

## **U.S. Party Politics and the Peculiar Nature of American Populism**

*Thomas Greven*

### **Abstract**

How did American democracy get to the breaking point symbolized by the “storm on the Capitol” on January 6, 2021? Since its founding, the Republican Party has employed several elements of populism to mobilize a base of mostly white Christian voters. Former president Donald Trump has successfully added elements of an economic populism to appeal to working-class white voters. This contributed to Trump’s 2016 success, to the closeness of his 2020 defeat, and to the GOP’s down-ballot success in 2020. The GOP’s populism has become ever more radical and polarizing, in part due to its shrinking base of voters, resulting in the current tribal state of American party politics and society. In other words, polarization in the United States is no longer based on policy or ideology; it is endemic, cultural, and a threat to the country’s democratic institutions. At the same time, a divided Democratic Party has failed to embrace an economic populism that could very well serve to renew its lost appeal to the white working class.

**Keywords:** Elections, party politics, populism, United States.

---

When the second impeachment trial against Donald J. Trump ended with the expected acquittal (albeit with a split Republican conference in the United States Senate), giving Trump the chance to run again in 2024, one wondered how future historians will assess the 2020 presidential election and its aftermath. Will they look back and say that the system worked? Despite a sitting president who did not accept defeat and tried in various ways to overturn the election results, including instigating the violent “storm on the Capitol” of his supporters on January 6, 2021, a new president was ultimately inaugurated. The peaceful transition of power, that hallmark of a functioning democracy, was once again

---

**Thomas Greven** is Professor of Political Science at Free University in Berlin (“Privatdozent”).  
<tgreven@zedat.fu-berlin.de>

secured.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, the election could be considered somewhat of a triumph of multiracial democracy, not only because an African Asian American was elected vice president.

Or will historians argue that, figuratively speaking, a bullet was dodged, one that came dangerously close to dealing a potentially fatal blow to American democracy? After four years of a president with clear authoritarian tendencies, more than 74 million Americans voted to keep Donald Trump in office. In fact, he came within a mere 45,000 votes of legitimately winning re-election. This was the combined leading margin of Democrat Joe Biden in Arizona, Georgia, and Wisconsin. Had Trump won these states, the Electoral College would have been tied and the presidential election would have been decided by the U.S. House of Representatives with one vote per state. As Republicans have majorities in more state delegations, Trump would have been duly elected, albeit once again by a clear minority of Americans.

Even scarier “what if” scenarios are certainly possible: What if the election had come down to just one state, as in 2000, or if the Republicans, the Grand Old Party (GOP), had had the majority in the House of Representatives? Could Americans really have trusted the Trump-dominated Republican Party and Trump-appointed judges not to try to steal the election? Most importantly, what does it say about the state of American democracy that we are seriously debating such scenarios?

Whatever future historians will write obviously depends on what happens next. Thus, there is no reason for complacency, not for American citizens, not for scholars of American politics. Against all evidence and in the face of dozens of contrary court rulings, Trump’s “big lie” about how an alleged “landslide victory” was stolen from him prevails among a majority of Republican voters and many officeholders at the federal and even more so at the state and local levels, as does the belief that the attack on the Capitol was not in fact led by Trump supporters but by Antifa. As was showcased at the annual Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) at the end of February 2021, in Orlando, Florida, Donald Trump continues to dominate GOP debates. Moreover, Trump and former administration officials are actively building a “constellation of groups (political, legal and policy) that parallel the structure of the national Republican Party,” threatening the financial and political control of the Republican National Committee regarding nominations and campaign messaging.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Behind the scenes, many actors worked very hard to ensure that the counting of the votes proceeded as it did: “It’s massively important for the country to understand that... [t]he system didn’t work magically. Democracy is not self-executing.” Molly Ball, “The Secret History of the Shadow Campaign That Saved the Election,” *Time* (February 15, 2021), <https://time.com/magazine/us/5936018/february-15th-2021-vol-197-no-5-u-s/> (accessed May 12, 2021).

<sup>2</sup> Chris Cillizza, “Donald Trump Is Building a Shadow Republican Party,” *CNN* (April 15, 2021), <https://edition.cnn.com/2021/04/14/politics/donald-trump-2024/index.html> (accessed May 12, 2021).

We must explore how the United States got to this breaking point.<sup>3</sup> The following argues that Trump's and the GOP's skillful use of all aspects of America's peculiar populism, and the Democrats' failure to use any aspect of it, contributed to Trump's 2016 success, to the closeness of his 2020 defeat, to the GOP's down-ballot success in 2020, and to the current tribal state of American party politics and society. This essay is structured as follows. First, it presents definitions of opportunistic and radical populism. Second, there is a discussion of the peculiar role that populism has played in American history, highlighting its progressive elements. Third, the essay explains how and why the GOP has become a radical populist party, and fourth, how and why the Democrats have failed to embrace an economic populism that could very well serve to renew their lost appeal to the white working class. The essay concludes with an outlook on the prospects of the Biden administration regarding the reconciliation of American society.

## What Is Populism?

In order to explore party politics in the United States in relation to the peculiar nature of American populism, we first must address what we mean by populism. In the author's view, two types of populism can be distinguished: opportunistic and radical. Many political parties and politicians on occasion will pivot to address popular issues or to take popular positions for short-term political gain. Some will use folksy rhetoric, suggest overly simple solutions to complex problems, or claim to represent general interests versus the interests of a specific group. Using these populist strategies is conditioned on a certain degree of programmatic flexibility or "thin ideology."<sup>4</sup> A consistent ideology or program is not essential, for this "opportunistic populism" and its practitioners do not need to be radical to be effective, just popular at the right moment.

In contrast, "radical populism" is best conceptualized as a strategic attitude and narrative that, while programmatically flexible, lends itself to particular and often extremist ideologies, left and right. Radical populism's central and permanent narrative is a Manichean, binary, anti-pluralist antagonism of "us versus them," usually contrasting "the (good) people" with a (corrupt or evil) "political class," "elite," or "establishment." Accordingly, the people, as whose sole authentic voice the populists bill themselves, are generally considered to be victims of the elite.

Right-wing populism adds a second antagonism of "us versus them," which is why it tends to have a higher degree of radicalness than left-wing

---

<sup>3</sup> Pew Research Center, "In Views of U.S. Democracy, Widening Partisan Divides Over Freedom to Peacefully Protest" (September 2, 2020), <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2020/09/02/in-views-of-u-s-democracy-widening-partisan-divides-over-freedom-to-peacefully-protest/> (accessed May 12, 2021).

<sup>4</sup> Cas Mudde, ed., *The Populist Radical Right: A Reader* (London: Routledge, 2017).

populism.<sup>5</sup> This additional antagonism is often based on the construction of a culturally homogenous in-group of the “true people” or “authentic people.” Their common identity and interests are considered to be based on common sense and are contrasted with the identity and interests of “others,” usually minorities such as migrants, often combined with the claim that the latter are favored by the (corrupt or evil) elite. This affective “othering” (i.e., the blaming of [ethnic] minorities), appeals to people’s emotions and often turns hateful and sometimes violent. Accordingly, right-wing populists, again more than left-wing populists, strategically and tactically use negativity in their political communication. Tools range from constant provocations, the calculated break of supposed taboos, disrespect of formal and informal rules (e.g., “political correctness”) to emotional appeals and personal insults. The transactional use of language, often without any basis in reality, frequently extends to the use of conspiracy myths and biologicistic or violent metaphors. Moreover, in line with the antipluralism of their conception of “the people,” radical right-wing populists refuse the give and take of political compromise and demand radical solutions.<sup>6</sup>

Thus, the key measure for the degree of radicalness of populist actors is the exact demarcation of the “in” and “out” groups. How is “us vs. them” defined exactly? Are members of the “out group” considered citizens, political opponents, or enemies? Are they dehumanized in political communication? At the same time, even radical populists need to be flexible enough to change course on substance if needed (e.g., redefine the contours of the in and out groups to win elections). In other words, political actors strictly guided by extremist ideologies usually no longer can be populist.

In sum, populism is a particular style of politics that features opportunistic pivoting on issues and positions and the intentional use of polarizing rhetoric for political gain. In its opportunistic form, it is the stuff of everyday politics. In its radical form, it is, however, intricately related to particular political ideologies that shape the specific definitions of “us” and “them.” In the case of right-wing populism, authoritarian and illiberal nationalism is often revealed as the ideological core when populists are elected to power. Public opinion research shows that a crucial common denominator of the support for right-wing populism and authoritarian nationalism is a pessimistic outlook on life. This pessimism is exacerbated by the politics of fear and anger promoted by leaders of right-wing populist parties and movements, resulting in a vicious cycle.<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup> See the discussion of populism in, Thomas Greven, “The Rise of Right-Wing Populism in Europe and the United States: A Comparative Perspective” (Washington, DC: Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, Internationale Politikanalyse, May 2016), [http://www.fesdc.org/fileadmin/user\\_upload/publications/RightwingPopulism.pdf](http://www.fesdc.org/fileadmin/user_upload/publications/RightwingPopulism.pdf) (accessed May 12, 2021).

<sup>6</sup> See *ibid.*, and Thomas Greven, “Right-Wing Populism and Authoritarian Nationalism in the U.S. and Europe” (Washington, DC: Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, Internationale Politikanalyse, May 3, 2017), <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/id/13395.pdf> (accessed May 12, 2021).

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

For historical reasons, populism does not have as bad a connotation in the United States as it does in most other developed democracies. Next is a brief exploration of the historical peculiarities of American populism.

## **The Centrality of Economic Populism in the United States**

Currently, populism greatly contributes to the intense social and political polarization in the United States.<sup>8</sup> While many democratic societies in the industrialized West are politically divided because of issues such as immigration, climate change policies, and international trade, no country is more polarized than the United States. Commentators have been talking about “two nations” and “tribalism” since before the controversial election of George W. Bush in 2000.<sup>9</sup> The demonization of political opponents as enemies, who must be kept from power at all costs, was widespread, especially on the right, long before the “storm on the Capitol” of Trump supporters and white supremacists on January 6, 2021.

But while populism is conducive to polarization because the logic of “us versus them” characterizes both, it can also give a voice to previously underrepresented segments of the population. What is notable about nineteenth-century populism in the United States is that it gave the concept a partially positive connotation.<sup>10</sup> The agrarian Populist (or People’s) Party in the 1890s in the U.S. is at the origin of what we call populism today. The party challenged the established two-party system with its critique of moneyed interests and ended up merging with, and somewhat transforming, the Democratic Party. While the Democrats subsequently moved to the left, however, the U.S. experienced a period of Republican dominance. Henceforth, many observers considered the United States almost immune to populist challenges because the two major “big tent” parties seemed able to absorb them. The historian, Richard Hofstadter, compared third-party challenges to bees: once they have stung (the system), they die.<sup>11</sup> In fact, not only has no third party been successful at the federal level since the founding of the Republican Party, but also third parties have occasionally served as “spoilers” to the party ideologically closer to them.

---

<sup>8</sup> Matt Grossman and David A. Hopkins, *Asymmetric Politics: Ideological Republicans and Group Interest Democrats* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), and Liliana Mason, *Uncivil Agreement: How Politics Became Our Identity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018).

<sup>9</sup> See Stanley B. Greenberg, *The Two Americas: Our Current Political Deadlock and How to Break It* (New York: St. Martin’s, 2004), and Thomas Greven, *Die Republikaner. Anatomie einer amerikanischen Partei* [The Republicans: Anatomy of an American political party] (München: C.H. Beck, 2004).

<sup>10</sup> See Lawrence Goodwyn, *The Populist Moment: A Short History of the Agrarian Revolt in America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978).

<sup>11</sup> Richard Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform: From Bryan to F.D.R.* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1955).

The People's Party's economic populism, while radical in its analysis of the power structure and in its approach to mobilizing people against the elite, was concerned with economic and political reforms and thus with the amelioration of significant representational deficits of American democracy in terms of class. Poor white males had the right to vote, as did African-American males (legally, de facto restrictions notwithstanding), but the political system was dominated by the economic elite. The populists gave a voice to the economic grievances of rural-agricultural and, to a certain extent, urban-industrial populations. This explains populism's appeal at the time and until today.

Earlier still, the populism of Democratic president Andrew Jackson in the early nineteenth century, regardless of the otherwise dubious character and politics of the man, is even more clearly an example of a closing of representational gaps in a young democracy. At the time, there were considerable obstacles for poor white males in terms of their right to vote. While clearly self-serving—Jackson simply wanted to win elections by extending the right to vote—the resulting positive changes of his “opportunistic populism” for American democracy in terms of representativeness help explain the appeal of “Jacksonian populism” and its reference to the people's “common sense” to this day.<sup>12</sup>

For a discussion of populism and its effect on party politics today, the closing of representational gaps is less relevant than anti-establishment and antipluralist tendencies and the aggressive “othering” of right-wing populists. We next turn to an elaboration of the GOP's use of various elements of populism. The link to nineteenth-century populism is the central role that economic populism continues to play. What is remarkable in this respect is that it is not the Democratic Party that has recently employed economic populism with electoral success at the federal level, but the GOP, and especially Donald Trump, who has used all elements of a radicalized populism.

## **Populism and the Republican Party**

Economic populism essentially is about popular appeals to restrict market competition, especially labor market competition. The Republican Party's origins lie in a quest for the abolition of slavery. For many Republicans, this quest was not so much about achieving equality for African Americans, however, but primarily about removing competition for “free labor.” Moreover, the fight against slavery included a preference for protectionist trade policies, designed to build American industry, which pitted the Northern free states against the agricultural slave states of the Deep South, which promoted free trade in order to sell cotton on the global market. In addition, the economic populism of the early GOP included a strong element of anti-immigrant

---

<sup>12</sup> Walter Russell Mead, “The Jacksonian Revolt, American Populism and the Liberal Order,” *Foreign Affairs* 96, no. 2 (2017): 2-7.

nativism, originating from one of its predecessors, the American Party (commonly called the Know Nothings), which shapes Republican politics to this day.<sup>13</sup>

As it is focused on attacks on “foreigners,” the Republican approach of protectionism and anti-immigrant nativism has obvious populist advantages over the Democratic approach to restricting labor market competition through regulation and welfare-state institutions, elements of which were first introduced as part of the New Deal response to the Great Depression of the 1930s. While clear majorities of Americans favor welfare policies such as Social Security and Medicare, European-style social democratic policies that require progressive taxation and limits to the economic freedoms of entrepreneurs are often met with a fundamental skepticism grounded in the belief in an “American Exceptionalism.”<sup>14</sup>

The GOP’s economic populism of the nineteenth century included two further elements that are major factors in today’s Trumpism. First, anti-immigrant nativism has always featured attacks on religion, first on Catholicism (“papism,” considered to be anti-American), now on Islam. Second, protectionism has always included an appeal to nationalism (“America First”). Again, in terms of popularity and simplicity, these elements give Republican economic populism an edge over complicated Democratic proposals on industrial and immigration policy.

### ***Racialized “Us vs. Them” Narratives***

After World War II, Republicans mostly embraced free trade, but following the Democrats’ turn toward racial equality and the civil rights movement, the party began using tenets of a racial “us versus them” narrative: Richard Nixon’s Southern Strategy successfully exploited the racism of Southern whites, after Barry Goldwater had tried and failed, which led to a realignment of Southern voters. Ronald Reagan demonized African-American welfare recipients to win white northern suburban voters (“Reagan Democrats”). In his campaign, Reagan’s successor, George H.W. Bush, did the same with African-American convicts.<sup>15</sup> As most of this political opportunism came in the form of “dog whistle” appeals to the racist sentiments of white voters, it did not yet make the Republican Party a radical right-wing populist party. But in light of the

---

<sup>13</sup> See Lewis L. Gould, *Grand Old Party: A History of the Republicans* (New York: Random House, 2003), and Greven, *Die Republikaner*.

<sup>14</sup> See Frank Unger, *Demokratie und Imperium. Die Vereinigten Staaten zwischen Fundamentalismus, Liberalismus und Populismus* [Democracy and empire: The United States between fundamentalism, liberalism, and populism] (Würzburg: K&N, 2009).

<sup>15</sup> Zoltan L. Hajnal, *Dangerously Divided: How Race and Class Shape Winning and Losing in American Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2020), and Jennifer McCoy and Murat Somer, “Toward a Theory of Pernicious Polarization and How It Harms Democracies: Comparative Evidence and Possible Remedies,” *ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 681, no. 1 (2019): 234-271.

demographic trend that will turn the United States into a “majority-minority society” in a few decades, the GOP’s continued anti-immigrant nativism and growing racism have more and more restricted its voter base to the relatively shrinking white population—and in fact only to parts of it, as the GOP’s strong focus on traditional Christianity and its strong embrace of gun ownership and the Second Amendment have alienated many white voters.<sup>16</sup>

### ***Culture Wars***

White voters participate in elections at a significantly higher rate than minority voters, and the GOP continues to enjoy structural advantages in the Electoral College and in the United States Senate because of the over-representation of rural voters (as well as in the House of Representatives, due to the “self-sorting” of Democratic voters in dense urban and suburban areas and Republican-dominated gerrymandering of electoral districts). However, the shrinking share of white voters has meant that the GOP has had to increase its turnout (and to decrease the turnout of minority and young voters) and this has set the stage for more overt “radical populist” tendencies and for a resurgence of GOP economic populism to appeal to white working-class voters.<sup>17</sup>

First, however, the Republicans suffered an election loss because of the third-party spoiler candidacy of Ross Perot, who championed an anti-free-trade (specifically anti-NAFTA) message in 1992 and helped Democrat Bill Clinton win the presidency. In the Republican primary, Pat Buchanan, himself an Irish-Catholic, had championed an economic populist agenda of “America first” protectionism and increased anti-immigrant nativism. He should be considered a precursor of Donald Trump’s political strategy. At the time, the GOP was not ready for Buchanan’s message and selected traditional “country club” conservative George H.W. Bush. The Republicans’ next winning re-election campaign, that of George W. Bush in 2004, focused its populism instead on the “culture wars” (i.e., issues such as abortion and gay marriage), while at least taking baby-steps toward appealing to Latino-American voters (beyond the anticommunist Cubans in Florida).<sup>18</sup>

### ***The “Gingrich Revolution”***

Before these steps were forcefully reversed by Trump’s 2016 openly hateful campaign against immigrants and minorities (and women!), two other developments set the stage for a more “radical populist” course of the GOP, making Trump less a hijacker or captor of the Republican Party, as many have

---

<sup>16</sup> See Thomas Greven, “Partei der Weißen. Die Republikaner vor dem Kongresswahlsieg?” [Party of whites: The Republicans ahead of winning Congress?], *Blätter für deutsche und internationale Politik* [Journal for German and International Politics] 55, no. 10 (2010): 101-106.

<sup>17</sup> See the discussion that followed the publication of Bill Bishop, *The Big Sort: Why the Clustering of Like-Minded America is Tearing Us Apart* (Boston: Mariner Books, 2009).

<sup>18</sup> See Greven, *Die Republikaner*.

argued, but more of a personified logical consequence of the GOP's campaign strategy of "divide and rule." First, the "Gingrich revolution" of the 1990s turned Jacksonian "common sense populism" into a successful anti-establishment strategy for the GOP. Aided by a growing number of increasingly popular right-wing talk-radio shows (most prominently the late Rush Limbaugh) and TV programs, Newt Gingrich, House Republican whip and then Speaker, denounced Washington insiders and other political, intellectual, and media elites. This strongly increased the GOP's appeal to the white working class and helped win back the U.S. Congress for the Republican Party for the first time in forty years. At the same time, the threat of challenges in the primary against those accused of being RINOs (Republicans-in-name-only) was arguably also the beginning of the severe intraparty rifts that today allow Donald Trump to issue credible threats against officeholders not deemed loyal to him personally. The threat of "being primaried" has thus been transformed from a strategy to unify a diverse "big tent" party around programmatic ideas (at the time, Gingrich's "Contract for America") to being a disciplinary tool used to ostracize and demonize those unwilling to pledge cult-like loyalty to a leader.<sup>19</sup>

### ***The Tea Party Movement***

Second, the rise of the anti-Obama Tea Party movement within the Republican Party, consisting almost exclusively of white Americans frightened by the presidency of an African American, embittered by Obama's alleged bail-outs of African-American and Latino debtors (which did not happen), and angered by a health-care reform that they equally interpreted as a government handout to minorities (which it was not), profoundly remade the American political landscape in a radical populist fashion.<sup>20</sup> While the Tea Party (an allusion to the Boston Tea Party and short for "taxed enough already") was not as much of a rank-and-file movement as it was first considered to be, it certainly strengthened and mobilized an already riled-up and alienated party base against the bipartisan establishment elites of Democrats and RINOs.<sup>21</sup>

---

<sup>19</sup> See *ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> See Christopher S. Parker and Matt A. Barreto, *Change They Can't Believe In: The Tea Party and Reactionary Politics in America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013); Alan I. Abramowitz, *The Disappearing Center: Engaged Citizens, Polarization, and American Democracy* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013); and Theda Skocpol and Vanessa Williamson, *The Tea Party and the Remaking of Republican Conservatism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

<sup>21</sup> See *ibid.*, and Thomas Greven, "Zwischen Plutokratie und Rassismus: Der sehr amerikanische Populismus der Tea Party-Bewegung" [Between plutocracy and racism: The Tea Party's very American populism], in *Die US-Präsidentenschaftswahl 2012. Analysen der Politik- und Kommunikationswissenschaft* [The U.S. presidential election of 2012: Analyses from political and communication science], ed. Christoph Bieber and Klaus Kamps (Wiesbaden: Springer VS, 2015), 109-134; Thomas Greven, "Die Tea Party-Bewegung und die Krise der amerikanischen Demokratie" [The Tea Party movement and the crisis of American democracy], in *American Dream? Eine Weltmacht in der Krise* [American dream? A world power in crisis], ed. Andreas Etges and Winfried Fluck (Frankfurt on the Main: Campus, 2011), 137-157.

Again, party primaries, where usually mostly party activists vote, were the preferred tool, resulting in today's Freedom Caucus in the House of Representatives, a grouping of the most radical and uncompromising Republicans. While the party establishment was ultimately able to hold off most challenges, the Tea Party's "paranoid style" already had many of the elements that later characterized Trumpism.<sup>22</sup> It is no accident that Trump—who, with the help of Roger Stone and others saw the political opportunity that Obama's presidency provided for a champion of the shrinking white population—embraced the "birther" conspiracy myth about Obama's alleged Kenyan birthplace. There were more "alternative facts" *avant la lettre*, including the claim of "death panels" as part of Obama's health-care reform.

The slogan, "We want our country back," shows the Tea Party's radical "us vs. them" populist attitude and hints at its proximity to white supremacists—back from whom? At the same time, there was an interesting twist to the Tea Party's antigovernment (and antisocialist) rhetoric. The famous outburst at one event, "Take your government hands off my Medicare," in fact highlights the popularity of a government program (one that could be called, if not socialist then certainly social democratic) as well as the welfare chauvinism apparent in the unwillingness to see it expanded to others, presumably to minorities and the "undeserving poor."<sup>23</sup>

With all this, the GOP became solely a representative of white America, now including an increased share of working-class whites. The internal rift between an energized and angry but at that time still leaderless base and the traditional and moderate conservatives who dominated the party establishment but were being denounced as "polite company conservatives," widened with the Tea Party. At the same time, the anti-establishment "common sense" Jacksonian populism increasingly featured an anti-intellectual streak, pitting the GOP base against any and every "expert" presented by the GOP establishment or the Democrats.<sup>24</sup>

### **"The Donald"**

Enter Donald Trump. To a large extent, Trump's upset in the 2016 presidential nomination for the GOP was the result of the Tea Party's success in radicalizing the party's base and at the same time a logical consequence of the radical populist route the party had been on for a long time. It gave the energized and increasingly angry party base a leader to follow.<sup>25</sup> Trump's populist promises

---

<sup>22</sup> Richard Hofstadter, "The Paranoid Style in American Politics," *Harper's Magazine*, November 1964, 77-86.

<sup>23</sup> See Greven, "Tea Party-Bewegung," 137-157.

<sup>24</sup> Walter Russell Mead, "The Jacksonian Revolt, American Populism and the Liberal Order," *Foreign Affairs* 96, no. 2 (2017): 2-7.

<sup>25</sup> Brian F. Schaffner, *The Acceptance and Expression of Prejudice during the Trump Era* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

of easy solutions to complex problems (“I alone can fix it”), without any need for compromise or negotiation, were appealing to a highly disaffected section of the white American public, as were his constant disregard for democratic and civic norms and his challenging of the supposedly hegemonic “political correctness” (and “cancel culture”). The Republican establishment, including many “never-Trumpers,” had condoned the use of racism, nativism, and demonization of the opponent in the past, and was mostly hypocritical when professing to be “shocked” by statements of Donald Trump, such as wanting to deport eleven million “illegal” immigrants, to close U.S. borders to all Muslims, and to build a wall on the U.S.-Mexican border (for which Mexico would have to pay) to keep out once and for all “Mexican rapists and murderers.”

Trump’s electoral success was thus the result of the Republican Party’s conscious and traditional strategy to divide the population along racial, ethnic, and other lines. Again, the party has used anti-immigrant, nativist sentiment and religion (first anti-Catholic, now anti-Muslim sentiment) as well as anti-urban sentiments from its founding in the 1850s; it has used race, crime, gun rights, anti-abortion and antihomosexuality sentiments since the 1960s (“culture wars”); and anti-establishment and antigovernment sentiments on and off and very strongly since the “Gingrich revolution” of the 1990s. Trump thrived on division and thus he excelled at the execution of the GOP’s electoral strategy. But if Trump mostly used the traditional Republican campaign playbook, dividing the population along racial, ethnic, religious, and urban/rural lines, as well as exploiting the anti-elite and anti-intellectual sentiment of the American body politic, was there anything new at all, beyond pushing the traditional Republican strategy to the extreme? Certainly, Trump’s willingness to openly and drastically espouse racist and nativist sentiments and his repeated unwillingness to distance himself from white supremacists earned him the support of the right-wing extremists and the Alt-Right movement, but it is unclear how much of a factor this was at the ballot box. More importantly, his status as a celebrity has helped Trump politically, as has his talent for social media. It has allowed him to dominate the news cycle by communicating directly with voters and the public. The centrality of his personality was cultivated by the right-wing media and exacerbated by the failure of the mainstream media to find a way to address the constant barrage of insults, disinformation, and outright lies without giving Trump undue and free publicity.<sup>26</sup>

### ***Economic Populism and the White Working Class***

In terms of our discussion of the role of populism, however, the central distinguishing element of Trumpism was his embrace of economic populism

---

<sup>26</sup> See Greven, “Right-Wing Populism and Authoritarian Nationalism.”

during the 2016 campaign. Building on Pat Buchanan's messaging rather than on Republican orthodoxy, Trump's anti-free-trade message, in particular, earned him considerable support from the white working class, pragmatically defined as white Americans without a college education, surprisingly also including white working-class women (despite Trump's obvious misogyny). As discussed earlier, anti-immigrant nativism, in addition to having a cultural component, can also be understood as economic populism (i.e., as a means of limiting labor market competition). There was positive messaging as well (e.g., in terms of infrastructure investments, a health-care policy to replace Obamacare, and rebuilding American manufacturing). For Trump, if not for the GOP establishment, the traditional alliance of white Christian evangelicalism, ethno-nationalism, and market fundamentalism was not inevitable, certainly not for campaign purposes.<sup>27</sup>

As white working-class voters, who had been trending toward the GOP for some time, put Trump over the top in several "battleground states," specifically in the so-called Rust Belt states (the old industrial heartland), it is plausible to call them the key group for Trump's success in 2016.<sup>28</sup> The Rust Belt has seen hard economic times. Pessimism makes people susceptible to fear, and the voters who made a difference in the Electoral College were mobilized by a politics of fear of globalization and of cultural change. Ill-prepared for these developments and faced with condescension from the elites, including neoliberal Democrats (Hillary Clinton infamously talked about a "basket of deplorables"), they revolted against increased competition.

Working-class voters were, however, not rewarded by economic populist policies. On the contrary, the Trump administration's policies were mostly traditional off-the-shelf Republican policies, specifically tax cuts (mostly for business and the wealthy), deregulation of environmental and other rules, and the nomination of conservative federal judges to placate the religious right (and satisfy business interests regarding regulation and labor unions). In addition, self-serving cronyism for his own business and his associates' businesses became a hallmark of the plutocratic Trump administration.<sup>29</sup> Despite the withdrawal from multilateral agreements, many economic nationalists such as Steve Bannon were quickly sidelined and the purported protectionism fell short of expectations, in part because of repercussions in terms of foreign tariffs (especially coming from China and the EU), in part because the Republican

---

<sup>27</sup> For a discussion of the central role of liberal globalization for the rise of right-wing populism worldwide, see *ibid.*, and Greven, "Rise of Right-Wing Populism."

<sup>28</sup> Nicholas Carnes and Noam Lupu, "The White Working Class and the 2016 Election," *Perspectives on Politics* 19, no. 1 (2020): 55-72.

<sup>29</sup> Paul Pierson, "American Hybrid: Donald Trump and the Strange Merger of Populism and Plutocracy," *British Journal of Sociology* 68, no. 1 (2017): 105-119.

establishment and its business supporters managed to conserve the traditional objective of protectionism: forcing trading partners to open their markets.<sup>30</sup>

Some observers claim that Trump was outmaneuvered by then Senate majority leader Mitch McConnell and the Republican establishment, but it is debatable whether Trump really wanted to enact economic and social policies that departed from Republican orthodoxy. He must have known that he had to keep his opportunistic coalition together, including a reluctant establishment, and that the working class was least likely to abandon him because of the negative social and fiscal consequences of policy. They could be placated by anti-immigrant rhetoric about “building the wall” and other symbolic uses of politics such as talk of law and order in the face of Black Lives Matter protests against police brutality. Also, for the longest time, employment figures and other economic indicators were good and so there was little reason for a revolt. Only the pandemic laid open the underlying structural problems of the U.S. economy as well as the governing failures of the Trump administration and may have contributed to Trump’s narrow defeat. At the same time, Trump managed to turn a large part of his base into cult-followers, including at least part of the religious right, and thus he increased turnout in 2020.<sup>31</sup>

### *American Fascism?*

The warning signs of this personality cult and Trump’s increasing authoritarian tendencies, the cronyism, the instrumentalization of the Justice Department for his own political purposes, the constant attacks on independent media (“fake news,” “lamestream media,” “enemy of the people”), were either tolerated or overlooked by the Republican establishment and its business supporters as long as it was convenient.<sup>32</sup> Trump and other right-wing populists have learned to skillfully, if not subtly, instrumentalize the mobilization potential and messaging of the white supremacist and extremist fringe to reach a broader base of voters by promoting a politics of fear and anger. While Trump may not be an “American fascist” (Robert Reich) or a “caesar” (Max Weber), because as the “nation’s angry-white-man-in-chief,” he was too much of an egomaniac to cultivate ties to the military (which he rather insulted), his willingness to start a civil war with the help of white supremacist allies became clear on

---

<sup>30</sup> Christoph Scherrer and Elizabeth Abernathy, “Trump’s Trade Policy Agenda,” *Intereconomics* 52, no. 6 (2017): 364-369.

<sup>31</sup> Christopher Caldwell, “Can There Ever Be a Working-Class Republican Party?” *New Republic* (February 8, 2021), <https://newrepublic.com/article/161113/republican-working-class-agenda-hawley-rubio> (accessed May 12, 2021).

<sup>32</sup> In fact, many federal institutions such as the FBI, the State Department, several inspectors general tasked with the oversight of federal agencies, and even the Census Bureau and Postal Service were dramatically politicized in the context of partisan polarization.

January 6, 2021, as did how far many of his heavily armed followers, many of them in the armed services and the police force, are willing to go.<sup>33</sup>

At the federal level, the GOP is today a political party that represents a structural minority of Americans, mostly from the shrinking group of white Christians. It can, however, still win federal elections because of constitutional advantages for rural states in both the Senate and the Electoral College, advantages in House districts due to the urban density of Democratic voters and gerrymandering, higher voting turnout of its base, and, last but not least, relentless efforts to suppress the minority (and youth) votes, now being increased under the cover of “election integrity” claims.

Demographic trends, the divisive logic of primary elections, movement conservatives such as the Tea Party, and the personality cult around Donald Trump have radicalized the GOP’s initial opportunistic populism. The GOP today is a populist radical right party, closer to the European radical right than to traditional conservative parties.<sup>34</sup> After his 2016 election, Trump overcame most of the party establishment’s resistance and even after his defeat in 2020, most Republican elected officials know better than to criticize him for fear of vicious verbal assaults and serious primary threats. The GOP is largely responsible for the transformation of American politics into a polarized battlefield, where political opponents, within and without the party, are demonized as enemies, and where ethnic minorities are vilified and “othered.” At the time of this writing, it is unclear whether the Republican Party will remain a hostage to the whims of the master of its own strategy of divide and rule, Donald Trump, or whether there will be serious splits from the party, either by Trump followers (who have been discussing founding a “Patriot Party”), or by critics of the continued loyalty to the disgraced former president. What seems clear is that both the “gamers” and the “breakers,” in the terms of Timothy Snyder, now have a mostly transactional relationship with Trump and his followers.<sup>35</sup> For the establishment opportunists around Senate minority leader Mitch McConnell, Trump has served his purpose by delivering the desired policies and conservative judges while in office but now only stands in the way of getting power back as quickly as possible. At the same time, many of these “gamers” or “institutionalists” are careful about how much distance they keep because of Trump’s continued strong support from the Republican base, and his continued claim to power. Those

---

<sup>33</sup> Harold Meyerson, “How the Republicans Ceased to Be a Party and Became a Cult,” *American Prospect* (February 18, 2021), <https://prospect.org/blogs/tap/how-republicans-ceased-to-be-a-party-and-became-a-cult/> (accessed May 12, 2021).

<sup>34</sup> See the discussion of the *New York Times*’ Manifesto Project. See, for example, Sahil Chinoy, “What Happened to America’s Political Center of Gravity?” *New York Times* (June 26, 2019), <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/06/26/opinion/sunday/republican-platform-far-right.html> (accessed May 12, 2021).

<sup>35</sup> Timothy Snyder, “The American Abyss,” *New York Times Magazine* (January 9, 2021), <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/09/magazine/trump-coup.html> (accessed May 12, 2021).

“breakers” (of formal rules and informal conventions) or “revolutionaries,” who want to inherit Trump’s followers, either as populist leaders themselves, like Senators Ted Cruz and Josh Hawley, or as architects of a 2022 Republican coalition, must tread carefully as well, not least because Trump may want a role for members of his family. A split of the party is not in anybody’s interest, including the remaining traditional “country club” conservatives, because of the third-party spoiler effect in winner-takes-all elections.

### *A New Workers’ Party?*

Populist Republicans such as Senator Ted Cruz of Texas have been trying to rebrand the GOP as a workers’ party, but one of the biggest challenges for the Republican Party, with or without Trump, may be the continued use of economic populism.<sup>36</sup> Protectionism is at odds with Republican economic orthodoxy, outliers such as Trump’s economic advisor Peter Navarro notwithstanding. Overt anti-immigrant nativism gets in the way of an expansion of the voter base to conservative Latino Americans, which will ultimately be necessary because of demographic trends in key Republican states such as Texas. However, some protectionism, if only mostly symbolic, may be acceptable because of anti-China geopolitics. And some anti-immigrant policy—especially if directed against non-Latinos—may be possible because of its protections for naturalized immigrants (i.e., voters, against the labor-market competition of new immigrants, who are noncitizens). The biggest fundamental problem arises from the understanding of the role of government in the economy and for the people’s welfare. Most Republican officeholders do not want effective economic and social government, neither as regulator nor as provider of social protections, simply because that would legitimize taxation. Both “gamers” and “breakers” are more than willing to accept an imperfect democracy in order to stay in power as representatives of a shrinking white (Christian) minority and secure limited government—the “low tax, low service” model prevailing in states dominated by the GOP. But while this American exceptionalism may be hegemonic in the Gramscian sense, extending as it does to a wide range of Democrats, parts of the white working-class base that Trump was able to energize, in fact, want government to work for them. Not only do they support established programs such as Social Security and Medicare but also they realize that the lack of effective government in economic and other crises (the pandemic and the recent failure of the electric grid in Texas are cases in point) has negative consequences for them. This provides an opening for a Democratic economic populism (i.e., a push for social democratic economic and social policies), however, it requires overcoming the racial and ethnic divisions of the American people, as much of the Republican white working-

---

<sup>36</sup> Caldwell, “Working-Class Republican Party?” Also see, Ross Douthat and Reihan Salam, *Grand New Party: How Republicans Can Win the Working Class and Save the American Dream* (New York: Doubleday, 2008).

class base currently may want government to work but prefers that it does so only for them.

### **Bernie Sanders, the Democratic Party, and Economic Populism**

In 2016, Bernie Sanders' left-wing variant of the popular revolt against the neoliberal consensus on globalization, without any attacks against ethnic minorities and instead focusing on the super-rich and (big) business, may have made a difference in the Rust Belt. Alas, after Hillary Clinton won the Democratic nomination, it was Donald Trump who was able to mobilize the (white) working class. Still, with the rise of Bernie Sanders as a serious contender in the 2016 Democratic presidential primary, as well as with the election of a number of members of the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) to the House of Representatives, the prospect of an "economic populism" from the left re-entered the realm of the politically possible, after decades of a centrist, neoliberal course. Yet, in 2016, and again in 2020, the party establishment ultimately prevailed, with some programmatic concessions but with continuity in terms of political personnel between the centrist Obama and Biden administrations. Why has the Democratic Party not realized the potential of a populist appeal to a significant segment of the current Republican voter base, parts of which were previously part of the Democratic coalition?<sup>37</sup>

Historically, the Democratic Party has been reluctant to embrace any kind of class-based politics or to become an explicit advocate of disadvantaged and poor people.<sup>38</sup> The dominance of craft-based unions and their bread-and-butter business unionism, and the anticommunism and antisocialism of the labor movement in general, played a part. The party expanded its base by closing representational gaps, while almost always ensuring that the fundamental rules of the capitalist game need not be challenged or changed. Even the establishment of the rudimentary welfare state and the activist economic and social policies of the New Deal left considerable gaps because of necessary compromise with Deep South Democrats. Thus, the New Deal did not reach, for example, farm and domestic workers, and thus African Americans and migrant workers were largely excluded. When this was partially rectified with Lyndon B. Johnson's project of the Great Society and his embrace of the Civil Rights Movement, the Democratic coalition suffered a major realignment of voter preferences toward the GOP, first in the South, then in the suburbs.

---

<sup>37</sup> See Thomas Greven, "...and now, for something completely different? Mögliche Entwicklungsrichtungen der US-Demokratie und -Gesellschaft," [Possible developments for American democracy and society], *Grenzgängerin* [Crossing Borders Journal], no. 2 (2020): 60-71, [https://grenzgaengerin.eu/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/grenzgaengerin-002\\_v2.pdf](https://grenzgaengerin.eu/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/grenzgaengerin-002_v2.pdf) (accessed May 12, 2021).

<sup>38</sup> Frances Fox Piven and Richard A. Cloward, *Why Americans Still Don't Vote: And Why Politicians Want It That Way* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2000).

Hence, the electoral cost of an attempt to universalize the welfare state and expand the right to vote made a major impression on the Democratic establishment, which embarked on a “right turn” toward neoliberalism (lower corporate taxes, deregulation, privatization, fiscal austerity, liberalization of financial markets, “ending welfare as we know it,” and so on), thus converging with the pro-market positions of the Republican Party.<sup>39</sup>

Even for Democrats willing to push for universal social democratic policy, the Republican hegemony in economic and social policy, grounded in the widespread belief that continental European “socialism” (i.e., social democracy) is alien to American entrepreneurship and freedom (“American exceptionalism”), creates an uphill battle.<sup>40</sup> As discussed before, the Republican approach of protectionism and anti-immigrant nativism has obvious populist advantages over the Democratic approach to restricting labor market competition through regulation and welfare-state institutions, because it is focused on attacks on foreigners. In terms of true “us vs. them” populism, Democrats must focus their attacks on “the rich” or the “one percent.” Not only does this again go against the grain of the American dream narrative of opportunity and “rags to riches,” but also Democrats are faced with a middle-class dilemma. The middle class, broadly defined (i.e., including lower- and upper- middle-class Americans, with at least a college education), is a crucial block of voters for both parties. While white evangelical Christians in this group are mostly out of reach for Democrats because of “culture war” issues such as abortion and LGBTQI rights, they cannot win elections without appealing to the nonevangelical middle class. These voters, however, have had to go to great lengths to compensate for the lack of quality public services that has resulted from the successful Republican (and neoliberal) delegitimizing and defunding of the state. They do profit from the relatively low tax burden but probably realize the fallacy of the “low tax, low service” approach, as they are spending tens of thousands of dollars to send their children to private schools or paying higher rents or real-estate prices in order to live in “good” school districts.<sup>41</sup> And education is only one example of their considerable compensating efforts. Middle-class Americans also spend on private solutions for health care, retirement, public safety, and so on. Thus, even those willing to endorse and support universal social policies are faced with the immediate prospect of higher taxes, while the quality of public services will likely increase

---

<sup>39</sup> Thomas Ferguson and Joel Rogers, *Right Turn: The Decline of the Democrats and the Future of American Politics* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1986). In the United States, Trump profited from the development that drove many working-class voters to radical populist political parties across Europe, namely the embrace of promarket policies by social democratic parties. See Eelco Harteveld, “Winning the ‘Losers’ but Losing the ‘Winners’? The Electoral Consequences of the Radical Right Moving to the Economic Left,” *Electoral Studies*, no. 44 (2016): 225-234.

<sup>40</sup> Greven, *Die Republikaner*.

<sup>41</sup> Michael Lind, *Made in Texas: George W. Bush and the Southern Takeover of American Politics* (New York: Basic Books, 2003).

at a slower pace, possibly not fast enough to allow them to end their costly compensatory efforts. The dilemma they are facing translates to a dilemma for progressive Democrats, which railing against “the rich” does not solve.

In this context, it is hardly surprising that the Democratic establishment has chosen to focus its “populist” efforts to close representational gaps on minorities’ identity politics and not on a (more or less class-based) strategy of limiting labor market competition through regulation and social protection. As of now, however, the promise of an “emerging Democratic majority” resulting from demographic shifts has not been realized, in part because of the aforementioned structural advantages for the GOP in the imperfect U.S. democratic system, and also because of the significantly higher turnout of white GOP voters.<sup>42</sup> There was no “blue wave” in 2020; down-ballot from the vote for president, the GOP was very successful. Establishment Democrats are thus well-advised to give progressive arguments for universal economic and social policy appeals a second look, lest more voters are lost to the Republican Party’s radical populism.<sup>43</sup> At the same time, Democrats need to beware of their own version of a radical populism. A more or less class-based version of “us vs. them,” focusing on the “99 percent” (or on “working families”) is essentially antipluralist as well, as it ignores the diverse interests of Americans in those categories. Impatience with the system of checks and balances (and with the structural advantages of the GOP) is more than understandable, however, the original idea of the framers of the United States Constitution of protecting minorities against a possible “tyranny of the majority” in a democratic system of government, still carries weight, their own interests as members of the economic elite notwithstanding. Democrats will have to work to win majorities by mobilizing and building coalitions to overcome along ethnic and class boundaries at the same time with good policy. And, as always in democracies, they will have to compromise.<sup>44</sup> This does not mean, however, that it is not worth debating to end the filibuster in the United States Senate

---

<sup>42</sup> John Judis and Ruy Teixeira, *The Emerging Democratic Majority* (New York: Scribner, 2002); Paul Waldman, “Is the Emerging Democratic Majority Finally Coming to Pass? The Suburbs May Be Slipping from the Republicans’ Grasp,” *American Prospect* (August 11, 2019), <https://prospect.org/power/emerging-democratic-majority-finally-coming-pass/> (accessed May 12, 2021), and Thomas Greven, “Linke Perspektiven in den USA. Die Suche nach einem neuen sozialdemokratischen Projekt“ [Left-wing perspectives in the United States: Searching for a new social democratic project], *INDES. Zeitschrift für Politik und Gesellschaft* [Journal for Politics and Society], no. 3 (2018): 89-97.

<sup>43</sup> The considerable measures taken by the Biden administration in response to the Covid-19 pandemic and its economic consequences, while certainly an indication of a belief in a positive role for the federal government, so far fall short of a clear embrace of universalist social and economic policies.

<sup>44</sup> Thomas Greven, “Against Left-Wing Populism: Why a ‘Smart,’ Left-Wing Populist Campaign Is Not the Right Way to Beat Trump in 2020,” *International Politics and Society* (January 31, 2019), <https://www.ips-journal.eu/regions/north-america/article/show/against-left-wing-populism-3233/> (accessed May 12, 2021).

and using the budget reconciliation process whenever possible to overcome GOP obstruction. Moreover, Democrats are well advised to strengthen voting rights to counter Republican efforts to suppress the electoral participation of minorities, to reform redistricting processes to prevent gerrymandering, and to restrict the role of money in elections.

## Conclusion and Outlook

This study has shown that the Republican Party, since its founding, has employed several elements of populism to mobilize a base of mostly white Christian voters, and that former president Donald Trump has successfully added elements of an economic populism to appeal to working-class white voters. This contributed to Trump's 2016 success, to the closeness of his 2020 defeat, and to the GOP's down-ballot success in 2020. At the same time, GOP populism has become ever more radical and polarizing, in part due to its shrinking base of voters, resulting in the current tribal state of American party politics and society. In other words, this polarization is no longer based on policy or ideology; it is endemic, cultural, and a threat to the democratic institutions of the United States.<sup>45</sup> As the events on January 6, 2021, the subsequent impeachment process, and at the Conservative Political Action Conference in February 2021 showed, this has as much to do with the illiberal, authoritarian tendencies of former president Donald Trump as with the unwillingness of the Republican establishment to break with Trump.

On the contrary, despite clear indications that a significant majority of Americans opposes Trumpism (i.e., unconditioned loyalty to Trump; nationwide approval ratings for the GOP are below 40 percent, indicating that Trumpism is not winning overall), and that the rift in the GOP is growing (thousands have reportedly left the party since January 2021), many in the Republican establishment are willing to indulge Trump's continued insistence on the "big lie" that the 2020 election was fraudulent and stolen from him. They fear that Trump will help to "primary" them (i.e., support challengers to their next nomination), or instigate state and local Republican parties to censure them, mobilize his core followers to attack them personally, or worse. In large parts of the GOP's rank-and-file, the personality cult clearly increases. In their view, those who question Trump are not "real Republicans."<sup>46</sup> In Orlando, Trump's most committed followers went so far as to present a golden statue of

---

<sup>45</sup> The concept of "pernicious polarization" was developed in Jennifer McCoy and Murat Somer, "Toward a Theory of Pernicious Polarization and How It Harms Democracies: Comparative Evidence and Possible Remedies," *ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 681, no. 1 (2019): 234-271. See also, Thomas Greven, "Right-Wing Terrorism and the Constitutional Crisis in the United States," *Public Jurist* (October 19–21, 2020), <http://www.hkuglc.org/government-and-laws-committee-hku-public-jurist> (accessed May 12, 2021).

<sup>46</sup> Meyerson, "Cult."

him, without any recognition of the apparent similarity to the idolization of the “golden calf,” which should be anathema to Christians.

Even Senate minority leader Mitch McConnell, who has indicated that “electability” should trump loyalty to Donald Trump when selecting Republican candidates for 2022, for fear of losing races in swing states and districts that could otherwise be won, realizes the hold that Trump has on much of the GOP base.<sup>47</sup> Regardless of whether this hold persists (after all, even at CPAC, Trump did not reach 60 percent in the straw poll of potential 2024 presidential nominees), this situation makes it likely that the GOP will continue to focus on the mobilization of white voters. This goes against the recommendations of the Republican National Committee’s 2013 post-election “autopsy report,” which called on “Republicans...to grow...[their] appeal [because]. . . America is changing demographically,” and are again floated by GOP reformers and moderates.<sup>48</sup> And because its base of white voters is shrinking, the GOP has already begun to increase its efforts to suppress the electoral participation of minority voters by legal and administrative means (since the 2020 election, more than three hundred sixty bills have been introduced in forty seven states, for example, reducing the possibility of mail-in votes and early voting, requiring more identification), under the guard of wanting to increase “election integrity,” which, again, follows from an acceptance of Trump’s “big lie.” Even former vice president Mike Pence, almost a victim of the January 6 assault because of his refusal to overturn the results of the 2020 election, has come out in opposition to the Democrats’ attempt to shore up federal voter protections and regulations in HR 1, the so-called For the People Act.<sup>49</sup>

What does this mean for Biden’s promise of national reconciliation? His attempt to re-unify the country cannot succeed as long as the GOP does not significantly work to correct the autocratic turn it has taken with the personality cult around Donald Trump. Unfortunately, this seems unlikely, regardless of whether Trump runs in 2024 (the myriad lawsuits against him may be a distraction or serve his claim of victimhood in the face of a “witch hunt”).

Beyond embracing universal social policies that benefit a majority of Americans (“economic populism”), one way of appealing to Americans who want to continue to live in a democratic, pluralist society may be to force GOP radical populists to spell out what exactly the plan is for the “others” (elites, the media, and minorities) that they demonize and vilify. Are these “others” to

---

<sup>47</sup> At the time of this writing, Trump has sued GOP campaign entities over the use of his name for fundraising. This may be indicative of his financial problems (after all, licensing his name brand is a major source of income for his enterprise) but it also suggests that he wants to control whom the GOP can support in the party’s primaries and in general elections.

<sup>48</sup> Republican National Committee, “Growth and Opportunity Project” (2013), <https://online.wsj.com/public/resources/documents/RNCreport03182013.pdf> (accessed May 12, 2021).

<sup>49</sup> Mike Pence, “Election Integrity Is a National Imperative,” *Daily Signal* (March 3, 2021), <https://www.dailysignal.com/2021/03/03/election-integrity-is-a-national-imperative/> (accessed May 12, 2021).

be considered citizens who have the right to gain power through elections? Or are they “enemies of the state”? Even if there is no split in the GOP—either by a Trumpist-formed Patriot Party, or by never-Trumpers—this will help Democrats and moderate Republicans in swing districts. Of course, the primary system will ensure the success of radical Republican populists and extremists in other districts, helping to elect the likes of Majorie Taylor Greene, the newly elected Georgia Representative, an avid follower of the QAnon conspiracy. Unbelievably, some of the adherents of QAnon were expecting Donald Trump to be inaugurated as president on March 4, 2021, the date used for presidential inaugurations until 1933. Clearly, they did not come to their senses on March 5. In other words, regardless of what happens within the GOP, a scenario of increased violence, including attacks on government facilities and representatives, seems entirely possible.

