13

Populism, Popular Sovereignty, and Periphery

Julia R. Azari and Alexis Nemecek

INTRODUCTION

Populism has proven to be a ubiquitous, yet elusive, concept in discussions about the fate of democracy. The idea carries with it the promise of popular sovereignty – the potential for ordinary people to overthrow corrupt elites. However, it also poses a danger to political institutions and crucial elements of the liberal order, sometimes merging with anti-immigrant sentiment. This chapter addresses the challenge of populism in the US context, with specific focus on the role played by the rhetoric of antagonism in populist appeals. We argue that (1) antagonistic claims are central to understanding what distinguishes populism from other forms of popular appeals, (2) the US context is somewhat distinctive in that historically, populist appeals have incorporated antagonism across geographic regions, and (3) the nationalization of American politics has led populist rhetoric to seek other targets, fundamentally changing its relationship to political institutions.

We know that politicians use antagonistic rhetoric toward Washington, DC, political systems and institutions, and economic elites, and that this has been a recurring feature of American political discourse associated with the left and the right. Geographically speaking, this anti-Washington sentiment takes the form of populist rhetoric that invokes an elite core and a morally superior periphery. In this chapter, we examine the ways in which populist rhetoric in American politics has exploited the definitional ambiguity of populism in order to incorporate critiques of institutions into mainstream communication.

We begin by explaining the connection between populism and popular sovereignty and the debate about the relationship between populism and liberal democracy. We then identify factors in the US case that make the politics of populism distinct in this case, including the nature of the presidency and a decentralized political system often characterized by regional conflict.

234

The next section assesses recent use of populist and antagonistic rhetoric by presidents and presidential candidates. Based on this evidence, we argue that while the nationalization of politics and the emergence of new political outsiders created a populist moment in 2016, populist rhetoric also has origins in the tropes of mainstream political discourse.

POPULISM AND POPULAR SOVEREIGNTY

The forthcoming analysis of American populism is linked to the broader questions of popular sovereignty in this volume in several ways. Richard Boyd's chapter highlights the need to creating a fictive "people" as a prerequisite for popular sovereignty.[1] Populism addresses this task, often controversially, by highlighting a unified people and specifying the threats to the political community. In the case of the United States, there are many overlapping relevant political communities – regional, state, and other geographic identities like urban and rural. Studying populist rhetoric in historical context helps us understand how these identities have been manipulated differently as the country's politics have become increasingly nationalized.[2] Alvin Tillery's chapter in this volume features two themes present in this analysis: the complexity of intersecting identities in thinking about power and populism and the use of populism to challenge the failures of representative institutions.[3] Our chapter attempts to understand the use of populist rhetoric in contemporary presidential politics as both a means of articulating important criticisms of power structures and also disingenuously manipulating the idea of popular sovereignty in order to gain political power.

The scholarly literature on populism has a complex normative orientation. In this section, for the sake of clarity, we divide this body of scholarship into two bluntly differentiated camps: those that see populism as compatible with democratic claims and aspirations and those that primarily depict populism as a threat to liberal democracy. These two schools of thought also differ in their diagnoses of the cause of populist insurgencies within consolidated democracies. Approaches that view populism as compatible with democracy tend to ascribe its rise to intrinsic tensions within the practice of democracy, or the inevitable gap between ideals and practice. Those that see populism as a threat to liberal democracy have generally instead attributed populist movements to failures by mainstream political actors or other systemic malfunctions, rather than as a natural byproduct.

While praise for populism is not confined to the American politics literature, there is a strain that identifies populism as an important part of the American political tradition. Writing about the populist tradition in American

---

[1] Boyd, Chapter 4, in this volume.
[2] Hopkins, *The increasingly United States*.
[3] Tillery, Chapter 11, in this volume.

politics, historian Michael Kazin argues that "populism in the United States has made the unique claim that the "powers that be" are transgressing the nation's founding creed, which every permanent resident should honor."[4] Kazin's account suggests that populist rhetoric and persuasive argumentation emerge from the American political tradition, even as they have been harnessed by political actors with varying ideologies. Charles Postel conceptualizes the populist movement of the late nineteenth century as a complicated and dynamic one that incorporated multiple racial, economic, and regional interests. Postel, in what might be seen as a contradiction in terms in other contexts, depicts the American populists as a kind of modern and populist movement. Perhaps because of this particular history in the US case, discussions of American populism tend to associate the term with sincere efforts to resist economic exploitation and oligarchy.[5]

Democratic theory also links populism to the features of democracy. Margaret Canovan's assessment of populism broadens the theoretical relationship between populism and democracy. Rejecting the notion that populism emerges from contradictions inherent in liberalism and democracy, Canovan suggests instead that populism is the result of two competing facets of democracy itself. She argues that populism arises from the tension between the "redemptive and pragmatic" faces of democracy. The pragmatic component of democracy requires institutions and procedures, while the redemptive face is "romantic" and offers a vision of "salvation through politics."[6] Critically, she points out that populism is typically characterized as a rejection of authority, but, in fact, it draws on an established source of authority: the people.

A different body of literature, much of it coming from contemporary comparative politics, takes a much dimmer view of the normative prospects for populism. In the European context, twenty-first-century populism is also associated with far-right parties. Claims to represent the interests of a unified and undifferentiated people have merged with anti-immigrant sentiment. Jan-Werner Muller identifies the opposition to pluralism as the defining feature of populism.[7]

In addition to an illiberal disregard for pluralism, populist parties have also been associated with disrespect for the essential institutions of liberal democracy. Anna Grzymala-Busse describes populist parties in Poland and Hungary as having governed by attacking both the formal institutions of democracy and the informal norms that allow it to function.[8] In these accounts, populists' claims to represent the "true people" become weaponized against the

---

[4] Kazin, *Populist Persuasion*, 2.
[5] Postel, *Populist Vision*.
[6] Canovan, "Trust the People!," 10.
[7] Mudde, "Populist Zeitgeist"; Muller, *What Is Populism?*
[8] Grzymala-Busse, "How Populists Rule."

institutions like the judiciary and the news media. Populist actors who are antagonistic to the very existence of liberal democratic institutions undermine democracy even as they claim to speak for the people.

In sum, there is no clear scholarly consensus about the relationship between populism and democracy. By definition, populist rhetoric offers a critique of those in power. Scholars have in some instances deemed these targets worthy of criticism, as in the case of the late nineteenth-century US Populist movement's condemnation of the excesses of industrial capitalism. In other cases, scholars have warned that the institutions denigrated by populists are essential to the function of democracy. Populism can draw illiberal boundaries around the political community and undermine necessary institutions. At the same time, it can also serve as the basis for movements aimed at breaking up concentrated economic (and sometimes political) power. This leaves scholars of populism with many questions. Under what conditions does populism take the form of a necessary critique against the powerful? When does it take a corrosive form? How are existing subnational identities and conflicts mobilized? How do these questions map onto populism of the left and right? Can the targets of populism be both essential and corrupt?

The analysis of populist rhetoric in this chapter examines how this ambivalence manifests in the rhetoric of presidents and presidential hopefuls. While it certainly does not begin to address all of the major questions about populism and its relationship with healthy liberal democracy, the findings presented here offer some suggestions about the ways in which the populist moment of the 2016 election represented continuity and change in the treatment of populist themes in American presidential politics. The rhetoric of presidential hopefuls and their surrogates also illustrates the ways in which populist claims against elites and institutions are also mixed with defenses of these institutions and even appeals to reject populism.

THE AMERICAN POLITICAL LANDSCAPE

Scholars of comparative politics have identified populism as a "thin-centered ideology," with few firm ideas about "the nature of man and society."[9] In the comparative context, this allows populism to attach itself to various other ideologies. However, in the US case, scholars have often noted the thinness of ideology as a matter of course in party politics. Previous iterations of the American party system were criticized by political scientists for being insufficiently ideological.[10] The two major parties have frequently channeled multiple, not particularly compatible interests. In the late twentieth century, politics has undergone a dramatic shift with regard to ideological division. It is in the context of partisan sorting and polarization that populist appeals have

---

[9] Kaltwasser and Mudde, *Populism.*
[10] Rosenfeld, *The Polarizers.*

resurged. In light of this history, what makes the resurgence of populism in the twenty-first century distinct?

The unique structure of separation of powers has also shaped the backdrop of populism. Modern American presidents wield a great deal of real and symbolic power. The Trump presidency has uniquely merged this power with the grievance element of populism. The growth of presidential power has relied on the development of legitimacy claims rooted in populist ideas. Some scholars have linked the interpretation of elections to evolving institutional legitimacy.[11] Presidential claims to electoral mandates have accompanied expanding presidential power.

We draw a conceptual boundary around the idea of grievance against a corrupt elite as the operative characteristic of US populism; simply claiming popular authority is not sufficient to count as populist rhetoric.[12] This allows us to distinguish from other forms of plebiscitary appeals, especially at the presidential level, and to put twenty-first-century American presidential populism into a distinct and meaningful category.

Finally, American politics is becoming increasingly nationalized, with voting behavior oriented toward national figures, political divisions, and media.[13] We examine the nature of populism in this new nationalized context, arguing that this constitutes a break with the history of more regionally based US populism. If the defining characteristic of populism is grievance, then the objects of that grievance are likely to shift in a nationalizing political environment.

THE POPULIST PRESIDENCY

As the previous section indicates, the American presidency is a distinct institution that offers unique opportunities to make public appeals and pronouncements about other institutions. The rhetoric analyzed in a later section looks at presidents and presidential candidates. But it is not just about the distinctiveness of the American presidency as an institution. There are also questions about the unprecedented presidency of Donald Trump.

There are a few important differences between past situations and the Trump administration. Even the most populist or paranoid presidents have been surrounded by people who remind them of the constitutionality of their office, and the power that it wields. Populist appeals have typically been primarily on behalf of others. At Trump's 2017 inauguration, he promised the crowds of supporters, "I will be your voice."[14] However, his practice of populist rhetoric has deviated from this standard style. Instead, the grievances the president expresses are focused on himself. For example, in June 2019, the

---

[11] Azari, *Delivering the People's Message*; Ellis and Kirk, "Presidential Mandates."
[12] Bimes and Mulroy, "The Rise and Decline of Presidential Populism."
[13] Hopkins, *The Increasingly United States*.
[14] Trump, "The Inaugural Address."

forty-fifth president declared that no president in history had been "treated worse" than he had. The president's surrogates have complained about unfair treatment from the news media, as Republican National Committee (RNC) Chairwoman Ronna Romney McDaniel did on the anniversary of D-Day. The news media is a consistent target of contemporary, nationalized populism. The beginning of an impeachment inquiry in fall 2019 has provided opportunities for Trump's team to insist on their persecution by political opponents, including the press.

At the same time, a peculiar political logic obtains in the age of Trump. The politics that led to his presidency have created the conditions for a partisan presidential politics of grievance. Trump's unconventional path to the Republican nomination, in which he beat candidates with more establishment support and yet went on to win mainstream support as the party standard bearer has created an unusually strong "team" feeling. As Lilliana Mason has described, partisan politics has come to symbolize more than mere policy disagreements; party labels also align with salient social identities.[15] Under these conditions, fellow partisans identify strongly with Trump and attacks on him are plausibly also attacks on them.

The political environment bolsters these claims. Because of the closeness of partisan competition, it is possible for either side to credibly argue that it is at a political disadvantage, exploited by a corrupt elite that is affiliated with the other side. The arousal of populist anger becomes part of the dynamic between parties as well as within them. It is not difficult for the president, his surrogates, and his supporters to find evidence of significant and concerted opposition. Any action or statement is likely to elicit criticism and mockery; even the party that controls government can point to powerful and vociferous political adversaries. Furthermore, while Trumpist political forces control much of the federal government (as of 2019), the cultural establishment has been consistently critical of the administration. Partisanship is a compelling but incomplete explanation. The ferocity and ubiquity of Trump criticisms – which range from substantive policy arguments to mockery of the president's body, hair, and eating habits – provide material for a narrative about elite opponents even as the administration pursues a conventional Republican economic agenda rather than one more commonly associated with populism.

The significance of this turn is twofold. First, Bonikowski and Gidron note in a study of populist campaign rhetoric among presidential candidates that populist appeals have generally been the domain of outsider candidates with less experience as professional politicians.[16] In other words, populism has been an electoral appeal of challenger candidates, which fits with Trump's status during the 2016 campaign. However, the dynamics of these arguments shifted when Trump assumed the power of the presidency. As Lieberman, Mettler,

---

[15] Mason, *Uncivil Agreement*.
[16] Bonikowski and Gidron. "The Populist Style in American Politics."

Pepinsky, Roberts, and Vallely have observed, the Trump administration has demonstrated a willingness to use the tools of the executive branch to punish political adversaries.[17]

While Trump has no clear historical antecedent, we pose the question of whether his populist rhetoric in 2016 and beyond was truly a departure from the language of previous presidential aspirants. We find that while Trump has uniquely used the language of anti-pluralist populism to delegitimize his opponents, language that incorporates broad criticisms of various institutional targets has not been uncommon in recent presidential politics.

LEFT POPULISM OF THE RURAL WEST

In this section, we turn to the political geography of American populism in historical context. Differences across the major regions of the United States has driven recent political conflict, although contemporary populism has not been examined explicitly through this lens.[18] Perhaps the work that comes closest to this theme is Katherine Cramer's *The Politics of Resentment*, which examines the attitudes of rural Wisconsin residents toward public employees and urban areas in their state.[19] The literature on American populism also highlights the importance of periphery and outsider status. Bimes and Mulroy argue that, "presidential populist leadership has been closely linked to wider changes in the relationship between presidents and governing institutions."[20] They find that while nineteenth-century Democratic presidents employed populist rhetoric to push back against a national government dominated by special interests (156), Republican populism in the twentieth century has adopted similar anti-statist themes, but with tamer rhetoric. In other words, as the presidency has come to be understood as part of a larger national administrative apparatus, the employment of antagonistic populist rhetoric has been a more difficult fit. Similarly, Bonikowski and Gidron find that a presidential candidate's "perceived distance from the federal political elite," as measured by previous offices held and length of political career, is linked to use of populist rhetoric.[21]

Populism as a distinct political movement emerged in the 1890s in the United States, although many of its ideological roots can be traced back to the early nineteenth century and before. Charles Postel has described at length the complexity of the movement's structure and ideas, noting that grassroots organization took place throughout the country. While Postel emphasizes the geographic diversity of the Populist movement, its merger with mainstream

---

[17] Lieberman et al., "Trumpism and American Democracy."
[18] Hopkins, *The Increasingly United States*; Mellow, *State of Disunion*.
[19] Cramer, *The Politics of Resentment*.
[20] Bimes and Mulroy, "The Rise and Decline of Presidential Populism," 138.
[21] Bonikowski and Gidron. "The Populist Style in American Politics," 1603.

politics also shifted focus to a more explicitly regional reach and strategy. The electoral map from 1892, when the Populist Party ran its own candidate, James Weaver, and from 1896, when the Democratic Party nominated the populist William Jennings Bryan (who was subsequently nominated by the Populist Party), illustrates the geographic nature of this movement. After substantially merging with the Democratic Party in 1896, nominating their candidate, William Jennings Bryan, populists found their electoral fortunes still largely concentrated in "under-developed regions … whose residents had long nursed an anger against the urban, moneyed East."[22]

The best-known populist rhetoric of this era probably comes from the convention speech of William Jennings Bryan, accepting the Democratic presidential nomination in 1896. While the line about the "cross of gold" and the implications for the party's shift on monetary policy are frequently cited, the speech also invokes many themes about economic elitism. This includes the urban–rural divide that both animated populist claims and limited the success of the movement. Bryan described the "producer" vision of agrarian populism in apocalyptic terms:

You come to us and tell us that the great cities are in favor of the gold standard; we reply that the great cities rest upon our broad and fertile prairies. Burn down your cities and leave our farms, and your cities will spring up again as if by magic; but destroy our farms, and the grass will grow in the streets of every city in the country.[23]

The economic populism embraced by Democrats in this era reappeared in New Deal rhetoric.[24] Other themes, including geographic resentments and uneasy integration with mainstream party politics, have also recurred. Yet, as we will see in a later section, changing context has altered populism on the left, altering its regional content and orientation toward institutions.

RIGHT POPULISM OF THE SEGREGATED SOUTH

Defining the conservative populism of the South is more complicated. The focal point for the merging of a populist political messaging style and the substance of southern anti-integration was Alabama governor and presidential candidate George Wallace. The conservative populism of the late 1960s differed from the economic populism decades earlier; it focused on the middle-class and "ordinary" Americans. This emphasis was part of a political strategy to break away from the party's disadvantage relative to Democrats with working- and middle-class voters, as well as an effort to capitalize on post-Civil Rights racial resentment.[25]

---

[22] Kazin, *Populist Persuasion*, 42; Postel, *Populist Vision*.
[23] Bryan, "Democratic Convention Address."
[24] Gerring, *Party Ideologies in America*.
[25] Mason, *Richard Nixon and the Quest for a New Republican Majority*, 220.

Wallace biographer Dan Carter contrasts the segregationist governor with more "authentic" populist voices genuinely concerned with reform, and suggests that both the slippery definition of the term and Wallace's own lack of conformity to received ideological categories drove the use of this label.[26] Nevertheless, conservative populism can trace its anti-elite, antigovernment and, to use Joel Olson's phrase, "white ordinariness" roots to a geographically segmented system of politics.[27] The targets of this strain of populism were also less straightforward. While the literal targets of populist anger were intellectuals and elites, sometimes with a geographic component, the implied targets were racial minorities seeking rights and protections. Populism in this form becomes not only complicated but also insidious, as it makes one set of claims about elites in order to oppress the already disadvantaged.

POPULIST RHETORIC IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

Here, we turn to the question of how twenty-first-century presidents and presidential aspirants have used populist appeals. We draw on several sets of speeches from the American Presidency Project. The 136 speeches analyzed in this section come from several different categories: speeches given by candidates and former presidents during the 2016 nomination campaign, speeches given by the major candidates in fall 2016, and speeches given by Trump during his early months in office. As with previous analyses of populist rhetoric, we relied on both automated and hand-coding methods. The text was analyzed by first creating a dictionary using the software program Diction (v. 7.1.3). This dictionary differed from some past efforts to assess populism because it did not include language about a unified people. Rather, it included words associated with frequent targets of American populism. These words included banks, bureaucracy, bureaucrats, cities, coasts, Congress, corporations, east, educated, elites, experts, interest groups, media, politicians, powerful, rich, special interests, system, Washington, wealthy.

In the hand-coding portion of the analysis, we eliminated references that were irrelevant, and drew qualitative assessments of the relevant references. These are presented in the following sections, and, as we will show, were not clearly classifiable into positive and negative references. Instead, we found that the praise and criticism for institutions of power were in many cases bound together or at least presented in the same speech.

The approach here departs from some previous studies, which hold individual politicians as the unit of analysis and compare them. For example, using a sophisticated, multipart measurement for populist speech, Eric Oliver and Wendy Rahn demonstrate that Trump and Sanders use more populist

---

[26] Carter, *The Politics of Rage*, 344.
[27] Olson, "Whiteness and the Polarization of American Politics."

rhetoric than other 2016 contenders.[28] They also illustrate how the two candidates use forms of populism most typical for their respective parties. Trump employed political populism while Sanders used more economic populism. It is now well established that some politicians draw on more populist tropes while others use them more sparingly. However, we begin this analysis from the premise that most politicians use some populist frameworks, and that this language can be embedded in other types of political appeals, or spoken alongside opposing frameworks. Furthermore, the focus of this analysis is on the ways in which populist rhetoric is directed at institutions and other targets of antagonism. The method developed assesses how populist language about institutions, social groups, and ideas compares with other discourse about these same things.

The pursuit of the presidency has a distinct political geography. Nomination seekers and their surrogates (like George W. Bush speaking on behalf of his brother Jeb) concentrate their efforts in Iowa, New Hampshire, and South Carolina. These locations are relevant to the regional populisms that have historically shaped American politics, especially as they still hold identities as peripheral, rural areas excluded from the urban cultural core. Fundraising, especially for Democrats, happens in these urban centers, often not located in competitive or strategic states. For example, Obama's fundraiser comments are concentrated in Chicago, Illinois, Seattle, Washington, and Los Angeles, California. However, the relatively small number of speeches makes it difficult to draw serious inferences about regional patterns in presidential and candidate populism. We discuss our findings with regard to the politics of periphery in the next sections.

The 2015–2016 Nomination Campaign

The surveyed period included twelve speeches delivered by Barack Obama, then the sitting president, at fundraisers for various organizational wings of the Democratic Party as well as for specific candidates. This period also featured several speeches by Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders, whose left-wing populist tendencies have been documented in previous research.[29] Comparison between these two politicians' use of rhetoric about common populist targets illustrates the ways in which populism is both integrated into mainstream political discourse, as well as the contrast between its mainstream uses and more overt populist appeals.

Many of Obama's references to Congress, Democrats, and politicians were positive or neutral. A frequently repeated line was "And so our unfinished

---

[28] Oliver and Rahn, "Rise of the Trumpenvolk."
[29] Cinar, Stokes, and Uribe, "Presidential Rhetoric and Populism"; Oliver and Rahn, "Rise of the Trumpenvolk."

business doesn't depend on me or Congress or even the next Democratic President, it will depend on us." Obama also referred to politicians in a matter-of-fact way, conceding the realities of politics while drawing a comparison between Republicans and Democrats: "Democrats are politicians too. You've to worry about constituencies and polls and trying to get reelected. But we tend to pay attention to facts, and we tend to pay attention to evidence, and we actually listen to reason and arguments."

The forty-fourth president's comments on other populist targets, Washington and the media, were less positive. A typical comment from Obama about the media emphasized its role in exaggerating and rewarding political conflict: "And we've got a media that likes to concentrate on conflict, and you get attention, you can cash in by saying the most outrageous things – a system that rewards people trying to score political points rather than actually get things done."[30] These comments were linked to a critique of the "system" that rewards "division and polarization and short-term thinking." At a fundraiser in Seattle for Senator Patty Murray, Obama quipped about the dysfunction of the nation's capital: "Now, I know sometimes in the other Washington, our politics doesn't always reflect the decency and the common sense of the American people."[31]

Expressions of exasperation and willingness to blame the country's problems on "the system" and elites in Washington made some sense given Obama's political history. As Cinar, Stokes, and Uribe point out, Obama's initial entry into presidential politics drew on his status as a political outsider.[32] Furthermore, as a politician who ran on the idea of changing the system and making major policy change, he had been thwarted by structural features – especially a polarized landscape and outrage-based conservative media – throughout his eight years in office.

Obama's comments about some of the frequent targets of populism – the media, Washington, "the system" – differed a great deal in tone and frequency from those delivered by Trump and Sanders. Nevertheless, they also contained some common kernels with more bombastic populist rhetoric. In contrast with Trump, Obama never referred to the media as "the enemy of the people" or accused them of lying. Yet, he did consistently point to their role in creating a polarized and dysfunctional political system. These statements implied that the "system" and the media sometimes fostered division at the expense of a more unified national public, conforming to a mild logic of populism. In another regard, Obama's comments were consistent with some of the research on polarization, which suggests that the news media has been pivotal in shaping the tone and hostility in partisan politics and that the importance of belonging

[30] Obama, "Remarks at a Democratic National Committee Fundraiser in Los Angeles."
[31] Obama, "Remarks at a Fundraiser for Senator Patricia Murray."
[32] Cinar, Stokes, and Uribe, "Presidential Rhetoric and Populism."

to a winning "team" has come to drive polarization.[33] Nevertheless, they did contain some of the same targets as later and more forceful uses of populism.

However, these comments also combined criticism of institutions with a defense of mainstream politics. For example, Obama's Seattle remarks later included a more complex point about anti-Washington cynicism: "And look, it's comfortable to just say Washington doesn't work anymore, everything is dysfunctional, just to turn away." His comments also suggested that while it was understandable that people might become frustrated and disengage because of the "system," the only path to political progress also lies with engagement in the system. For example: "And as frustrating as Washington can be – and I promise you, it can be frustrating – [laughter] – the system has a way of, over time, just jiggering and going down blind allies and hitting bumps, but if we are determined to change it, it changes."[34] Similarly, at a Democratic Hope Fund dinner, Obama acknowledged the prevailing anti-system attitudes of the moment. "And I know that we live in a cynical time, and you're seeing in our election cycle right now the expressions of a lot of anger and frustration. Some of it is manufactured for political purposes. Some of it is hype that we see in the news cycle, in the media, in the age of Twitter. But the frustrations are there, and they're real." In many of Obama's communications, critiques of institutions were often interconnected with messages of hope and encouragement about the potential to work for change within the political system.

Sanders' use of populist rhetoric made him stand out not only from other Democrats (namely, Obama and Clinton) but also from populists on the right like Trump. Oliver and Rahn observe that Sanders' 2016 primary rhetoric featured a high score on "economic populism, blame attribution, and invocations of 'America' but employs a more complex and sophisticated language. Nor does he score high in the use of 'we–they' collectivist rhetoric. Thus while Sanders may be 'populist' in a strictly economic sense, his language is not nearly as 'of the people' as either Carson's or Trump's."[35] Cinar, Stokes, and Uribe identify Sanders as a left populist, observing that "Sanders's words of disparagement are aimed at traditional populist targets: Wall Street, bankers, the super-wealthy. Except for the absence of complaints about the railroads and the gold standard, he sounds a lot like American populists of the late nineteenth century."[36]

Importantly, however, Sanders' economic populist rhetoric, at least in the brief period surveyed here, was closely tied to his criticisms of the political system. For example, at the 2015 Jefferson–Jackson Day dinner, Sanders offered

---

[33] Grossmann and Hopkins, "Placing Media in Conservative Culture"; Young, *Irony and Outrage*; Mason, *Uncivil Agreement*.
[34] Obama, "Remarks at a Democratic National Committee Fundraiser in Chicago."
[35] Oliver and Rahn, "Rise of the Trumpenvolk."
[36] Cinar, Stokes, and Uribe, "Presidential Rhetoric and Populism," 251.

an indictment of economic and political elites alike: "After I came to Congress, corporate America, Wall Street, the administration in the White House and virtually all of the corporate media pushed for passage of the North American Free Trade Agreement." The same speech also criticized the media, along with the "political establishment," for their support of the Iraq War in 2003. After his victory in the Iowa caucuses, Sanders took aim at several of the typical populist targets. His words emphasized the parallels across different seats of power, noting "As I think about what happened tonight, I think the people of Iowa have sent a very profound message to the political establishment, to the economic establishment, and by the way, to the media establishment." Sanders also reminded his audience that "experts" had doubted the electoral chances of Barack Obama eight years earlier. In an address at Georgetown University, Sanders once again explained the connection between political and economic power.[37]

Analyses of Sanders' populist rhetoric that classify it as solely economic populism omit a critical aspect of his message. His critiques targeted economic elites in ways that were not entirely out of step with past democratic ideas and were, as we see in the next section, possible for Hillary Clinton to incorporate into her messages.[38] Populist ideas about the failures of the political system offer a different set of challenges for mainstream politicians. Such complaints have become a routine feature of political rhetoric, in the form of anti-Washington messages or those that decry the "system" as a corrupting force. However, Sanders' merging of the two kinds of populist set his messages apart, and drew on existing frameworks to criticize the *status quo* in ways that were difficult for mainstream politicians to respond to or adopt.

CLINTON VERSUS TRUMP

As the 2016 campaign came to an end, Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump both spent a great deal of time in highly competitive states throughout the country – Colorado, North Carolina, Florida, Ohio, and Pennsylvania. Trump also expanded his geographic reach a bit, adding Michigan, Wisconsin, Arizona, and Nevada to the list. Clinton also spoke in New Hampshire and at the Alfred Smith dinner in New York City.

Like Obama, Clinton often married populist and anti-populist, pro-institution themes in her speeches. "Washington" was often a soft target, with critiques implicit in statements like, "That's what we need more of in Washington, people like Patrick who are going to get up every day and go to work for you, a better life for you and your families, instead of blocking progress at every turn, listening to the special interests and powerful forces that really are not interested in what it's going to take for every one of you

---

[37] Sanders, "Remarks at Georgetown."
[38] Gerring, *Party Ideologies*.

to get ahead and stay ahead."[39] In Daytona Beach a few days later, Clinton urged voters to elect Murphy because "we need people in Washington who are problem-solvers, not problem-makers."[40] Similarly, in a speech in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, Clinton said of Senate candidate Deborah Ross, "She will be an independent voice for the working families in this state, and she will help break through the gridlock in Washington."[41] While these were campaign statements in support of Congressional candidates, they also drew on familiar tropes about the problems of government, the established system, and the incumbent politicians.

These kinds of statements seem at first glance to be political boilerplate. Yet, the very ordinariness of such reflexive anti-Washington statements, tied in with party politics and campaign rhetoric, reveals how populist anti-institutional ideas are woven into American political communication. Politicians voice these sentiments alongside defenses of the system and its institutions. Furthermore, the expectation that criticism of "Washington" will be a mainstay of campaign discourse helped to create the foundation for more overtly populist appeals. These anti-Washington remarks mingled both accurate critiques of the system's lack of responsiveness and empty tropes about "breaking through gridlock" that cast political conflict as a problem rather than a natural occurrence in a democracy.

Clinton's remarks in October 2016 differed from Obama's in another critical way. While Obama sometimes castigated the media for their role in rewarding political division, Clinton praised the role of the press. These statements were embedded in the specific context of the general election against Trump. In her Coconut Creek speech, Clinton drew a contrast between herself and her opponent: "And we don't punish newspapers or journalists that try to cover the news or are critical of politicians, or threaten to restrict the First Amendment, because our democracy depends on a free press."[42]

Clinton's speeches featured notably more economic populism than Obama's, however. By October, she had adopted some version of Bernie Sanders' economically populist talking points, speaking about the abuses of corporations and banks. Her statements implicating "the wealthy" often tied tax cuts and other policies intended to benefit rich Americans to her opponent. In this sense, Clinton and Sanders were not so different in their use of populism, and both fit into an established, if not ubiquitous, tradition in the modern Democratic Party. When it came to other targets, Clinton both embraced populist critiques of established power and defended important, if powerful, institutions like the press and the political system in general. Some of her economic populist rhetoric was aimed at her opponent. As we shall see, Trump returned the favor in his frequent anti-system populist claims.

[39] Clinton, "Remarks at Broward College's North Campus."
[40] Clinton, "Remarks at the Dickerson Community."
[41] Clinton, "Wake Forest University."
[42] Clinton, "Remarks at Broward College."

By the end of Donald Trump's presidency, his penchant for delegitimizing rhetoric against democratic institutions, perhaps most infamously the news media, had become a familiar aspect of American politics. However, it is worthwhile to consider the messages of antagonism that Trump used on the campaign trail in 2016. Our analysis of his October 2016 communication is consistent with other scholars' findings that Trump's populism took the form of political, rather than economic, antagonism. In contrast with Clinton and Sanders, Trump's speeches rarely included negative references to the banks, corporations, or the wealthy. Trump often ended speeches by talking about making America wealthy again. Instead, the targets of his criticism were politicians, the system, and Washington. Populist attacks on the media included complaints about their lack of coverage of preferred issues (such as the allegation of paid protesters at Trump rallies), and accusations that they were part of the Clinton campaign. Many of the statements about the corrupt Washington establishment or the mistakes of career politicians were directly linked to Clinton.

One distinct aspect of Trump's populist rhetoric is the extensive list of targets employed in nearly every campaign speech in October, 2016. In addition to talking about the media, Trump offered a comprehensive critique of the American political system in some speeches, decrying career politicians in Washington and the role of special interests. The political establishment was implicated in failing to enact adequate border policy or listen to the public on trade. The "Drain the Swamp" stump speech also called for Congressional term limits, a popular idea but also one within the populist domain.

It is difficult to assess the impact of specific campaign rhetoric on the hearts and minds of voters or the outcome of the election. However, examining how antagonistic populist rhetoric often works alongside mainstream political speech, with criticisms of groups and institutions often presented with defenses of different aspects of the political system, helps to illustrate how the populist turn in 2016 built on existing tropes. Sanders combined economic populism with broad institutional critiques. Clinton was able to pick up on that populism, but refrained in general from political populism. Trump, however, adopted anti-Washington rhetoric used by mainstream outsider candidates like Obama, and even invoked mildly by Clinton. Trump increased the intensity of this rhetoric, without tempering it with defenses of the system, and offered his own candidacy as the solution.

CONSERVATIVE POPULIST RHETORIC IN AND OUT OF THE WHITE HOUSE

The previous section illustrates how populist and anti-institutional campaign rhetoric built on mainstream language used by democratic politicians. This section looks at how Trump's rhetoric, this time on the road as a newly elected president, compared to that of the most recent Republican president, George W. Bush, during his first 100 days in office in 2001. While existing

research suggests that proximity to power makes a difference for how politicians use populist rhetoric, we also know that lines between governing and campaigning have increasingly blurred. This has been especially true for Trump, who has continued to hold campaign-style rallies throughout this presidency and to launch populist attacks against opponents and especially the news media.

Recent conservative populism has had a distinct rhetoric of political geography. During the 2008 campaign, Sarah Palin drew criticism for referring to North Carolina as "real America." In an article on possible democratic challenges to Donald Trump, a Republican spokesperson was quoted saying, "[Trump's 2020 opponent should be] Somebody who speaks to common-sense American values – that is what the Democrats need. I'm not sure who that person is, but I am pretty sure she or he does not reside in New York, Massachusetts or California."[43]

We have seen how the electoral map creates a politics of periphery that is evident in the rhetoric of populist antagonism among presidential candidates. How does this manifest once the president is in office? This section takes up the question with a specific focus on Republican presidents, comparing Donald Trump with George W. Bush. Both presidents undertook some travel during their first 100 days in office, with Bush making forty speeches and Trump making twenty-one, as archived by the American Presidency Project. The political geography of each president's travel was somewhat different; Trump spent a higher percentage of his time in the South (thirteen speeches, not counting those delivered in Washington – adjacent areas of Virginia), including Florida. Bush also spent considerable time there (seventeen speeches, including two in Virginia outside of the DC area). Both presidents spoke in Wisconsin and Michigan. But Bush also traveled to other parts of the Midwest, interior West, and border regions, including Montana, North Dakota, Iowa, and Missouri.

One of the central purposes of Bush's speaking tour in early 2001 was to promote education reform. In promoting this initiative (what would eventually be the No Child Left Behind bill), Bush frequently talked about the idea of local control and not allowing "Washington" to determine local education policy. (The contradiction between these statements and the passage of major legislation that increased federal involvement in education is perhaps another discussion entirely.) These comments often took the form of soft anti-Washington populism, as in an address in Omaha, Nebraska: "Even though I have a Washington, DC, temporary address, I want you to know I strongly believe in local control of schools. I believe the people who care more about the children of Nebraska are the citizens of Nebraska. And we must work together, the Congress and the executive branch must work together to pass power out

---

43 Cohen, "Trump's Road to 2024."

of Washington to provide flexibility at the local level. One size does not fit all when it comes to educating the children of our country."[44]

Bush often repeated this line about having a Washington address but placing value on getting out of Washington (Atlanta, GA). Some stronger anti-Washington rhetoric appeared in two speeches in North Dakota. Speaking about the budget in Fargo, Bush said, "And that means the folks are overtaxed, and if you're overcharged for something, you ought to demand a refund. And I stepped in front of the Congress and demanded a refund on your behalf." (Bush also talked about refunds in Atlanta, but he used the word "remind" instead of "demand.")[45] In Sioux Falls, he also implicated Congress, stating, "I also don't trust the Congress to pick winners and losers in the Tax Code." Further comments about government spending included, "But if you listen to the voices of those who would rather keep your money in Washington, DC, they say we can't meet the needs. I'm telling you, we can meet the needs with the right kind of priorities."[46]

Bush's anti-Congress rhetoric in these sets of remarks stands apart from some of his other communications, which often mentioned Congress in a more neutral or even positive way. These comments included statements about legislation he had sent Congress or noting that he hoped Congress understood ideas about local control or fiscal responsibility. In the two North Dakota speeches, however, Bush adopted a classic populist presidential stance. The presentation of the president as the true representative of the people's interests against a Congress that represents power and special interests is a classic presidential populist appeal. Although we have too few observations to draw any clear inferences, it is notable that Bush used this rhetoric for an audience in one of the most peripheral – geographically and culturally removed from coastal elite politics – destinations during his early 2001 travels.

The general orientation of Bush's messages was much what we might expect from a mainstream conservative politician and newly elected president. As with Obama in 2016, Bush alternated between criticizing and defending powerful governing institutions, generally avoided invoking economically populist rhetoric, and offered mostly mild jabs at the political establishment "in Washington." It is possible to see how this style of rhetoric set the stage for more intense and bombastic populist antagonism nearly two decades later, while also differing substantially from the later style.

Trump's 2017 rhetoric took aim at a narrower range of targets than the speeches during the campaign. While campaign appeals attacked "politicians" and the political system, sometimes even invoking economic populist language against the influence of the wealthy in the political system, the tone changed

---

[44] Bush, "Remarks in Omaha."
[45] Bush, "Remarks at North Dakota State University" and "Remarks at Fernbank Museum."
[46] Bush, "Remarks in Sioux Falls."

once Trump took office. This is unsurprising, as Trump likely came to the realization that he would need allies in Washington in order to pursue his agenda. Some of the outsider anti-Washington rhetoric continued in these speeches, usually connected with Trump's signature policy issues. In Ypsilanti, Trump criticized "Washington" for not acting on trade policy; in Harrisburg, this was connected to immigration. Other anti-Washington critiques were linked to Andrew Jackson, whom Trump referenced in his Ypsilanti speech as well as one in Nashville, Tennessee (the latter address was at an event honoring Jackson's birthday). However, the target that came up in one-third of the speeches during this period was the media. These speeches often contained multiple references to the media, calling them "dishonest" and "fake" accusing them of neglecting to report facts about immigration and crime.[47]

Scholars of comparative politics have discussed the use of the populist label to describe far-right anti-immigrant parties and movements. In the case of Trump, a striking feature of his governing rhetoric is the shift of emphasis from populist antagonism against a wide array of institutional targets to a more explicitly nationalist rhetoric framework. For example, when signing an executive order on trade in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, Trump made references to keeping jobs in the United States. A similar theme dominated a speech in North Charleston, South Carolina. The focus in this essay on antagonism against institutions and other targets helps to illuminate the difference between these two forms of appeals.[48]

The political geography of Trump's populist antagonism did depart from Bush's in several significant ways. Trump's speeches were more heavily concentrated in the South, with fewer visits to the Midwest and none to interior West states like North Dakota or Montana. Second, when Trump spoke about the problems with "Washington," he invoked policy failings or contrasted the nation's capital, implied to be filled with establishment elites, with the wisdom of the electorate in general. Bush's claims, on the other hand, contrasted Washington with the knowledge found at the local level. While Trump sometimes referred to the "Washington media" on the campaign trail, his later anti-media comments were less specific. Instead, the media serve as a flexible target of populism, amenable to connections with other elites and with periphery politics, or as a separate target all their own.

CONCLUSION

Several features of recent rhetoric from American presidents and presidential hopefuls prompt new questions about populism. The communication choices of Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders stand out, not for the unique targets of

---

[47] Trump, "Remarks at the American Center for Mobility."
[48] Trump, "Remarks at the Boeing Company Manufacturing Facility."

their antagonism, but for the tone and combination of populist critiques of institutions. Other politicians combined praise for targets like Washington, "the system," or the media with ordinary rhetoric and even defenses of these institutions. The usage of populist rhetoric in this context challenges Canovan's argument that populist politics exist outside of ordinary politics. The ordinariness of populist rhetoric, incorporated into mainstream speeches, is consistent with the distinct features of American politics such as federalism and decentralization, the downplaying of ideology, and a plebiscitary presidency.

Two major differences between early and contemporary populist rhetoric on the left are evident. While the Populist movement of the Bryan era reconciled itself to a powerful state as a counterweight to the growing power of industrial capitalism, the contemporary populist approach to state power is more complicated. The practical policy agenda calls for regulation and government expansion, building on conventional Democratic Party priorities and extending their scope. However, the distinguishing factor between Bernie Sanders' campaign rhetoric and Hillary Clinton's in 2016 was not their orientation toward economic elites but toward the political system. Populism on the left contains a contradiction between its advocacy for an expanded state and its condemnation of a corrupt system of political power. This contradictions can, of course, be resolved through systemic reform and, crucially, replacement of governing elites – this is where the remedies of populism come in. Nevertheless, the approach to state power is not entirely consistent. In the 2020 Democratic nomination contest, tensions between the party's "establishment" and its populist critics briefly animated the debates between Bernie Sanders and Joe Biden.

Second, the persistent political geography of populism presents a conundrum. As we have noted, populism is historically rooted in a politics of periphery, with the regions like the West and South mobilized against "elites" located in the nation's power centers, usually depicted as coastal cities. The electoral map has created a new, durable politics of periphery. While candidates stop in major cities for fundraisers, the nomination process emphasizes a handful of states: Iowa, in the Midwest, South Carolina, in the South and New Hampshire, which is in the Northeast but still carries a strong rural identity. Candidates employ anti-Washington rhetoric for these audiences. Similarly, the general election map in 2016 sent candidates to the South – North Carolina and Florida – and the Midwest – mostly Ohio. The rhetoric of populist periphery makes sense given this geography. However, the base of the Democratic Party is located heavily in coastal and urban areas. This presents a dilemma for populism on the left. Of course, this dilemma is not entirely new – nineteenth-century populists also struggled to form a multiracial coalition and to expand their appeal into the cities. The persistence of periphery rhetoric highlights the tension between the political geography of the presidential selection process and the base of the Democratic Party. For Republicans,

this emergent urban–rural divide has presented new opportunities to employ core-periphery rhetoric as a racist dog whistle. After the 2020 elections, Trump took geographical populist rhetoric in a new direction, claiming without evidence that voter fraud had occurred in cities with large Black populations, such as Detroit, Milwaukee, and Philadelphia.

Populist rhetoric integrates more seamlessly into some typical Republican tropes, such as distrust of the national government and valorization of the "ordinary" at the expense of experts and elites.[49] At the same time, the contrast between Trump's rhetoric and that of other presidents and presidential candidates illustrates how much of a departure it is from standard political messages. The shift in Trump's own rhetoric from campaigning to governing illustrates this distinction as well. The comparison between Trump and Bush also suggests that, even as multiple political structures – the Electoral College, the nomination process – encourage a politics of periphery, the nationalization of politics might prompt populists to address different targets and adopt different language. Such a development may be especially dangerous if it involves attacks on the news media. Another possibility raised by the 2020 election and its aftermath is that attacks will be sustained on the election administration apparatus, even beyond what we have already seen. It is not difficult to imagine the rhetoric of such attacks invoking ideas like local control against election administrators who are part of the political establishment.

American populism has evolved with changing institutions and ideological developments. It is also interconnected with mainstream politics and political rhetoric in a way that highlights what is different about the most recent populist turn. Questions remain about the normative implications of populism. Critics assail populism as at odds with liberal democracy, sometimes problematically defining "the people" in ways that are exclusionary. But populism also invokes criticisms of institutions, which are both essential to democracy and sometimes ripe for critique. An examination of contemporary populist rhetoric in the United States highlights this ambivalence, illustrating the ways in which populism reflects back routine anti-institution rhetoric. Yet, when intensified and mixed with other political developments, populist rhetoric can take on a new, destabilizing dimension.

---

[49] Gerring, *Party Ideologies*.