of his actions, petulant behavior toward select reporters deemed to be "fake news,"⁸⁸ and ridiculing of foreign leaders on social media (e.g., "Little Rocket Man" for Kim Jong-Un of North Korea), evoke ample fears of a drift toward abuse of power, if not war at the expense of longstanding constitutional principles and norms of the presidential office. But what is more, those who view Trump's presidency through the prism of the Satan model share a view that his penchant for self-absorption, embrace of simplistically dichotomous logic that emphasizes an "us" versus "them" mentality, and engagement in impulsive rhetoric is a case for "personality as a source of presidential pathology."⁸⁹

The late presidential scholar James David Barber contended that presidents' performance could be forecast by understanding the way in which personality, the constituent components of which he considered *character*, *worldview*, and *style*, intersects with situational challenges. Character is "the way the President orients himself toward life"; worldview is the locus of "his primary politically relevant beliefs, particularly his conceptions of social causality, human nature, and the central moral conflicts of the time"; and style is his "habitual way of performing three fundamental political roles that

⁸⁷ James P. Pfiffner, "The Constitutional Legacy of George W. Bush." *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 45, no. 4 (2015): 727–41.

⁸⁸ Sally Persons, "Trump threatens to pull 'fake news' credentials." *Washington Times*, May 9, 2018. <https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2018/may/9/donald-trump-threatens-to-pull-fake-news-credential/>; Bill Goodykoontz, "Donald Trump vs. CNN . . . again. Now on a world stage and with a hint of totalitarianism." *USA Today*, July 15, 2018. <https://www.usatoday.com/story/opinion/nation-now/2018/07/15/white-house-cancels-john-bolton-interview-cnn-president-trump-column/786369002/>

⁸⁹ Nelson, "Evaluating the Presidency," p. 6.

include rhetoric, personal relations, and homework.”⁹⁰ The typology that Barber constructed emphasizes two essential dimensions: presidents’ affect toward the job (positive, negative) and the level of energy they bring to it (activity, passivity). Fashioning a fourfold classification, Barber argued that the most suitable chief executives were the “active-positives” like Franklin Roosevelt, Harry Truman, John F. Kennedy, Gerald Ford, and Jimmy Carter. These presidents exhibited high self-esteem, adaptability, and productivity. They invested high levels of energy into the job from which they derived enjoyment in the exercise of power, guided by the pursuit of well-defined personal goals.

Barber cautioned of the dangers that “active-negative” personality types represent. The examples of failed presidencies, including those of Woodrow Wilson, Lyndon Johnson, and Richard Nixon, highlight the degree to which these leaders expended enormous energy in the job but obtained little emotional reward, and were doomed to self-destruction in the Oval Office. Their downfalls were allegedly rooted in deep-seated psychological dysfunction reflected in the classic formulation of the active-negative character: compulsive behavior, uncompromising rigidity, and the elusive quest for personal power to compensate for low self-esteem. Power is a means to self-actualization rather than for noble pursuits in the interest of the greater good. Their ambition is frustrated by preoccupation with success and failure, and an unceasing struggle to manage aggression toward the external environment they confront.

Predictions abound of Trump’s impending demise stemming from similar, if not worse, personality defects of the active-negative variety represented by Johnson and Nixon. Many of the president’s detractors focus on his use of social media to articulate his populist messaging, suggesting that the eccentricities of his comportment and direct messaging paint a Francis Bacon tableau of an exasperated, paranoid, and even delusional leader. Former aide to President Nixon, John Dean, cites Barber’s analysis and opined that Trump’s “Twitter account reveals a man constantly complaining or whining about most everything. His only enjoyment in the job

⁹⁰ James David Barber, *The Presidential Character: Predicting Performance in the White House* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1977), pp. 7–8.

is that it feeds his insatiable narcissistic appetite for attention.”⁹¹ Moreover, as Michael Kruse posits, “He’s impulsive and undisciplined and obsesses with taking shots and settling scores and with the sustenance of an image of success even when it’s at utter odds with objective reality.”⁹² In effect, write Joan Johnson-Freese and Elizabeth Frampton, “Trump has only succeeded in revealing his level of discomfort—negativity—with the job of POTUS. The press, which Trump refers to as ‘fake news,’ is his adversary, much as it was for Active-Negative Richard Nixon.”⁹³

Uncertainties about Trump’s fitness for office reached a fever pitch as he came to the end of his first year, and concerns scarcely receded as the president reached the midpoint of his term. As liberal commentator Bill Press noted in early 2018,

Questions about Donald Trump’s mental capacity dominate the Capitol. A leading psychiatrist tells congressional Democrats that Trump’s mental health is “unraveling.” Two dozen Democrats introduced legislation requiring that the president be examined and removed from office if deemed unfit by a commission of physicians and psychiatrists. Republican staffers bone up on the 25th Amendment, while CNN headlines: “Is It Wrong to Question Trump’s Mental Fitness for Office?”⁹⁴

Other observers suggested that Trump’s speech patterns, remarkable for the failure to articulate full sentences, reflect some sort of

⁹¹ John W. Dean, “Active-negative Trump is doomed to follow Nixon.” *Newsweek*, May 29, 2017. <http://www.newsweek.com/activenegative-trump-doomed-follow-nixon-616641>

⁹² Michael Kruse, “I found Trump’s diary—Hiding in plain sight.” *Politico Magazine*, June 25, 2017. <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2017/06/25/i-found-trumps-diaryhiding-in-plain-sight-215303>

⁹³ Joan Johnson-Freese and Elizabeth Frampton, “The dangers of Donald Trump as an active-negative president.” *China US Focus*, July 11, 2017. <https://chinausfocus.com/foreign-policy/the-dangers-of-donald-trump-as-an-active-negative-president-to-us-china-policy>

⁹⁴ Bill Press, “Is Trump mentally fit for office?” *The Hill*, January 18, 2018. <http://thehill.com/opinion/white-house/368008-press-is-trump-mentally-fit-for-office>

recent cognitive deterioration.⁹⁵ Armchair psychologists who made rather scathing evaluations of Trump outside a clinical setting, despite a violation of the so-called “Goldwater Rule” of the American Psychological Association (APA), published a book detailing the connection between the early chaos of the new Trump administration and the president’s supposed mental defects.⁹⁶ By late summer 2018 the debate was reinvigorated when, after Trump sacked advisor Omarosa Manigault, who had previously appeared on his television show *The Apprentice*, she claimed that the president was in mental decline. The firing coincided with Bob Woodward’s book *Fear*, which compared Trump’s state of mind with that of Richard Nixon forty-four years earlier. As Jill Abramson submits in her review of Woodward’s work, replete with the iconic Watergate investigative journalist’s trademark anonymous sources and lack of verifiable references, “[t]hen, as now, the country faced a crisis of leadership caused by a president’s fatal flaws and inability to function in the job.”⁹⁷

Many outside the Beltway also shared ongoing concerns about Trump’s mental health. As Trump reached his one-year anniversary in office, an *ABC/Washington Post* poll in January 2018 found that 47 percent of Americans believed Trump is mentally

⁹⁵ John McWhorter, “What Trump’s speech says about his mental fitness.” *New York Times*, February 6, 2018. <https://nytimes.com/interactive/2018/02/06/opinion/trump-speech-mental-capacity>

⁹⁶ Bandy X. Lee, *The Dangerous Case of Donald Trump: 27 Psychiatrists and Mental Health Experts Assess a President* (New York: Thomas Dunne Books, 2017). The “Goldwater Rule” prohibits professional opinions by psychologists on any president whom they have not examined personally or from whom they have obtained permission to discuss publicly mental health issues. The rule stems from 1964 Republican presidential candidate Barry Goldwater’s successful lawsuit (*Goldwater v. Ginsburg*, 1969) for libel against the magazine *Fact*, which polled mental health experts about his fitness for office. See Aaron Levin, “Goldwater rules based on long-ago controversy.” *Psychiatric News*, August 25, 2016. <https://psychnews.psychiatryonline.org/doi/full/10.1176/appi.pn.2016.9a19>

⁹⁷ Jill Abramson, “Bob Woodward’s meticulous, frightening look inside the Trump White House.” *Washington Post*, September 6, 2018. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/bob-woodwards-meticulous-frightening-look-inside-the-trump-white-house/2018/09/06>

unstable, with 48 percent disagreeing.⁹⁸ The data changed little by September 2018, with a plurality of 48 percent of Americans believing Trump was mentally fit for the job, and 42 percent disagreeing.⁹⁹ Trump's most dogged Democratic detractors in Congress seized on the divide in public views to argue on behalf of their partisan constituency that he should be removed from office. Maxine Waters' (D-CA) indefatigable vituperations to "Impeach 45" are in part based on a belief that the president is mentally unfit. Trump, in turn, called Waters "low IQ" and "the face of the Democratic Party." The president and other of her critics charge that she suffers from issues connected to "Trump Derangement Syndrome," another psychological condition missing from the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* of the APA. The alleged cognitive ailment refers to such a vehement, irrational disdain for the president that the patient borders on insanity or a nervous breakdown.¹⁰⁰

Only the American social surrealist artists of yesteryear, with their brush strokes depicting hallucinogenic nightmares "permeated by the unknown"¹⁰¹ at the depths of the Great Depression, could sketch the madcap moments in contemporary time when psychologists testify before congressional subcommittees

⁹⁸ Rebecca Morin, "Poll: Almost half of voters question Trump's mental stability." *Politico*, January 22, 2018. <https://www.politico.com/story/2018/01/22/poll-trump-mental-health-354902>

⁹⁹ See Quinnipiac University Poll, September 10, 2018. <https://poll.qu.edu/national/release-detail?ReleaseID=2567>

¹⁰⁰ Thomas Lifson, "Maxine Waters goes completely unhinged." *American Thinker*, March 17, 2017. https://www.americanthinker.com/blog/2017/03/maxine_waters_goes_completely_unhinged.htm. "Trump Derangement Syndrome" is a term borrowed from late conservative commentator Charles Krauthammer, who described "Bush Derangement Syndrome" as the "the acute onset of paranoia in otherwise normal people in reaction to the policies, the presidency—nay—the very existence of George W. Bush." See Krauthammer, "The delusional dean." *Washington Post*, December 5, 2003. https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/opinions/2003/12/05/the-delusional-dean/cbc80426-08ee-40fd-97e5-19da55fdc821/?utm_term=.314e37cbee2f

¹⁰¹ Ilene Susan Fort, "American Social Surrealism." *American Art Journal* 22, no. 3 (1982): 8.

that the president is “going to unravel”¹⁰² under the pressures of the office while the president simultaneously proclaims himself a “stable genius” on Twitter and oddly compares himself to Ronald Reagan, who had Alzheimer’s disease.¹⁰³ But setting aside the frivolity of diagnosing any politician’s psychological stability from afar, Trump’s detractors insist he is unqualified and unsuited for the office based on observable behavior that they find offensive. This belief undergirded one vote in the House of Representatives in December 2017 to remove him from office. Texas Democratic Congressman Al Green fashioned articles of impeachment formally focused on allegations of the president’s obstruction of justice. A closer reading of Green’s indictment of Trump evinces the degree to which president’s Twitter attacks on fellow African American Representative Frederica Wilson (D-FL), whom the president called “wacky,” and other elements of Trump’s public conduct guided Green’s charge that Trump had “brought disrepute, contempt, ridicule and disgrace on the presidency,” and that he had “sown discord among the people of the United States.” Moreover, Green’s bill indicted Trump’s handling of white supremacists’ clashes with protestors in Charlottesville, Virginia in August 2017 and the president’s brazen condemnations of black NFL players, commencing with Colin Kaepernick of the San Francisco 49ers, who took to kneeling during the national anthem to protest alleged police brutality.¹⁰⁴ Fifty-eight Democrats in the House supported the doomed measure.

Green’s, of course, was not the last effort to oust the president. Immediately after Democrats won back the House of Representatives in the mid-term elections of 2018, California Representative

¹⁰² Brett Samuels, “Lawmakers briefed by Yale psychiatrist on Trump’s mental health: Report.” *The Hill*, January 3, 2018. <https://thehill.com/homenews/administration/367362-lawmakers-briefed-by-yale-psychiatrist-on-trumps-mental-health-report>

¹⁰³ Andrew Restuccia and Craig Howie, “Trump defends mental health: I’m a ‘stable genius’.” *Politico*, January 7, 2018. <https://www.politico.eu/article/donald-trump-slams-media-over-mental-health-reports/>

¹⁰⁴ Christina Marcos, “The nearly 60 Democrats who voted for impeachment.” *The Hill*, December 6, 2017. <http://thehill.com/blogs/floor-action/house/363645-the-nearly-60-dems-who-voted-for-impeachment>

Brad Sherman filed H.R. 13 to reintroduce articles of impeachment based on the president's alleged obstruction of justice.¹⁰⁵ Calls for impeachment continued in the wake of the release of the Mueller report in spring 2019 (see Chapter 7). Ultimately in December 2019 the Democratic-controlled House voted two articles of impeachment along party lines, one for abuse of power and another for obstruction of Congress stemming from an unrelated matter: the president's July 25 phone call to Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy. House Democrats alleged Trump had engaged in a quid pro quo arrangement for military aid to be released on condition that Ukraine investigate the business dealings of former Vice President Joe Biden's son, Hunter, who received a lucrative board position on Burisma, the country's natural gas company. The president was acquitted by the Senate on both articles on February 5, 2020.

Regardless, public opinion not only among progressives but also among "Never Trumpers" on the right of the political spectrum solidifies that "[t]o critics, Trump represents the sum of all fears: a populist demagogue who preys on voter anger, stokes racism, enacts self-enriching policies, and fans the flames of class division and partisan polarization that have been growing for decades."¹⁰⁶ Trump characterized Hillary Clinton as the devil in the 2016 campaign. But to his opponents he has brought nothing but fire, brimstone, and maleficence—if not psychosis—to the Oval Office as much for his political style as for substantive policy accomplishments.

¹⁰⁵ See Brad Sherman, "The case for impeaching Donald Trump." *Huffington Post*, October 5, 2017. https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/the-case-for-impeaching-donald-j-trump_us_59a5e4a3e4b08299d89d0a9b; and Sherman, "Why I filed articles of impeachment against Trump." *Washington Post*, January 9, 2019. https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/why-i-filed-articles-of-impeachment-against-trump/2019/01/09/aaa59a3c-12c7-11e9-ab79-30cd4f7926f2_story.html?utm_term=.e53ebe4c8297

¹⁰⁶ Linda Feldmann, "Disrupter in chief: How Donald Trump is changing the presidency." *Christian Science Monitor*, January 4, 2018. <https://www.csmonitor.com/USA/Politics/2018/0104/Disrupter-in-chief-How-Donald-Trump-is-changing-the-presidency>

C. Samson, scapegoating, and the sublimely impossible presidency

Finally, the Samson model posits that the capacity for presidential leadership is in general decline in the contemporary era, regardless of the officeholder. Just as Delilah had betrayed Samson by cutting his Nazarite hair and robbing him of his enormous power, in the immediate post-Watergate era Congress abjured the promising flame of presidential leadership by imposing significant constraints on the exercise of power. Scholars like George Reedy posited that after Watergate the executive was “imperiled” rather than imperial.¹⁰⁷ The travails of one-term Presidents Ford and Carter in a decade of congressional resurgence in the 1970s had arguably hamstrung the Oval Office through enhanced oversight on Capitol Hill, congressional reorganization aimed at strengthening leaders’ control of the legislative agenda, and a general lack of followership of the president.¹⁰⁸

Like Samson’s destruction of the temple in Gaza that brought back his strength, Ronald Reagan may well have reinvigorated presidential leadership, at least temporarily, with his policy stances toward the former Soviet Union and stunning legislative victories in 1981 through a combination of oratorical flourish and negotiation behind the scenes.¹⁰⁹ Regardless, many scholars emphasize the endurance of the Samson model by pointing to the continuing and widening “expectations gap” between what the public

¹⁰⁷ George Reedy, *The Twilight of the Presidency: From Johnson to Reagan* (New York: Dutton, 1987).

¹⁰⁸ See Roger H. Davidson, “The Presidency and the Three Eras of the Modern Congress.” In James A. Thurber (ed.), *Divided Democracy: Cooperation and Conflict Between the President and Congress* (Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly Press, 1991), pp. 61–78; Richard S. Conley, *The Presidency, Congress, and Divided Government: A Postwar Assessment* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2002); Charles O. Jones, *The Trusteeship Presidency: Jimmy Carter and the United States Congress* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1988); Yanek Mieczkowski, *Gerald Ford and the Challenges of the 1970s* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2005).

¹⁰⁹ John W. Sloan, “Meeting the Leadership Challenges of the Modern Presidency: The Political Skills and Leadership of Ronald Reagan.” *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 26, no. 3 (1996): 795–804.

anticipates presidents to be able to accomplish and what they really can. From this viewpoint, inflation of expectations is worse than the rising interest rates of the 1970s. “Since the birth of the modern presidency,” Richard Waterman, Carol Silva, and Hank Jenkins-Smith assert, “the policy demands on the presidency have expanded exponentially, with presidents currently expected to resolve virtually every societal problem,”¹¹⁰ from the economy and the national debt to foreign affairs, terrorism, and intractable social issues. In other words, demands on the Oval Office exceed what is likely realizable by any presidential administration.

Trump’s supporters and detractors hold diametrically opposite opinions of the Samson model. The president’s proponents applaud his major accomplishments, many of which have been implemented through executive action. On this front, the president does not appear to have had his trademark auburn coiffure sheared like Samson’s locks. Regardless, when Congress fails to act on issues ranging from immigration reform to “repeal and replace” of the Affordable Care Act (i.e., ACA, or “Obamacare”), Capitol Hill becomes a convenient scapegoat to support the thesis that a cabal of shadowy creatures lurking in a murky slough alongside the Potomac are bent on hindering the will of the people as Trump interprets it. If Trump is Samson, it is *not* the president’s lack of prowess in the “art of the deal” that is in question. Rather, it is the fault of lily-livered legislative leaders and pusillanimous political foes with personal vendettas like the late John McCain (R-AZ), whose “thumbs down” on repealing the ACA in the Senate was little more than political theater to humiliate Trump, defy the preferences of the people, and preclude the administration’s success. At rambunctious campaign rallies Trump’s battle cry to restore presidential power is based on “reform” of Congress by electing Republican candidates who pledge uncompromising fealty to him.

For Trump’s critics, many are optimistic that the Samson model can constrain the president and immobilize his policy agenda and

¹¹⁰ Richard Waterman, Carol L. Silva, and Hank Jenkins-Smith, *The Presidential Expectations Gap: Public Attitudes Concerning the Presidency* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2014), p. 16.

worst populist instincts. Such a model is thus to be celebrated. Whether through the checks and balances of the constitutional system, manipulation of institutional rules by the minority or majority in the bicameral Congress, or judicial review of controversial policies, the “veto points”¹¹¹ in the very structure of American government serve as a paramount and *positive* check on an otherwise runaway presidency. Even the president’s conservative critics, including the prominent Pulitzer Prize-winning columnist George Will, suggested that one way of containing Trump is to halt the servility the president demands from congressional Republicans by robbing him of legislative majorities in the mid-term elections of 2018. Imposing divided control of the White House and Capitol Hill arguably combines with traditional checks and balances to hamstring the president’s legislative agenda. Calling the president a “Vesuvius of mendacities,” Will appealed to Republicans to restrain Trump, contending that

to vote against his party’s cowering congressional caucuses is to affirm the nation’s honor while quarantining him. A Democratic-controlled Congress would be a basket of deplorables, but there would be enough Republicans to gum up the Senate’s machinery, keeping the institution as peripheral as it has been under their control and asphyxiating mischief from a Democratic House.¹¹²

Will got his wish on November 6, 2018 as Democrats picked up enough seats to gain the majority in the House of Representatives and impose a form of divided government reminiscent of Ronald Reagan’s last two years: a Republican-controlled Senate and a Democratic-controlled lower chamber. The legislative stalemate that has since taken hold is to be rejoiced as a central mechanism to curb the excesses of Trump’s impulses and his attempt to

¹¹¹ George Tsebelis, *Veto Players: How Political Institutions Work* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002).

¹¹² George Will, “Vote against the GOP this November.” *Washington Post*, June 22, 2018. https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/vote-against-the-gop-this-november/2018/06/22/a6378306-7575-11e8-b4b7-308400242c2e_story.html

reshape the Grand Old Party (GOP) in his own populist image. With the assistance of Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-KY), the president has successfully played off one chamber against the other, from legislation he finds objectionable to impeachment.

IV. Trump, populism, and the theory and exercise of presidential power

The Savior, Satan, and Samson perspectives raise the critical question of how the operationalization of Trump's populist style of leadership challenges or comports with scholars' understanding of, and prescriptions for, the exercise of presidential power in the American system of separated institutions. Trump has deftly employed the levers of the rhetorical presidency to reinforce support among core factions of his successful, if tenuous, electoral coalition in 2016. But substantively, the president has scored few victories in Congress, notwithstanding tax cuts and two Supreme Court appointments.¹¹³ Instead, many of Trump's most consequential policy victories have come through unilateral actions based on existing statutory authority or constitutional prerogative, such as immigration and a border wall, prompting extensive court litigation.

Trump's leadership approach is at variance not only with prescriptive theories of presidential power emphasizing informal persuasion over formal, constitutional authority but also with his campaign assurances of superlative negotiating skill. The mismatch between the president's self-proclaimed perspicacity in negotiation and bargaining and his *modus operandi* of unilateralism merits scrutiny. A paradoxical feature of Trump's populist

¹¹³ McKay Coppins, "A Faustian bargain pays off for conservative Christians," *The Atlantic*, February 1, 2017. <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2017/02/conservatives-react-to-trump-sctus-pick/515265/>; Julie Zauzmer, "As Trump picks Brett Kavanaugh for the Supreme Court, evangelicals rejoice: 'I will vote for him again'." *Seattle Times*, July 9, 2018. <https://www.seattletimes.com/nation-world/nation-politics/wapoas-trump-picks-kavanaugh-for-the-supreme-court-evangelicals-rejoice-i-will-vote-for-him-again/>

style is the active alienation of officials in Congress and in the wider executive branch whose support is critical for both negotiation and the implementation of his policies.

A. Neustadt, bargaining, and power as persuasion

By embracing the unilateral model of leadership that stresses the formal, constitutional mechanisms of presidential power, Trump has largely eschewed the bargaining theory advocated by Richard Neustadt six decades ago with the publication of *Presidential Power and the Modern Presidents*. An advisor to Presidents Harry Truman and John F. Kennedy, Neustadt employed his observations to assess the successful practice of personal power in the White House. Like Niccolò Machiavelli's classical work *The Prince*, his focus is on the realities of governing—less on normative theory and more on situating leadership “amid a general context of complex contingencies and conflicting interests” and on “using the realities of power and contingency to educate public and professional opinion about the fitting ends, means, and personal qualities of leaders.”¹¹⁴ As George C. Edwards III notes, “Neustadt’s framework highlights the president’s operational problem of *self-help* in thinking about influence strategically.”¹¹⁵ Neustadt emphasized persuasion as the central source of presidential power, which is bolstered by the chief executive’s prestige, reputation, and unique position atop the political order:

Effective influence for the man in the White House stems from three related sources: first are the bargaining advantages inherent in his job with which to persuade other men that what he wants of them is what their own responsibilities require them to do. Second are the expectations of those other men regarding his ability and will to

¹¹⁴ Stephen H. Wirls, “Machiavelli and Neustadt on Virtue and the Civil Prince,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 24, no. 3 (1994): 461.

¹¹⁵ George C. Edwards III, “Neustadt’s Power Approach to the Presidency.” In Robert Y. Shapiro, Martha Joynt Kumar, and Lawrence R. Jacobs (eds.), *Presidential Power: Forging the Presidency for the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), p. 9.

use the various advantages they think he has. Third are those men's estimates of how his public views him and of how their publics may view them if they do what he wants. In short, his power is the product of his vantage points in government, together with his reputation in the Washington community and his prestige outside.¹¹⁶

Bargaining theory emphasizes that the president must take pains to shield his unique resources in the Oval Office from those who would challenge him. First, in terms of reputation, the president must exhibit resoluteness and decisiveness. Convincing others of the certainty of his success reinforces loyalty and underlines the costs they may anticipate by obstructing his goals. The biggest risk to the president's reputation is the perception of successive failures, which strike at the foundation of his reputational advantage by undermining the confidence others have in his ability. Second, popular support is critical to presidential bargaining power. Politicians anticipate the reaction of voters in deciding to favor or oppose the president. If the president suffers from low prestige outside the Beltway, those inside Washington's political institutions have greater latitude to resist his leadership with impunity. Finally, the president must necessarily safeguard his personal power. Sitting at the apex of government, no one else has the unique, global view of the system like the president—and no one has the ability to substitute such an all-encompassing view for him. Others are influenced by narrow, parochial interests, whether electoral (Congress) or institutional (bureaucratic).

Through the midpoint of his term, Trump has clearly defied the tenets of Neustadt's prescriptions with a style of leadership that is more improvisational than farsighted. During the transition in 2017 the White House was notable for chaos, short-lived appointments, and uncertainty surrounding the president's commitment to policy objectives. This dynamic undermined his reputation as an honest broker. Trump earned a certain notoriety for indecision and backtracking on positions that left members

¹¹⁶ Richard E. Neustadt, *Presidential Power and the Modern Presidents: The Politics of Leadership from Roosevelt to Reagan* (New York: Free Press, 1990), p. 150.

of Congress and many outside Washington flummoxed as to his priorities and doubting any potential detriment to them for failing to support legislation he advocated.

The abortive machinations of Republicans on Capitol Hill to repeal and replace the ACA, and the president's irresolution, are a case in point. During the presidential campaign Trump "repeatedly pointed to the repeal of Obamacare as a top priority and a key reason why he wanted to be president," promising some sixty-eight times that he would rescind the law.¹¹⁷ However, as the GOP legislative majority got under way in early 2017 and wrestled with constructing a health care reform bill that could attract majority support, Trump grew impatient, claimed "nobody knew that health care could be so complicated," and suggested that Republicans should let Obamacare implode as a means of assigning blame to Democrats.¹¹⁸ As Doyle McManus maintains, Trump's leadership on the ACA repeal suffered from four primary defects. First, the president did not learn the details of legislative proposals. Second, he "signaled repeatedly that his heart wasn't in the effort—that he'd be just as happy, maybe happier, if the bill didn't pass." Third, he never made any efforts to persuade the public and secure grassroots support at a time when public support for the ACA had strengthened. And finally, he undercut any influence over recalcitrant lawmakers, "most of whom have run more times than the president" and who did not believe him when he contended they would suffer in the next election if they voted against the bill that ultimately failed.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁷ Ryan Koronowski, "68 times Trump promised to repeal Obamacare. The White House says it's already moving on." *ThinkProgress*, March 24, 2017. <http://www.thinkprogress.org/trump-promised-to-repeal-obamacare-many-times-ab9500dad31e>

¹¹⁸ Madeline Conway, "Trump: 'Nobody knew that health care could be so complicated.' The president appears to nod to the grim political reality around repealing and replacing Obamacare." *Politico*, February 27, 2017. <http://www.politico.com/story/2017/02/trump-nobody-knew-that-health-care-could-be-so-complicated-235436>

¹¹⁹ Doyle McManus, "It turns out Donald trump is not an Artist of the Deal." *Los Angeles Times*, March 24, 2017. <http://www.latimes.com/opinion/op-ed/la-oe-mcmanus-trump-healthcare-failure-20170324-story.html>

Turning Neustadt's theoretical precepts of presidential leadership upside-down, Trump has tacitly accepted the realities of Democratic opposition, equivocation by many in the congressional GOP over following his lead, and possible electoral advantages of "strategic disagreement."¹²⁰ The president has recognized that his political rivals have endeavored to destabilize his prestige and political influence by questioning his very legitimacy. "Trump's adversaries," Stephen B. Young highlights,

consciously or not, have taken Neustadt's analysis to heart. They tirelessly work to deny Trump the power to persuade. They have belittled him, disparaged him, insulted him and, systemically, day in and day out, have challenged his integrity, his intelligence and his ethics—all tending to deny him stature and credibility.¹²¹

Instinctually, the president returns fire with the anti-elite rhetoric that reassures and enlivens his core electoral base, and promises to fight on in other policy domains like building a wall or securing better bilateral trade deals. But the result legislatively and in electoral terms is halting progress at best, stalemate and a continuation of the status quo at worst: "Trump has secured his base, and the Democratic leadership has held its core support. Neither side has majority backing among the people."¹²²

B. Unconventional and unimpeded? The unilateral foundations of presidential power

It is little wonder that Trump has generally exchanged persuasion and bargaining for the unilateral perquisites of the presidency for many of his most important policy successes. The second face of presidential power—the opposite side of the coin to Neustadt's bargaining model—derives from classic analyses of the chief executive's

¹²⁰ John B. Gilmour, *Strategic Disagreement: Stalemate in American Politics* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1995).

¹²¹ Stephen B. Young, "The power of the presidency: Why Trump can't make it go." *Minneapolis Star-Tribune*, March 31, 2017. <http://www.startribune.com/the-power-of-the-presidency-why-trump-can-t-make-it-go/417835453/>

¹²² Ibid.

constitutional authority, including those of Edward Corwin and Clinton Rossiter.¹²³ Scholars who question Neustadt's emphasis on behavioralism contend that "the key to an understanding of presidential power is to concentrate on the constitutional authority that the president asserts unilaterally through various rules of constitutional construction and interpretation."¹²⁴ As Kenneth Mayer asserts, "A president's ability to effect major policy change on his own is in many instances less dependent on personality or the powers of persuasion than on the office's formal authority and the inherent characteristics of governing institutions."¹²⁵ Unquestionably, there are significant benefits to acting alone. "When presidents act unilaterally to set policy," William G. Howell posits,

they present Congress (and the Courts) with a *fait accompli*. Rather than proposing legislation and hoping Congress enacts it, or vetoing legislation, and hoping that Congress does not override, here presidents can independently shift policy in any way they wish, and there it will stay, until and unless either Congress or the courts effectively respond.¹²⁶

Presidential prerogative traverses the domestic and foreign policy realms, and flows from constitutional powers outlined in Article II (e.g., the armed forces, treaty negotiation, etc.), congressional delegations of authority through legislative statutes in the administration of laws, and broad interpretations of inherent powers (i.e., war powers, emergency powers, etc.) that are subject to intense debate in scholarly and legal circles.¹²⁷ Unilateral actions may include executive orders, memoranda, proclamations, national

¹²³ See Raymond Tatalovich and Byron Daynes, "Towards a Paradigm to Explain Presidential Power." *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 9, no. 4 (1979): 428–41.

¹²⁴ Richard Pious, *The American Presidency* (New York: Basic Books, 1979), p. 16.

¹²⁵ Kenneth R. Mayer, *With the Stroke of a Pen: Executive Orders and Presidential Power* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), p. 224.

¹²⁶ William G. Howell, *Power without Persuasion: The Politics of Direct Presidential Action* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003), p. 26.

¹²⁷ Examples include Franklin Roosevelt's internment of Japanese-Americans during World War II and Harry Truman's seizure of the steel mills during the Korean War.

security and homeland security directives, and signing statements. As Philip J. Cooper maintains, presidents can employ their prerogative power to accomplish a number of policy *and* political goals with these instruments. These include, inter alia, implementing swift changes in foreign policy, generating publicity, circumventing Congress, controlling the executive branch, responding to emergencies and directing disaster aid, and rewarding supporters.¹²⁸

Trump's unilateral actions line up unmistakably with rational choice theories of unilateralism. William G. Howell hypothesizes that presidents will utilize the independent levers of the office when Congress is unable to enact legislation, there is alternation in party control of the White House, and during unified control of the presidency and Congress when presidents are less likely to confront a coalition capable of overturning executive actions.¹²⁹ In the latter scenario, if a consensus existed on Capitol Hill, legislation would likely be the result and consequently restrict the president's discretion. All three conditions apply to Trump's first two years in office, and there is ample empirical evidence to support the thesis that political and institutional context in addition to the president's criticism of, and fractious relationship with, elites in Congress, the executive branch, and the courts has contributed to his preference for independent action.

The president has been able to rescind his predecessor's regulatory rules and push forth his own vision for the economy, deregulation, and international affairs in ways that are reminiscent of Reagan's first year.¹³⁰ From border security and immigration to

¹²⁸ Philip J. Cooper, *By Order of the President: The Use and Abuse of Executive Direct Action* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2002), p. 239.

¹²⁹ Howell, *Power without Persuasion*.

¹³⁰ Reagan signed forty-nine executive orders in 1981; Trump signed fifty-five in 2017, and thirty through mid-September 2018. Reagan also set his sights on institutionalizing regulatory reform with the establishment of the Presidential Task Force on Regulatory Relief in January 1981 and by ordering the Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs (OIRA) in the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) to undertake cost-benefit analyses of new regulations. See George C. Eads and Michael Fix (eds.), *The Reagan Regulatory Strategy: An Assessment* (Washington, DC: The Urban Institute, 1984); Barry D. Friedman, "A Case-Study Analysis of the Reagan Regulatory Review Program." *Politics and Policy* 21, no. 4 (1993): 705–20.

the reduction of tax and regulatory burdens and approval of the Keystone XL and the Dakota Access Pipelines, Trump's executive actions quickly reaffirmed his promises to overturn significant components of President Obama's policy legacy. Additionally, the president drew upon his constitutional authority to withdraw the United States from the Paris Climate Accord, the Trans-Pacific Partnership, and the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), better known as the "Iran Nuclear deal," while boldly moving the U.S. embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem—a promise that was not kept by any of his predecessors dating back to Clinton. Finally, some proclamations, like those dramatically reducing the size of federal monuments in Utah to enable natural resource extraction by oil and mining companies, rewarded a core business constituency of his 2016 campaign.¹³¹

Yet executive orders and independent actions are scarcely a panacea for any president. They are subject to congressional scrutiny and judicial review. As Howell puts it, the other two co-equal branches of the government "define what the president can accomplish on his own . . . Congress's ability and the courts' willingness to overturn them remain the final arbiters of what presidents can accomplish should they decide to act unilaterally."¹³² On the legal front, Trump has faced numerous court challenges, including the highly publicized travel ban on certain Muslim countries, the "two for one" reduction for every

¹³¹ On December 4, 2017, Trump signed two proclamations. The first reduced the Bear's Ears National Monument by an astounding 1.3 million acres, or 85 percent; the second reduced the Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument by nearly 876,000 acres, or 47 percent. Environmentalists and Native American tribes have launched legal challenges. See Gregory Korte, "Trump shrinks Bears Ears, Grand Staircase-Escalante monuments in historic proclamations." *USA Today*, December 5, 2017. <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/2017/12/04/trump-travels-utah-historic-rollback-national-monuments/919209001/>; Michelle L. Price and Brady McCombs, "Native American tribes sue over Trump's decision to shrink Utah national monument." *Chicago Tribune*, December 5, 2017. <http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/nationworld/politics/ct-trump-national-monuments-20171205-story.html>

¹³² Howell, *Power without Persuasion*, p. 99.

new agency rule (E.O. 13771),¹³³ the termination of Deferred Action on Childhood Arrivals (DACA) for the children of illegal immigrants, and the attempt to reorient congressional appropriations to a border wall with Mexico, just to highlight a few. These latter examples suggest that Trump has been unable to bypass structural constraints that have at a minimum delayed his policy objectives, at least in terms of the judiciary. Whether the Democratic House majority that was seated in 2019 seeks to limit the president's authority is an open question at the time of writing. Regardless, the most important lesson in the longer view of history is that circumventing Congress with the stroke of a pen has its potential hazards. A Democratic successor to Trump could quickly dismantle his immigration, regulatory, and foreign policy changes absent congressional legislation. One of the central lessons of the Obama foreign policy inheritance, for example, is that his use of executive agreements and failure to enshrine his priorities in treaties approved by the Senate left his legacy to be disassembled with relative ease by his successor.¹³⁴

Trump's reliance on the unilateral prerogatives of the presidency befits a populist style that is founded upon impatience with, and indignity toward, elites and mediated institutions like Congress. The controversies his actions stir and even his defeats can be manipulated for rhetorical consumption. His supporters applaud his executive actions and tout them as "promises made, promises kept" and blame others for his defeats at the hands of judges.¹³⁵

¹³³ Lydia Wheeler, "Court tosses challenge to Trump's two-for-one regulatory order." *The Hill*, February 26, 2017. <http://thehill.com/regulation/court-battles/375617-court-tosses-challenge-to-trumps-two-for-one-regulatory-order>

¹³⁴ See Jeffrey Peake, "Obama, Unilateral Diplomacy, and Iran: Treaties, Executive Agreements, and Political Commitments." In Richard S. Conley (ed.), *Presidential Leadership and National Security Policy: The Obama Legacy and Trump Trajectory* (New York: Routledge, 2018), pp. 142–71.

¹³⁵ Dan Merica, "Trump turns to once-mocked executive orders to tout wins." *CNN*, April 27, 2017. <https://www.cnn.com/2017/04/27/politics/trump-executive-orders/index.html>; Christopher Buskirk, "While Trump's critics keep talking, our president is fulfilling his promises." *USA Today*, January 18, 2018. <https://www.usatoday.com/story/opinion/2018/01/18/while-trumps-critics-keep-talking-our-president-fulfilling-his-promises-christopher-buskirk-column/1041117001/>

The president's detractors, on the other hand, suggest that his reliance on executive orders and other unilateral instruments of the presidency is a plot to undermine the Constitution and a sign of fundamental weakness.¹³⁶

The penultimate question is the long-term sustainability of Trump's dependence on a strategy of independent action combined with an anti-elite narrative that threatens to destabilize his own administration's policy implementation. His most controversial policies implemented at the outset of his term, including the travel ban on select Muslim countries and unilateral foreign policy initiatives connected to his "America First" agenda, provoked the resistance of his own civil service.¹³⁷ Trump rejoiced in firing Acting Attorney General Sally Yates for refusing to defend the travel ban in court and suggested she was part of the "deep state" bias he confronted in the Department of Justice. When 900 State Department employees signed a letter condemning the travel ban, White House Press Secretary Sean Spicer bluntly stated that dissenting career bureaucrats should "get with the program or they should go."¹³⁸ In response to the mêlée, the president tweeted: "There is nothing nice about searching for terrorists before they can enter our country. This was a big part of my campaign. Study the world!"¹³⁹ If he is manipulating the unilateral levers of the presidency for rhetorical consumption, "Trump," as Howell suggests,

may be playing to a base that cares less about policy than about waging an existential war on Washington. The dustups caused by these unilateral directives may not productively change policy, but in

¹³⁶ David M. Driesen, "President Trump's Executive Orders and the Rule of Law." Syracuse University. *Social Science Research Network* (SSRN Papers, 2018). https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3114381

¹³⁷ "America first and last; Donald Trump's foreign policy." *The Economist*, February 4, 2017, p. 17.

¹³⁸ Oren Dorrell, "Nearly 1,000 State Department staffers condemn Trump's travel ban." *USA Today*, January 31, 2017. <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2017/01/31/nearly-1000-state-department-staffers-condemn-trumps-travel-ban/97306024/>

¹³⁹ @realDonaldTrump. "There is nothing nice about searching for terrorists before they can enter our country. This was a big part of my campaign. Study the world!" *Twitter*, January 30, 2017, 4:27 a.m.

the eyes of Trump's supporters, they may serve as proof positive that their man is righteously renouncing the discredited rules of a broken political system.¹⁴⁰

V. The Trump presidency, populism, and American political development

The objective of this book is to analyze Trump's populist leadership style from a political development perspective, with a particular focus on his first two years in office. In the subfield of American political science, political development focuses on "the causes, nature, and consequences of key transformative periods and central patterns in American political history"¹⁴¹ as a means of building theories about political change through case-study analysis. The goal is to place the presidency of Donald Trump and his populist style of governance within the broad scholarly dialogue on the sinuous historical evolution of the nation's highest political office, and where his populist style is potentially situated in "political time" or cycles of history.¹⁴² A central thread of inquiry that runs through this study addresses whether Trump may be a *reconstructive* president who is transforming the institution of the presidency and the political order, whether he is a *disjunctive* president signifying the dying embers of the Reagan "regime" and imminent defeat in 2020, or whether his presidency represents a "punctuated equilibrium"¹⁴³ of change to the status quo that is based more on style than substance in a period of cyclical ambiguity.

This book develops a framework to explicate Trump's leadership style that draws from a historical, comparative perspective.

¹⁴⁰ William G. Howell, "Unilateral politics revisited (and revised) under Trump." *Princeton University Press Blog*, February 6, 2017. <http://blog.press.princeton.edu/2017/02/06/william-g-howell-unilateral-politics-revisited-and-revised-under-trump/>

¹⁴¹ Rogan Kersh, "The Growth of American Political Development: The View from the Classroom." *Perspectives on Politics* 3, no. 2 (2005): 335.

¹⁴² Stephen Skowronek, *The Politics Presidents Make* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997).

¹⁴³ Frank R. Baumgartner and Bryan D. Jones, *Agendas and Instability in American Politics*, 2nd edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010).

A common feature of the populist flare across time in the American experience is the articulation of unconventional, emotionally charged, and frequently quixotic appeals. The rhetoric of populism is distinctive for its recurring themes: reproach of elites, emphasis on the needs and desires of “ordinary people,” support of majoritarianism over pluralism, simplification of issues, and romanticization of the past with frequent nativist overtones. The particular argumentative frames employed by populists highlight the intersection of, and variable disjuncture between, *rhetorical style*, *symbolism*, and *substantive policy*.

Trump’s exercise of the populist leadership style can be juxtaposed with prior presidents and failed candidates with similar impulses and rhetorical bravado. Key examples include Andrew Jackson, William Jennings Bryan, Barry Goldwater, George Wallace, and H. Ross Perot. How does Trump’s populist brand variably connect to his predecessors? One central argument of the book is that although the *vessel* for Trump’s direct communication (social media) appears much different than previous candidates and presidents with populist platforms (e.g., speeches, newspapers, electronic townhalls), he shares, *inter alia*, with his populist forerunners a style that reflects a disdain for a political class of privileged elites, a focus on allegedly threatened social values, indifference toward co-equal institutions, and an anti-intellectual discourse often infused with conspiracy theory.

The broader question this analysis considers is the relative sustainability of Trump’s populist style vis-à-vis the integrity of formal and informal institutions of American democracy and the perils that style may portend in the long term. The contradictions of Trump’s 2016 campaign victory with the 2018 mid-term election backlash that handed Democrats control of the House of Representatives underscore a profoundly ambivalent electorate, an anxious citizenry, and profound polarization. Trump prevailed in the 2016 election despite strong majorities reporting that he was untrustworthy, was unqualified to be president, and lacked the temperament to serve as chief executive. Yet he surpassed 2012 Republican standard-bearer Mitt Romney’s share of the vote among evangelical Christians and

Hispanics.¹⁴⁴ And about a third of 650 counties that voted for Barack Obama twice (2008, 2012) flipped to support him in 2016, even though voters interviewed in fourteen states “said they did not like Mr. Trump as a person and did not consider themselves die-hard supporters. Some were even embarrassed by him.”¹⁴⁵ “Affectively polarized” in the present climate of mounting civil discord and factual relativism, “Americans fear the other party more than they like their own, not merely disagreeing with but actively disliking each other.”¹⁴⁶ One of the most disquieting legacies of Trump’s presidency, in terms of his own comportment and his detractors’ reactions to his populist juggernaut, may be the exacerbation of incivility in a polity increasingly defined by a loss of communicative norms in the age of social media and an absence of “universal pragmatics”¹⁴⁷ necessary to a healthy civic discourse.

VI. Plan of the book

The scope of this book extends to Trump’s early forays into politics and the shaping of his populist style, including the conspiracy-theory tactic of igniting the “birther” controversy surrounding President Barack Obama’s national origin as a prelude to running for the presidency. Subsequent chapters analyze his behavior during the 2016 election cycle, his rabble-rousing post-election rallies, and his governing strategy through the midpoint of his term.

Chapter 2 provides a theoretical conceptualization of populism to analyze Trump’s leadership style comparatively and appraise

¹⁴⁴ Chris Cilizza, “The 13 most amazing findings in the 2016 exit poll.” *Washington Post*, November 10, 2016. https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2016/11/10/the-13-most-amazing-things-in-the-2016-exit-poll/?utm_term=.82f37b291451

¹⁴⁵ Sabrina Tavernise and Robert Gebeloff, “They voted for Obama, then went for Trump. Can Democrats win them back?” *New York Times*, May 14, 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/04/us/obama-trump-swing-voters.html>

¹⁴⁶ Singh, “‘I the People’,” p. 19.

¹⁴⁷ Jürgen Habermas, “Some Distinctions in Universal Pragmatics.” *Theory and Society* 3, no. 2 (1976): 155–67.

the implications for campaigning and governing. The chapter identifies essential components of populist approaches to leadership and clarifies the definition of populism, per se. One key notion in American populism is the presidency as the “tribune” of the people—a better representative of the popular will than Congress—and the legitimization of presidential action through popular authority conveyed upon the president by the electorate’s endorsement of his policy stances. A second component is the rejection of consensual politics and instead “the use of an antagonistic appeal that pits the people as represented by the president against a special interest.”¹⁴⁸ Finally, a common characteristic of the populist style is the accent on a “corrupt elite” against which only a mass political movement can prevail.¹⁴⁹ It is this leitmotif of anti-elitism and exaltation of the “common man,” the “little man,” or the “people” broadly defined that connects Trump to a historical tradition of populism and the development of the plebiscitary presidency in bygone eras. Yet the apparent paradoxes of the Trump presidency—and indeed populist movements of yesteryear—include the oscillation “between a desire to transform, and so create a new order of things, and a desire to restore a yearned-for (or imagined) old order.”¹⁵⁰

Chapter 3 considers the origins of Trump’s populism. The chapter reviews his controversial business career and his gravitation toward a brand of populism that was shaped by political forays in the 1980s. The chapter outlines the origins of his political views alongside his apparent and interminable quest for self-aggrandizement and the rise of his populist rhetoric.

Chapter 4 analyzes the dynamics of the 2016 electoral cycle in terms of populist messaging by Trump and Bernie Sanders, in particular. The analysis considers the psycho-social dynamics of

¹⁴⁸ Terri Bimes and Quinn Mulroy, “The Rise and Decline of Presidential Populism,” *Studies in American Political Development* 18, no. 2 (2004): 139.

¹⁴⁹ Michael Kazin, *The Populist Persuasion: An American History* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998).

¹⁵⁰ Steve Fraser and Joshua B. Freeman, “In the Rearview Mirror: History’s Mad Hatters—The Strange Career of Tea Party Populism,” *New Labor Forum* 19, no. 1 (2010): 76.

Trump's populist spectacles and narratives during the 2016 election and the differences and similarities to Sanders' appeal. The chapter also highlights how the populist insurgencies on the Left and Right transformed the framework of the 2020 presidential contest.

Chapter 5 examines Trump's singular comportment in the immediate aftermath of the 2016 election. Emphasis is placed on his post-election and post-inaugural rallies. The analysis emphasizes that Trump's primary goal was not to persuade voters or policymakers on Capitol Hill, but rather to consolidate his base of support in furtherance of a new form of permanent campaign.

Chapter 6 considers briefly Trump's governing approach through the midpoint of his term. Exchanging bargaining theory for the unilateral levers of the presidency, Trump's most significant policy victories have come through executive action, including regulatory reform. The chapter accentuates the risks associated in bypassing Congress for Trump's potential legacy.

Chapter 7 considers briefly how Trump's populist approach to leadership may jeopardize his presidency. The major perils to his legacy include constitutional, criminal, and political liabilities. The more profound question is how the populist style has impacted civic dialogue in ways that conflict with the Founders' vision of the nation's highest office and where the nation goes in the post-Trump era.

Chapter 8 provides a brief epilogue on the state of Trump's populist presidency a little less than a year from the 2020 election. Of critical importance is the future fate of the Republican Party whether he is re-elected, removed, or defeated. Ideological consistency and conviction politics are not the staple of Trump's populist style—and his eventual exit from politics raises more questions than answers about the Republican brand in the future.