“The Humble Members of Society”

UNDERSTANDING POPULISM IN THE UNITED STATES

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Executive Summary

This report traces the antiestablishment roots of populism, arguing that it is a manifestation of the principal problem inherent to representative government. In the Anglo-American political universe, it first appeared in the early 18th century in the ways the Country Whigs modified the English Commonwealth tradition to attack the economic policies of Robert Walpole.

Migrating to America after the Seven Years’ War, it manifested itself in the Anti-Federalist opposition to the Constitution, Jeffersonian complaints about Hamiltonian economics, and Jacksonian democracy. In all these instances, populist antiestablishment sentiment envisioned a kind of conspiracy of the wealthy, well-born, and connected to hijack republican government, denying the rightful rule of the people and ensconcing the elite in permanent power.

As industrial capitalism facilitated vast inequalities of wealth and power, the ancient anxieties have been notably persistent—such as the agrarian Populists and Bull Moose Progressives, the George Wallace phenomenon, and finally the tea party and Trump movement. While the complaints of each faction are different in the specifics, the underlying grievance, that the privileged few have interfered with the connection between the people and their elected leaders, has been notably consistent.
Donald Trump’s election in 2016 has widely been heralded as a populist moment. But what is populism exactly? The term is often employed, but its meaning is vague and ambiguous. One thing, at least, is sure: It need not actually be popular. Trump, after all, lost the popular vote to Hillary Clinton and won a smaller share of it than did Mitt Romney—the ultimate non-populist. Beyond that, though, populism is clouded in mystery, as a range of disparate groups—such as the Jeffersonians and Jacksonians of the early republic, the agrarians of the late 19th century, the George Wallace voters in the 1960s, and the tea party of today—have claimed the mantle of populism.

This report will seek to clarify populism by identifying it as a style of republican politics, in particular populism’s anxiety about the principal-agent problem inherent to representative government. It will infer additional qualities of populism by examining populist movements across time, beginning with the Country Whigs of the early 18th century. Populists are often, though not always, on the losing side of socioeconomic shifts. They typically impute dark motives to their political opponents, who tend to be wealthy and proximate to the seat of governing authority. Their politics tend to be nostalgic, rooted in the fear of losing power that was once comfortably possessed, and restorative, pledging to bring back the “good old days.”

Populism as Republican Critique

Populism is not primarily a substantive view of politics. This is not to say that populism does not have a policy agenda but rather that it is secondary to the essence of the position. If I told you I am a protectionist, you would know where I stand on the matter of industrial policy. Similarly, if I told you I am a neoconservative, you would know where I stand on foreign affairs. However, populist has different policy implications, depending on the period of American history—and the phrase is loose enough that it can mean different things to different people in the same time. Nowadays, populists can be Ron Paul “goldbugs,” nationalists like Donald Trump, or tea party advocates aligned with Ted Cruz.

Instead, populism is mainly a formal critique of politics. “Populism” (based on the Latin populus, meaning people) suggests a critique related to the republican political tradition (“republican,” from the Latin res publica, or “affair of the people”). Specifically, populism has historically registered a complaint against representative government that is consistent with the principal-agent problem noted by public choice economics. As Kenneth Shepsle and Mark Bonchek argue, “In a principal-agent relationship it is the principal who stipulates what he wants done, relying upon the agent’s concern for her reputation, appropriate incentives, and other control mechanisms to secure compliance with his wishes.”

However, the agent can have “missions, interests, and objectives of their own that may conflict with those of the” principal. Republican government relies
on the principle of representation to, as James Madison put it in Federalist No. 10, “refine and enlarge the public views, by passing them through the medium of a chosen body of citizens, whose wisdom may best discern the true interest of their country, and whose patriotism and love of justice will be least likely to sacrifice it to temporary or partial considerations.” In other words, elected representatives are the agents of the voters, who are the principals. But as Madison noted in the “Vices of the Political System of the United States,” the principal-agent problem can easily manifest itself as representatives pursue their own agenda:

Representative appointments are sought from 3 motives. 1. ambition 2. personal interest. 3. public good. Unhappily the two first are proved by experience to be most prevalent. Hence the candidates who feel them, particularly, the second, are most industrious, and most successful in pursuing their object: and forming often a majority in the legislative Councils, with interested views, contrary to the interest, and views, of their Constituents, join in a perfidious sacrifice of the latter to the former.

This problem, inherent to representative government, is the basis of most populist critiques—even as the substantive agenda of this or that populist movement shifts over time.

Populism is typically rooted in two disadvantages that the principals (or voters) have vis-à-vis their agents (or representatives in government). The first disadvantage is monetary. As Madison suggested, representatives in government are interested in the glory and honor that comes from office and personal monetary benefits that can be obtained from public service. The voters are often not in a position to bestow these bounties, and representatives can be drawn to those factions—typically wealthier and situated higher on the socioeconomic scale—that can.

The second, closely related disadvantage is informational, which often contains a geographic component. Namely, it is difficult for the principals to monitor the agents and to make sure that they are remaining true to their interests. The information required to properly assess a representative’s behavior can be prohibitively expensive, especially the farther one is from the seat of government. (This is less of a problem now, in the age of telecommunications, but it had long been a concern of populists in previous generations.)

Put another way, populism at its foundation is an argument that republican government—or government “of the people, by the people, and for the people,” as Abraham Lincoln put it in the Gettysburg Address—has been corrupted. Representatives are not responding to the interests of their constituents in their home districts; instead, they are seeking honor, wealth, or esteem from the elites in and around the Capitol.

It is from this similar, formal complaint that populist movements level different substantive grievances of government. In the populist telling, if representative governments were functioning properly (i.e., if the principals were actually being loyal to their agents), then the particular policy demands of the populists would be enacted, for the populists represent the interests of the people. Whether this is actually true is, of course, a debatable matter on the merits. Still, the broader point remains: The policy demands are incidental to the populism itself, which at its essence is a republican critique of the government.

With this theoretical foundation in place, we can identify a variety of movements over the course of modern political history as being properly populist in that they attack the practice of government for being a corrupted version of republicanism. This historical analysis will, in turn, enable us to identify additional tendencies inherent to populist movements.

**From the Country Whigs to the Jeffersonians**

The prototype for American populism emerged in England in the early 18th century in response to the implementation of a modern financial program spearheaded by Prime Minister Robert Walpole. The Walpole agenda emphasized a permanent debt, managed by the Bank of England and financed by tariffs and land taxes. This enabled England to borrow virtually unlimited sums of money, transforming the tiny island
nation into a world power. But it did not sit well with a constituency that came to be known as the Country Whigs—polemicists such as Lord Bolingbroke, John Trenchard, Thomas Gordon, and James Burgh.

The Country Whigs situated themselves within the political philosophy of James Harrington, who argued that the landed gentry was the mainstay of republican government. This class possessed the independence, virtue, and intrepidity to fulfill the duties of citizenship. The Country Whigs argued that, with its emphasis on finance, the Walpole program replaced agriculture with commerce, republican virtue with stockjobbing greed, and independence with a slavish dependence on the vicissitudes of the financial markets.

Moreover, the Country Whigs argued that the British monarchy was using patronage to buy off members of Parliament—historically the bastion of the landed gentry—to implement this program. The British monarchy’s Civil List—the funds the monarch had without a parliamentary grant—was used to offer patronage as the demands of the Walpole system required. So-called rotten boroughs filled Parliament with members who had no real constituencies. Phony titles of nobility distributed strategically could tip the balance in the House of Lords. And military sinecures could transform members of Parliament into servants of the king. In other words, argued the Country Whigs, money and patronage were corrupting Harrington’s simple republicanism.

In *A Dissertation upon Parties*, Bolingbroke wrote:

> By the corruption of Parliament, and the absolute influence of a King, or his minister, on the two Houses, we return into that state, to deliver or secure us from which Parliaments were instituted, and are really governed by the arbitrary will of one man. Our whole constitution is at once dissolved. Many securities to liberty are provided, but the integrity which depends on the freedom and the independency of Parliament, is the keystone that keeps the whole thing together.5

This passage illustrates key themes of subsequent populist rhetoric. Note firstly the invocation of the principal-agent program—by buying off Parliament, the king and his ministers had effectively robbed the people of their voice and destroyed the constitution. But note as well the nostalgic orientation of the argument—the idea being that there once was something approaching a pristine republic but that it had since been lost.

The Country Whigs were highly useful to the American revolutionaries of the 1760s and 1770s, for they described a government that had become degraded, which in turn enhanced the colonists’ rhetorical case for independence. Interestingly, Country Whiggism reemerged in a strictly American context in arguments against ratifying the Constitution, which suggests a certain quality of populism to the Anti-Federalists.

The Federalist advocates of the Constitution believed that a stronger national union was necessary for the preservation of self-government in the young nation. Madison articulated this view most succinctly in *Federalist No. 10*, where he called for a broad, diverse polity so that no faction would dominate the others. But this view ran contrary to conventional wisdom at the time regarding republicanism, especially that espoused by Montesquieu, whose *Spirit of the Laws* was widely read. For instance, Anti-Federalist Melancton Smith argued that “the idea that naturally suggests itself to our minds, when we speak of representatives is, that they resemble those they represent; they should be a true picture of the people; possess the knowledge of their circumstances and their wants; sympathize in all their distresses, and be disposed to seek their true interests.”6 Similarly, the pseudonymous Federal Farmer urged that representative government required “a sameness, as to residence and interests, between the representative and his constituents; and by the election by a majority, he is sure to be the man, the choice of more than half of them.”7

These complaints can be understood in terms of the principal-agent problem that drives populist anxiety. In an extended republic such as that proposed by the Federalists, there would not be enough representatives to create a similitude of sentiments between the principals and their agents. And, in a theme that
would become quite common to populism, many Anti-Federalists suspected dark motives. The pseudonymous Centinel suggested that the Constitution was a plot by the “wealthy and ambitious.” By gaining the “concurrence of the two men in whom America has the highest confidence”—namely, George Washington and Benjamin Franklin—they could complete their “long meditated schemes of power and aggrandizement.” Federal Farmer named Robert Morris, the wealthy financier of the revolution who “avariciously grasp[ed] at all power and property” because he disliked “free and equal government” and wished “to change, essentially, the form of government in this country.” In the populist mindset, popular government is often under threat from a cabal of the wealthy few, who have in mind the corruption of the link between representative and citizen.

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Madison would have none of this, at least not during the ratification debates. But he too would come to suspect dark forces of oligarchy at work, via Secretary of Treasury Alexander Hamilton’s system of finance. Although he and Hamilton had worked together during the 1780s, they broke in the 1790s over the issues of debt, banking, and industrial protection. In opposition, Madison penned a series of essays for the National Gazette, which remain an urtext for understanding American populism.

Madison believed that Hamilton was trying to transform the new republic into a monarchy—against the manifest wishes of the people at large. This plot, he believed, was double pronged. The first was to hide behind the august figure of Washington, and in this regard Madison and Jefferson believed, as the Anti-Federalists did, that the old general was being duped by designing and malicious men. And to win the requisite votes in Congress, Madison reckoned that Hamilton was using his financial program to effectively bribe members of the legislature. In a pointed essay titled “Spirit of Governments,” he denounced Hamiltonianism in strident terms:

A government operating by corrupt influence; substituting the motive of private interest in place of public duty; converting its pecuniary dispensations into bounties to favorites, or bribes to opponents; accommodating its measures to the avidity of a part of the nation instead of the benefit of the whole: in a word, enlisting an army of interested partizans, whose tongues, whose pens, whose intrigues, and whose active combinations, by supplying the terror of the sword, may support a real domination of the few, under an apparent liberty of the many.

The influence of Bolingbroke and the Country Whigs is obvious in this passage. Madison was basically arguing that the principal-agent relationship had been corrupted by money. The result was that the republic was being destroyed, even though citizens retained the nominal right to vote. It is notable how seamlessly these ideas became part and parcel of the American political psychology. Many people, not just average citizens but estimable leaders such as Madison, were easily convinced that the nation’s experiment in self-government was fragile, that the wealthy few were looking to destroy it, and that the primary means by which they would do this was by corrupting the representative process. Notice as well that there is a fear of loss inherent to these narratives. The Republicans, the Anti-Federalists, and even the Country Whigs assumed that the body politic in a previous instance had been a true republic, but now it was all coming undone. This would become another consistent theme of populism—a nostalgic posture that endeavors to protect the old ways.
Populism in the 19th and Early 20th Centuries

Thomas Jefferson’s victory in the election of 1800 suggested that political parties may help reduce the costs of the principal-agent problem. By “facilitat[ing] a general intercourse of sentiments,” as Madison put it, the party press could inform voters of the goings-on in government. A party system of nominations could ensure good candidates. And party discipline in the legislature could minimize defectors. Yet by and large the Republicans did not see their impressive organization as a permanent feature of politics but rather a temporary expedient to deal with the unique Hamiltonian threat. As James Monroe told Andrew Jackson in 1817, permanent parties in other nations were due to “certain defects in those governments, rather than in human nature . . . and we have happily avoided those defects in our system.”

But the populist revival of the 1820s and 1830s saw the reemergence of party politics, along with the explicit argument that they were essential to popular control over government. The leader of this resurgence was Andrew Jackson, who was jilted in the election of 1824 by what his supporters deemed a “corrupt bargain.” Although he had won a plurality in the multicandidate presidential contest, he was denied a victory in the House of Representatives because Speaker Henry Clay swung the delegations of several states to John Quincy Adams, even though their voters had backed Jackson. Adams then named Clay secretary of state, which the Jackson faction denounced as a blatant quid pro quo. It seemed, once again, that a cabal of elites had hijacked American democracy.

For the next 12 years, Jackson would make it his personal crusade to take back power for the people, making Jacksonian democracy another populist force in the nation. Many of Jackson’s maneuvers had a distinctly populist bent to them, as he consistently framed his endeavors as making government properly responsible to the people. His most durable legacy was creating a permanent political party, which came to be known as the Democratic Party. As Martin Van Buren, Jackson’s right-hand man, would describe in his autobiography, parties were essential to public control. “Doubtless excesses frequently attend parties and produce many evils,” Van Buren admitted, but they were on balance essential to government. “The disposition to abuse power, so deeply planted in the human heart, can by no other means be more effectually checked.”

The parties would find a reliable source of funds via patronage, or the distribution of jobs, honors, and emoluments from the government. Jackson initiated this by what he called “rotation” in office. In his 1829 presidential message, he argued that “no one man has any more intrinsic right to official station than another. Offices were not established to give support to particular men at the public expense.” Thus, in his view, “Rotation . . . constitutes a leading principle in the republican creed.”

Jackson also struck at the institution that he believed was trying to upend his administration: the Second Bank of the United States. Jackson brought to office a prejudice against banks and a preference for hard currency. Like many conservative Jeffersonians, he believed that the Second Bank—chartered by Madison in 1816—was a source of oligarchic authority that threatened the republican character of the government. When Congress presented him with a bill to recharter it in 1832, he vetoed it. His fiery defense of the veto argued that “when the laws . . . make the rich richer and the potent more powerful, the humble members of society—the farmers, mechanics, and laborers—who have neither the time nor the means of securing like favors to themselves, have a right to complain of the injustice of their Government.”

While the Republicans of the 1790s articulated a populist message, Jackson was the first president to govern as a populist. These various actions—reinvigorating party, implementing rotation in office, and vetoing the Second Bank recharter—all suggest anxiety about the principal-agent relationship at the heart of republican government. Jackson, Van Buren, and their allies believed that it had become corrupted; that a permanent governing class had installed itself in power, independent of the popular will; and that it was up to them to root it out. The Republicans of the 1790s had suggested that they would do this, but when they acquired power, they made generally moderate
adjustments to the Federalist status quo. The Jackson men, on the other hand, were looking to transform politics, soup to nuts. And they succeeded.

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It is a testament to the ambiguous policy agenda of populism that in the 1830s the populists were advocates of “hard currency” but that in the 1890s they called for inflation, demanding the unlimited coinage of silver on a 16:1 ratio with gold. Nevertheless, the Populist Party of the 1890s had a decidedly Jacksonian view about the relationship between government and citizen. The preamble of the 1892 Populist Party platform harkened back to old Jeffersonian notions:

We meet in the midst of a nation brought to the verge of moral, political, and material ruin. Corruption dominates the ballot-box, the Legislatures, the Congress, and touches even the ermine of the bench. The people are demoralized. . . . The newspapers are largely subsidized or muzzled, public opinion silenced, business prostrated, homes covered with mortgages, labor impoverished, and the land concentrating in the hands of capitalists. The urban workmen are denied the right to organize for self-protection; imported pauperized labor beats down their wages, a hireling standing army, unrecognized by our laws, is established to shoot them down, and they are rapidly degenerating into European conditions. The fruits of the toil of millions are boldly stolen to build up colossal fortunes for a few, unprecedented in the history of mankind; and the possessors of these, in turn despise the Republic and endanger liberty. From the same prolific womb of governmental injustice we breed the two great classes—tramps and millionaires.²⁶

There are some ancient republican ideals here—in particular, the decline of civic virtue and the hollowing out of the middle class as a clique of oligarchs who hate self-government take control. And how have they been able to do that? The Populists answered: corrupting the legislature, degrading the ballot box, and even stiffing First Amendment rights—notably the freedom of the press and of assembly. In other words, the principal-agent problem was again threatening republicanism. Obviously, the Populists are speaking to a decidedly industrialized America, but these sorts of complaints date back to the Country Whigs and had been invoked several times before in American history.

The Democrats of 1896, under William Jennings Bryan’s leadership, poached the main Populist issue, bimetallism, without picking a fight with Republicans on the broader issue of corruption, but Populist ideas would return with the Bull Moose Progressives of 1912, whose party platform had a decidedly Whiggish bent to it:

Political parties exist to secure responsible government and to execute the will of the people.

From these great tasks both of the old parties have turned aside. Instead of instruments to promote the general welfare, they have become the tools of corrupt interests which use them impartially to serve their selfish purposes. Behind the ostensible government sits enthroned an invisible government owing no allegiance and acknowledging no responsibility to the people.

To destroy this invisible government, to dissolve the unholy alliance between corrupt business and corrupt politics is the first task of the statesmanship of the day.²⁷

Note the acknowledgement of Van Buren’s view of parties—namely, that they are integral to the maintenance of good government. However, the Progressives
believed that this function had been corrupted by the wealthy oligarchs, just like those who had riled up the Populists a generation earlier.

**Postwar Populism**

Populism as a political or ideological movement more or less disappeared for a generation after the election of Franklin Roosevelt, whose tenure eventually pushed left-wing movements such as communism and socialism outside the political mainstream. The New Deal brought about a repurposing of governmental agency, around the “humble members of society” as Jackson put it. And Republicans during this period generally favored maintaining the New Deal as it was.

But after the civil rights movement achieved its greatest results in the mid-1960s, there was a backlash among many southern and urban white voters. As Theodore White put it in *The Making of the President 1968*, the “share-out,” the great New Deal endeavor of spreading the wealth among the masses, had “run its course”:

In pursuit of the philosophy of share-out, the Johnson administration had come to consideration of that last group still clamoring for its share—the unfortunate and underprivileged black population of America. Here, however, was a faultline that the old philosophy of share-out could not straddle; for what the blacks clammed to share was not only money, jobs and material things but such intangibles as dignity and equality. And the sharing that was demanded in this quest was demanded not from the affluent so much as from white workingmen, who were asked also to share their schools, neighborhoods, and places of amusement with the blacks.18

This frustration gave rise to a third party, the American Independent Party (AIP), helmed by Alabama Gov. George Wallace, who not only carried several states in the Deep South in the 1968 election but also won sizable shares of the vote in major urban counties in the Midwest.

The AIP once again leaned on populist ideas to make its case, arguing that the principle of representation had been degraded in the nation. Whereas populist movements of the past had named wealthy oligarchs who had corrupted the legislature, the AIP blamed the unelected federal judiciary for overstepping its boundaries. The party’s 1968 platform read:

In the period of the past three decades, we have seen the Federal judiciary, primarily the Supreme Court, transgress repeatedly upon the prerogatives of the Congress and exceed its authority by enacting judicial legislation, in the form of decisions based upon political and sociological considerations, which would never have been enacted by the Congress. We have seen them, in their solicitude for the criminal and lawless element of our society, shackle the police and other law enforcement agencies; and, as a result, they have made it increasingly difficult to protect the law-abiding citizen from crime and criminals. This is one of the principal reasons for the turmoil and the near revolutionary conditions which prevail in our country today, and particularly in our national capitol. The members of the Federal judiciary, feeling secure in their knowledge that their appointment is for life, have far exceeded their constitutional authority, which is limited to interpreting or construing the law.19

In response, the AIP called for the popular election of the judiciary as a way to increase public control over a branch that was growing markedly in power.

The populism of the segregationist AIP—as well as the general racist tenor of 19th-century politics—has often led some to conclude that populism is itself racist. But this is not the case, at least on a theoretical level. Populism is primarily a lament about the decline of democratic accountability, which gives it a nostalgic quality. This can, and in the case of the 1968 AIP it actually did, lend itself to racism—as voters previously in sole or dominant possession of political power are averse to sharing it with racial or ethnic minorities who now come to claim their fair share of governing authority. Because populism is primarily anxious about the politics of loss, it can be a posture
adopted by those who fear rising minority populations and therefore can be seen as racism. Yet it need not be the case.

In the past decade, populism has once again returned—although it remains a politically inchoate relative to the Populist Party and AIP. Instead, it is more a sentiment infusing the conservative wing of the Republican Party, given particular voice by several prominent figures such as Ted Cruz and Donald Trump.

It is a concerted effort by corporate lobbyists and establishment politicians. Lobbyists and career politicians make up the Washington Cartel. Let me explain to you how it works: A bill is set to come before Congress, and career politicians’ ears and wallets are open to the highest bidder. Corrupt backroom deals result in one interest group getting preferences over the other, although you give the other a chance to outbid them. Or even worse, a very small interest group getting special carve-outs at the expense of taxpayers.20

This is an argument that the principal-agent problem has corrupted representative government and is thus consistent with longtime populist grievances.

Cruz is not the only one who made such claims. Donald Trump, the eventual winner of the nomination battle, complained—sometimes bitterly—about such a cartel. In his 2016 nomination address, he said:

[Special interests] have rigged our political and economic system for their exclusive benefit. Big business, elite media and major donors are lining up behind the campaign of my opponent because they know [Hillary Clinton] will keep our rigged system in place. They are throwing money at her because they have total control over everything she does. She is their puppet, and they pull the strings.21

Trump echoed these claims when he was sworn in as America’s 45th president, giving a fire-and-brimstone speech reminiscent of old Jacksonianism:

Today we are not merely transferring power from one administration to another or from one party to another, but we are transferring power from Washington, DC, and giving it back to you, the people.

For too long, a small group in our Nation’s Capital has reaped the rewards of Government while the people have borne the cost. Washington flourished, but the people did not share in its wealth. Politicians prospered, but the jobs left, and the factories closed. The establishment protected itself, but not the citizens of our country. Their victories have not been your victories; their triumphs have not been your triumphs; and while they celebrated in our Nation’s

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Consider, for instance, the tea party—even the name itself harkens back to populism. The complaint of the Boston Tea Party from 1773 was that the British Prime Minister Lord North had slapped a tax on colonial tea without the consent of the colonies. In other words, the objection was at least in part a matter of political power. For conservative insurgents to adopt the moniker tea party, rather than something more anodyne, suggests a level of populist frustration.

As he campaigned for president in 2016, Ted Cruz gave voice to this frustration by frequent references to the “Washington cartel”—a telling phrase. A cartel, after all, is an alliance of seemingly disparate actors looking to control or regulate the output of some good. In Cruz’s estimation, Republicans and Democrats align with special interests in a cartel to block legislation that would interest the American people. In a 2015 speech to the Heritage Foundation, Cruz said:
Capital, there was little to celebrate for struggling families all across our land.22

These are old arguments. Bolingbroke was making similar points some 300 years ago, distinguishing his country party from Walpole’s court party. Again and again, the complaint is similar: The representative process at the heart of republican government has been hijacked by some malevolent force, usually the wealthy, and needs to be restored. This is the theoretical foundation of populism.

**Conclusion**

As we have seen, populism revolves around the principal-agent problem endemic to representative government. Populists are worried that their representatives in government are no longer working for them but instead are now looking out for some other interest, usually a wealthy one with better access to power. The populist platform can vary on matters of policy substance, but it inevitably calls for restoring the old norms that have since been corrupted. This is the main way that populism can be distinguished from other movements.

A few additional observations are in order. As we have seen, populism tends to be a politics of nostalgia. Implicit within the populist argument is that republican government was functioning properly at some point but has of late become corrupted. Similarly, those factions most amenable to populist arguments are those that believe they have lost a quantum of power. This can mean, in turn, that populism appeals to groups on the downside of socioeconomic shifts—the landed gentry of early 18th century England, the yeoman farmers of the Great Plains in the 1890s, or urban ethnics in the 1960s. Populism, in this way, is a backward-looking ideology. Finally, populists tend to infer malevolent motives in their political opponents.

Disagreements are not in good faith among fellow republicans who nevertheless have divergent views of the general welfare but rather a consequence of a plot to undermine, perhaps even destroy, self-government in the United States.

Still, for its many excesses, the emergence of a populist movement can be a sign that something in our politics is deeply amiss. The 1790s, 1820s, and 1890s were all times of rampant government corruption, and opponents were not wrong to be worried that the republican character of the government was in some jeopardy. Madison certainly overstated his case when he denounced the Hamiltonian Federalists, but he was not wrong to worry about “a real domination of the few, under an apparent liberty of the many.” Thus, populism—for its tendency toward hyperbole, nostalgia, and paranoia—should remind us that the substance of self-government is forever fragile, even as the right to vote is nominally secure.

Finally, strong, vibrant political parties can be an institutional alternative to fiery populism. The purpose of parties, as Van Buren noted so long ago, is to make sure the representatives serve as effective agents for their constituents. Today, we have strong partisanship but institutionally weak parties. Strengthening parties in such a way to make them responsive to the concerns of voters could be a way to ease public anxiety and prevent another bout of populist inflammation.

**About the Author**

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