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Pop-Culture Politics: How Cable News
Created the Tea Party, Trump, and a
Fake Populist Movement

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“If the people shall, with a ringing an impressive voice, declare four weeks from next Tuesday that the public credit shall not be lowered; that the national currency shall not be degraded; that the peace and tranquility of this government of law shall not be broken; that the revenues of the treasury shall be no longer insufficient for the needs of the government, and that the tariff shall no longer be inadequate to protect the American workshop and the American mark, business activity will return, confidence come back again...work will be resumed, prosperity will come to bless and benefit us all.”¹

-William McKinley, 1896

The catchword of the modern political moment is populism. Donald Trump’s rise in the 2016 presidential election, against all preconceived odds, has led politicians and analysts alike to declare his movement “populist,” dredging up a long-used term first popularized in the United States in the late nineteenth century. On MSNBC, commentators referred to Trump as a populist in order to avoid the more blasphemous characterization of fascist.² Fox News, on the other hand, did so in order to explain away economic policies that differed from traditional GOP talking points.³ Trump was not the only presidential hopeful who received the populist tag, as Bernie Sanders ignited the American left against Hillary Clinton in the Democratic primary. While commentators on Fox News, CNN, and MSNBC characterized Sanders and Trump in the same way, the two candidates only residually resembled each other. Each certainly argued that they were against the “establishment;” indeed, this was the primary characteristic that earned them the populist label. But populism is more than simply anti-establishment sentiment. American populism in particular remains inescapably entrenched within the legacy left behind by the Populist movement that started

¹ Serendipitously found from a newspaper clipping tucked inside an edition of *Errors in Populism*. Title of the newspaper and the date are unknown.

² “Niall Ferguson: Donald Trump Not A Fascist But A Populist | Morning Joe | MSNBC - YouTube,” accessed May 9, 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ybae3LF36_k.

³ Fox News, *Donald Trump’s Populist Campaign*, accessed May 9, 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sRDEac6l_NE.

in the 1880s by the Farmer's Alliance. While Sanders embodied much of the original movement, Trump remains diametrically opposed to the ideological core of American populism—instead, he embodies much of what William McKinley, the grand opponent of populism in the 1890s whose election in 1896 effectively ended the movement, stood for.

The original American populists—those from the late 19th century—spoke to a particular kind of anxiety. Theirs was an economic anxiety in a time of crony capitalism, monopolization, and frequent banking failures that would lead to panics, depleting the savings of the most economically vulnerable Americans. It was an upward-looking anxiety, one felt by citizens on the lowest rungs of the socio-economic ladder about those above them. They were distrustful of both economic and political elites, arguing that representatives in Washington D.C. were in the pocket of big banks and corporations. This lent itself naturally to conspiracy theories that centered on the belief that the rich sought to steal an ever-increasing proportion of the wealth in United States. While agrarians made up the base of what would become the Populist Party, a broad coalition including industrial workers, suffragettes, prohibitionists, and African Americans partook in the populist cause to varying degrees. Crucial to the spread of their ideas was the promulgation of newspapers across the American landscape, particularly to the less densely populated areas of the Midwest. As the cost of production decreased and the telegraph allowed information to spread more freely, newspapers extended both knowledge and ideas into previously untouched cities and towns. Populist newspapers acted as pulpits in strongholds like Kansas and Colorado, facilitating the passage of a particular economic ideology that stressed a large “corporate government” that controlled a wide range of perceived public goods, an expansionary monetary policy, and constitutional amendments for an income tax and the direct election of senators. After receiving 22 electoral votes in 1892, the Populists combined

with the Democratic Party in 1896. The loss of their candidate, William Jennings Bryan, marked the end of the Populist movement, but populism would not die in the United States. For the next century, grassroots movements would be declared populist, with the most famous instance prior to 2016 being George Wallace's campaign for President in 1968.⁴

For all its reiterations, populism remained ambiguous and not well understood. This has been mainly due to the influence of one book: Richard Hofstadter's *The Age of Reform*. Argued to be "the most influential book ever published on the history of twentieth-century America," *The Age of Reform* purported that the Populist movement contained both a "hard side" and a "soft side."⁵ Most important to future scholars and political analysts would be the "soft side," which described a nostalgic, backwards nature of populism. It is this characterization that we still deal with today, despite more recent literature disputing its historical validity.⁶

Political analysts have classified the Trump movement as populist because it fits within Hofstadter's conspiratorial, economically nostalgic "soft side," ignoring the work of historians like Charles Postel who have argued that the "hard side"—which consisted of devoted political activists with determined ideologies that sought economic solutions that fit within the globalized world—is a more accurate and substantial portion of the Populist movement. However, the Trump movement ideologically contradicts many of the positions the populists fought so hard for. They support lower taxes, more restrictive voting laws, and criticize the Federal Reserve's expansionary monetary policy in response to the Great Recession. Furthermore, despite some of Trump's rhetoric on trade, his supporters are

⁴ Based on my interpretation of American populism, I would not say that George Wallace's campaign was populist.

⁵ Alan Brinkley, "Richard Hofstadter's the Age of Reform: A Reconsideration," ed. Richard Hofstadter, *Reviews in American History* 13, no. 3 (1985): 462, ; Richard Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform: From Bryan to F.D.R.* (New York: Knopf, 1955).

⁶ Charles Postel, *The Populist Vision* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

socially and culturally, rather than economically, motivated. The ideologies behind Trump's movement are not his own, but rather are the extension of the beliefs held by factions of the Tea Party who had been radicalized by right-wing media outlets like Fox News. To the extent that they are economically minded, they sit in almost direct opposition to populists. While Trump's movement captured some of Hofstadter's "soft side" of populism, it failed to incorporate any of the more important "hard side."

Therefore, I define the Tea Party and the corresponding Trump movement not as populists but rather as "cable conservatives." Unlike the populists of the 1880s and 1890s, who situated any social and cultural discussions within the context of their broad economic message, "cable conservatives" situate their economic plans within a nativist social and cultural message that stresses the perceived danger presented Latin American immigrants, Muslims, and other minorities. Finally, ideas were not developed at a grassroots level, as in a populist movement, but rather were presented by right-wing cable news anchors like Sean Hannity, who used frustrations over the election of Barack Obama and fear of a new Progressive Era to radicalize a far-right Republican base that would push Trump to the presidency. In the first section, I will briefly analyze the historiography of American populism with the goal of defining the traits that make it distinct from other forms (European, Latin American, etc.). Next, I look at the evolving media landscapes in the nineteenth and twenty-first centuries, respectively. In this section, I will show how the Populist movement used newspapers to spread their ideas, whereas contemporary movements were formed by the ideas spread by cable news. Finally, I delve into the motivating factors fueling each movement and how those factors framed any secondary policies proposed by the populists and Tea Party/Trump respectively.

What is Populism?

Because both the historiography and political science on the issue is so contested, any discussion of populism must first situate itself within the ideological debate of “what is populism?” It is thus necessary to return to Hofstadter’s discussion of “soft side” and “hard side” populism, not only to develop a more cemented definition of each but also to situate his ideas within the broader discussion on politics when Hofstadter was writing (1955). Hofstadter claims that a thread can be strung from the Populists of the nineteenth century to the Progressives who elected Franklin Roosevelt. This was not to say that the New Deal was in some way a grand final victory for the populists of forty years prior. Rather, Hofstadter sought an examination of how reform movements themselves evolve and additionally cause rise to reactionary movements.⁷ At the center of his analysis is the dual characterization of populism. While arguing that the “hard side” would have a more lasting impact, it is the “soft side” that garners the most attention for Hofstadter in regards to nineteenth century populism. He identifies the “soft side” of populism with the idea of the yeoman farmer and an “agrarian myth,” arguing that these reflected nostalgia, anti-elitist angst, conspiratorial theories, and economic anxiety.⁸ “Soft side” populists were poorly educated and previously politically uninterested, choosing to exert mental energy on keeping up life as a sustenance farmer rather than on the evolving global economy. After a stint of political engagement in the 1890s, these populists would return to their corners of the nation when William Jennings Bryan lost in the presidential election of 1896 to William McKinley. “Hard side” populists, on the other hand, were generally well educated and had partially or fully formed political

⁷ Richard Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform: From Bryan to F.D.R.*, 19–21. We should thus understand Hofstadter in the context of the early stages of the Cold War, when emphasis was placed on determining why the U.S. way of life would prevail over the Soviet model.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 27–30. The yeoman farmer and agrarian myth work off each other. The farmer is an idealistic image of what a man should be, and the agrarian myth is the life that man should live. It seeks to idolize the agrarian lifestyle as the truest form of independent, America life. Agriculture was central to society, and thus the government had a role in protecting agricultural workers. In this way, it is quite Jeffersonian.

ideologies. They were “speculative thinkers” who operated somewhere between ordinary and high culture.⁹

The conclusions drawn from Hofstadter’s work in the insuring years were, historically speaking, ill founded. Rather than assessing the two forms of the Populist movement, contemporaries of Hofstadter took “soft side” to equal populists and “hard side” to equal progressives. This augmented picture can largely be drawn to the political science of the day, which, in the wake of the Cold War, grappled with the stability (and the very existence) of an “American ideology.”¹⁰ Political scientists such as Robert McCloskey would argue in the decade following *The Age of Reform* that ideology was held by a sector of political elites, which he defines as a group made up primarily of politicians, lobbyists, and high-level activists.¹¹ The rest of the polity was not motivated politically by ideology, but rather by individualistic issues. By this logic, the very groups that made up the base of populism in the United States—farmers, miners, industrial workers, women, etc.—were by their very nature *not* the holders of “The American Ideology,” making them fall into Hofstadter’s “soft side.” Political analysts (who would fall into McCloskey’s “elite”) today still follow this characterization, as any socially, culturally, or economically “backwards” movement is almost automatically deemed populist. As Jan-Werner Müller wrote recently in *What is Populism?* “consciously or unconsciously, we continue to draw on a set of assumptions derived from modernization theory that had its heyday in the 1950s and 1960s. This is true even of many political theorists and social scientists who, if asked, would say

⁹ Ibid., 6.

¹⁰ Robert G. McCloskey, “The American Ideology,” in *Continuing Crisis in American Politics*, ed. Marian D. Irish (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1963).

¹¹ Ibid.

they consider modernization theory to be thoroughly discredited.”¹² Six decades of scholarship have chipped away at Hofstadter’s premise, most recently with the work of Charles Postel and his book *The Populist Vision*, which one reviewer argued was a return to populism’s “hard side.” I will therefore continue under the pretense that American populism is more narrowly defined than how it is generally used. It is not only a movement of the people, but one that adheres to a particular combination of ideologies and practices, each of which is necessary but not sufficient. Important to note is that I am dealing with populism in the American form, which differs from other parts of the world. American populism (referred to as just “populism” for hereon out) has three main characteristics, the first two of which are true of populism generally and the last of which distinguishes the American variety. First, it must truly be a movement of the people. Second, it is anti-elite, but not anti-government. In fact, it sees the government as an answer to its problems. Finally, it is derived from an upward-looking economic anxiety, with any social and cultural elements acting only as manifestations of an economic agenda.¹³

Fair and Balanced

Perhaps the most important element of the late nineteenth century in the United States was the destruction of distance. While railroads crossed the nation, physically connecting people, goods, and services, telegraph wires made the transfer of thoughts and ideas quite literally as quick as lightning. By 1880, the United States had nearly 300,000 miles

¹² Jan-Werner Müller, *What Is Populism?* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), 17.

¹³ This is the key difference from European populism, which features both upward and downward anxieties and is the main cause of the natural form of European populism to be right-wing. For a full discussion on the how populism can be interpreted differently depending on the location, see: Jan-Werner Müller, *What Is Populism?*; Leonard Zeskind, “A Nation Dispossessed: The Tea Party Movement and Race,” *Critical Sociology* 38, no. 4 (July 1, 2012): 495–509, doi:10.1177/0896920511431852; Charles Postel, “The Tea Party in Historical Perspective: A Conservative Response to a Crisis in Political Economy,” in *Steep: The Precipitous Rise of the Tea Party*, by Lawrence Rosenthal and Christine Trost (University of California Press, 2012).

of wire resulting in over 30 million messages sent a year.¹⁴ No longer, as historian Daniel Czitrom noted, would transportation and communication be intertwined, with news only being disseminated as quickly as a mode of transportation could carry it.¹⁵ As important as it was for business, those in the Midwest found the development of the telegraph to be life changing, as information was no longer hoarded by the cities. Major news and events could be disseminated across the United States at a moment's notice, allowing those who previously felt incapable of entering the political or economic landscape to become at least a part, if not an active member, of the United States political economy.

Coinciding with the spread of the telegraph was the proliferation of newspapers to the American landscape. While daily papers had previously only been profitable in densely populated areas like New York and Chicago, a series of conditions began to allow them to operate in small towns across the United States. Industrial progress lowered the costs to start up a paper, and operating costs were additionally lowered as the telegraph allowed papers to print news bulletins that covered local, state, and national news. The results were astounding, as 574 daily papers in 1870 ballooned to 1610 by the end of the century. As Hofstadter noted, “newspaper gossip...provided a substitute for village gossip.”¹⁶ Practically speaking, this change manifested itself in the topics of conversation for those in Middle America. While local issues certainly popped up, conversations on national issues could be discussed intelligently and with a level of common understanding that was provided by the local paper. Farmer's began holding meetings to discuss economics, politics, science, and, yes, farming.¹⁷ These meetings would facilitate the creation of groups like the Farmer's Alliance that would eventually coalesce into the Populist movement. Once organized, members of the various

¹⁴ Daniel J. Czitrom, *Media and the American Mind* (University of North Carolina Press, 1982), 23.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹⁶ Richard Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform: From Bryan to F.D.R.*, 185–87.

¹⁷ Charles Postel, *The Populist Vision*, 45–50.

Alliances—Farmer’s, Southern, Colored—began creating their own newspapers, which would be vital in not only forming and spreading populist ideology but also in representing the intellectual curiosity within the movement. The *National Economist* wrote about Louis Pasteur and germ theory, *Rural California* about information on subtropical fruits, and *Western Rural* argued about the potential downsides of genetically engineered fruits and livestock.¹⁸ *The Advocate* advertised for free colleges and universities, open to both male and female students, offering “training in the mechanical arts and agriculture, with mathematics, sciences, and English language.”¹⁹ Most notable however, both quantitatively and qualitatively, were articles on politics and the economy. Cover stories on the August 8th edition of *The Advocate* touched on Bonds; international relations between the U.S., Europe, China, and Japan; as well as political developments on the national level such as proposed bills and congressional races.²⁰

The newspaper industry was changing not only in quantity but also in style. In cities, human-interest stories, flashy headlines, and titles printed in large, eye-catching print all sought to distinguish particular papers from their counterparts. The *San Francisco Examiner* began adding drawings to compliment stories, and “yellow journalism” sensationalized events in the hopes of drumming up news on a slow day.²¹ Eventually, even city papers began to play on the “radical” ideologies of the populists to gain readership. Indeed, populist papers of the Midwest were not in a vacuum, as they were the extension—or, rather, the basis—of a national phenomenon. They differed, however, by operating outside the competitive landscapes of the cities, allowing content to focus on agrarian issues and

¹⁸ Ibid., 54.

¹⁹ “The Advocate. (Topeka, Kan.) 1894-1897, August 08, 1894, Image 14,” August 8, 1894, 8.

²⁰ Ibid., 1.

²¹ Milly Williamson, “When ‘Popular’ Was ‘Radical,’” *Media History* 18, no. 2 (May 2012): 115–27, doi:10.1080/13688804.2012.663860.

concerns. While showing solidarity for the laboring masses in the cities, papers like *The Advocate* focused more on the economic issues of the money question, railroads, and tariffs.

The evolving forms of information in the later part of the nineteenth century certainly kick-started what would become the Populist movement. However, once organized, populists began taking over their own media outlets from which both news and opinions could be disseminated. Therefore, they were not beholden to the more radical papers owned by news magnates like William Randolph Hearst who offered a distorted image of populist ideology.²² Control over the flow of information allowed the movement to remain pure and true to its ideologies and agrarian message. Additionally, it allowed the movement to maintain its grassroots image even while it grew, gained national membership, and attracted members of the political elite. Systemic control over the structures of media was not available to the Tea Party.

The trends that would push Republican voters into Trump's lap started well before his descent down the Trump Tower escalator to announce his campaign for president. It began with a simple premise: that the mainstream media was made up of left-leaning organizations that subversively put their hand on the scale in favor of Democrats. Bob Dole argued that this might have resulted in his failed campaign for president in 1996 (the same year that Fox News was founded).²³ In 2001, Fox News overtook CNN as the cable news network with the highest ratings, adding almost 300,000 primetime viewers in the process.²⁴ It did so with a dedicated campaign aimed at picking off Republican viewers of other networks, arguing that those who had become disillusioned by accusations of bias in the

²² Ibid.

²³ Jonathan S. Morris, "Slanted Objectivity? Perceived Media Bias, Cable News Exposure, and Political Attitudes," *Social Science Quarterly (Wiley-Blackwell)* 88, no. 3 (September 2007): 707, doi:10.1111/j.1540-6237.2007.00479.x.

²⁴ "Cable News Is in Trouble, and It's More about the News than the Cable," *Vox*, May 10, 2015, <http://www.vox.com/2015/5/10/8578041/cable-news-ratings-2015>.

media could retreat to Fox for a “Fair and Balanced” report of the news. Meanwhile, those on the left argued that the media, and particularly Fox News, were biased to the right. By 2004, sixty-nine percent of the public thought that there was at least a “fair amount” of media bias, while only seven percent found no bias.²⁵

Fox then began a process of turning their Republican viewers more to the right. They not only covered Republicans more often, but also did so with less scrutiny than with their analysis of the political left.²⁶ However, some of the more conservative commentators showed a willingness to break from Republican leaders when their positions were seen as not conservative enough. In 2004, Sean Hannity held a discussion on a proposed policy by President Bush that would offer a path to citizenship for the “illegal immigrants” living in the United States. Hannity rhetorically asked, “Does the president’s new open borders policy open the door for a potential flood of dangerous individuals onto our shores?”²⁷ This trend would continue into 2009, as Hannity and other Fox commentators would argue against what they called RINOs (Republicans in Name Only). These RINOs were moderate Republicans willing to bend on ideological issues such as the need for small government and low taxes.

In the midst of Fox’s surge, CNN was left trying desperately to regain its spot atop the cable news rankings, despite at that point having almost one million fewer prime-time viewers. Matt Guardino and Dean Snyder argue that this is the most logical reason for

²⁵ Morris, “Slanted Objectivity?”

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ “Loosening U.S. Immigration Policy,” Text Article, *Fox News*, (January 8, 2004), <http://www.foxnews.com/transcript/2004/01/08/loosening-us-immigration-policy-1132103508.html>.

CNN's favorable coverage of the Tea Party in its early stages.²⁸ This is in stark contrast to the typical treatment of protest movements by cable news sources, which often “marginalize groups’ substantive grievances and policy demands while playing up negative dimensions.”²⁹ While both Fox and CNN represented the Tea Party Tax Day protests (April 15, 2010) in a positive light, CNN did so to an even larger degree, with nearly 90 percent of its coverage being positive. Additionally, both Fox and CNN covered the policy-driven aspects of the protest to a much larger degree than seemingly superficial details like the demographics and make-up of the protestors.³⁰ These sources had substantial weight, as a large majority of Tea Partiers had heard about the movement from television or radio (71 percent, compared to 8 percent from newspapers). Responders to the same poll had an 85 percent favorability of the movement.³¹ This coverage would prove vital in the midterm elections later that year, when Republicans would take 63 seats from Democrats in the House of Representatives, giving them a majority that would stall legislative processes for the next six years. Perhaps more important though was the type of Republican elected, as a new wave of far-right politicians—now the members of the Freedom Caucus—came to Washington as ideologically pure candidates with the sole mandate of obstructing any Democratic policies.

These new representatives embodied the coalition that the right had been forming since at least the 1980s, and further demonstrated the pull of cable news, and in particular Fox News. A coalition was made up of the moneyed elite that fought for hardline neoliberal economic policies—low taxes, free trade—and socially conservative members of the

²⁸ Matt Guardino and Dean Snyder, “The Tea Party and the Crisis of Neoliberalism: Mainstreaming New Right Populism in the Corporate News Media,” *New Political Science* 34, no. 4 (December 2012): 527–48, doi:10.1080/07393148.2012.729741.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ “New York Times/CBS News Poll: National Survey of Tea Party Supporters,” accessed April 7, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/projects/documents/new-york-times-cbs-news-poll-national-survey-of-tea-party-supporters>.

working class that adhered to evangelical ideologies. Essentially, it was the bulk of Nixon's "silent majority"—older whites who were opposed to social and cultural progress and who felt left out by the media in the public discussion on such matters. Even after Barack Obama's landslide victory in 2008, conservative commentators like Hannity continued to speak towards the idea that the will of the people was one of conservative ideals and values; "I think there's a conservative ascendancy emerging in the country... I think that the left and one-party rule, they misinterpreted the election results."³² Hannity spoke to a decades old conspiracy that a "one-world government" rigged democratic processes in order to fulfill liberal ideologies, a conspiracy that was revamped with Obama's election, despite its landslide nature.³³ These views were further reinforced by the demonization of Obama as a "tyrant," "thug," and as someone with a "fetish" for czars.³⁴

The cable news industry has helped create a new type of conservative. While still emphasizing some traditional conservative platforms—low taxes, small government—additional emphasis was placed on appealing to the middle and working classes, socio-culturally motivated voters that had been brought to the Republican Party in the aftermath of Nixon's Southern Strategy and Reagan's "law and order" appeal. By pushing these platforms, Fox News sought two ends: First, they hardened and polarized a constituency that would vote in favor of ideologies backed by the network. Second, they fit the rest of the "media" within the conspiracy to elect liberal politicians in an attempt to bolster ratings by not only picking off viewers from other networks, but also by cementing them into Fox News and Fox News only. In this context, CNN decided to offer more favorable coverage

³² "Ginni Thomas Says Democrats in Power Are Imposing Tyranny," Text.Article, *Fox News*, (June 8, 2010), <http://www.foxnews.com/transcript/2010/06/08/ginni-thomas-says-democrats-in-power-are-imposing-tyranny.html>.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.; "Obama's Crisis Calling Card: Appoint a 'Czar,'" Text.Article, *Fox News*, (June 17, 2010), <http://www.foxnews.com/transcript/2010/06/17/obama-crisis-calling-card-appoint-czar.html>.

of certain groups, like the Tea Party, in order to appease cable news demographics. And unlike in the 1880s and 1890s when populists turned primarily to their own forms of media, Fox News remained the primary source of news for conservatives. Finally, we see the underpinnings of what would become Trump's movement over a decade before his run for president, particularly during their primetime slot with Sean Hannity that greatly outperformed other cable news networks.

As early as 2004, Hannity described undocumented Latino immigrants as dangerous threats, when in fact they commit less crime than the average citizen.³⁵ Viewers of his and of Fox News in general were shown to have distorted beliefs about the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Additionally, Hannity falsely covered attempts of Muslims to bring Sharia Law to the United States. Further, Hannity held frequent discussions on what he and his guests deemed to be the nature of Islam: "Muslims murdered Christians in Egypt, Copts in Egypt, Christians in Lebanon, Armenians in Turkey, Hindus in India, Jews in Arab lands... this is Islamic radicalism... Their true colors are showing."³⁶ Finally, he sought to undermine the first African American President as illegitimate, despite no evidence to back it up. Fox News anchors spoke to the nostalgic, conspiratorial, and backwards tendencies of "soft side" populism with no such commensurate backing of "hard side" populist ideals. They thus set the groundwork for movements that would resemble not American populism, but rather the inaccurate portrait of populism created in the wake of *The Age of Reform*.

Ratios and Demographics

³⁵ Evelyn Rupert, "Reports Find That Immigrants Commit Less Crime than US-Born Citizens," Text, *TheHill*, (March 19, 2017), <http://thehill.com/latino/324607-reports-find-that-immigrants-commit-less-crime-than-us-born-citizens>.

³⁶ "Radical Imam's Warning to America: 'Islam Is Coming to Your Backyard,'" Text.Article, *Fox News*, (February 3, 2011), <http://www.foxnews.com/transcript/2011/02/03/radical-imam-warning-to-america-islam-is-coming-to-your-backyard.html>.

Nineteenth-century America was a hotbed of social, economic, and political change. It began with the victory of the North in the Civil War, which not only freed some four million slaves but also set the path of economic growth for the United States in the decades to come. Industry became the way of the land as entrepreneurs sought to reap the rewards of America's capitalist capabilities. Railroads stitched together the vast expanses of the United States, earning large subsidies of both land and money for those who built them in the process. Telegraph wires crossed the nation, allowing those on the Pacific to communicate with the great Northeastern cities like never before. Behind the growth were bankers, funding the projects and innovations that spurred on this Industrial Revolution. But not everyone felt the gains of those on top of Bellamy's carriage.³⁷ Those who had settled west of the Mississippi felt as though the rapid expansion of the United States' economy had not trickled down to them. Frequent Panics—banking crises that would cause depressions—hit agrarian areas the hardest, fermenting anger at the bankers who caused such turmoil. By the late 1880's, these citizens had had enough and began to fight to regain their economic and political voice.

At the crux of the Populist movement sat the ratio of sixteen to one. In 1873, the United States had demonetized silver, putting itself on the gold standard. This enraged farmers across the United States, as silver could no longer be used to pay back the debts they had accrued, and would effectively cause a contraction of the supply of money in the nation.³⁸ Furthermore, those who held gold—principally bankers, in the minds of the future populists—now found themselves with even greater economic leverage, as the Federal Government would need to purchase gold if it wanted to re-expand the money supply—

³⁷ From Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward*, where he describes capitalism as a small group of elites on top of a carriage being pulled up a mountain by the masses.

³⁸ Sarah Emery, *Seven Financial Conspiracies* (Westport, CT: Hyperior Press, 1894).

which it would need to do in order to just keep up with economic growth. Of primary concern to those on the prairie, however, was the increasing indebtedness such contractionary monetary policy caused. As prices fell, it became increasingly more difficult to pay back the loans that had been taken out when prices were nominally higher. The results, according to populist literature, were staggering: \$67,000,000 destroyed in 1870, \$35,000,000 in 1871, and \$12,000,000 in 1872. The Panic of 1873 puts half a million men out of work in 1873, a million in 1874, and two million in 1875.³⁹

The next fifteen years saw little progress, and the grievances of the populists turned conspiratorial. In 1887, Sarah Emery published her best-selling book, *Seven Financial Conspiracies*, which argued that the big banks of New York had plotted since the beginning of the Civil War to squeeze every dollar they could from the pockets of both citizens and the Federal Government.⁴⁰ While her direct claims were well repudiated by William Craven in his 1896 book *Errors of Populism*, Emery's work speaks to the frustrations and sentiment of the populist cause. Populist anger was not directed toward the government; quite the contrary, populists believed that the government would be the source of the growth of the agrarian portions of the nation. It was the moneyed classes who inflicted these "seven financial conspiracies *against* this government."⁴¹ As Charles Postel argues in *The Populist Vision*, populists fought for an expansion of the federal government and a restructuring of its role in the United States economy.⁴² This would take many forms, but the first step in establishing a government that would work for the people was the re-introduction of bimetallic currency system that monetized both silver and gold at the ratio of sixteen to one. Additionally, populists saw a role for government in creating educational institutions and in nationalizing

³⁹ Ibid, 39-40.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid. (Emphasis added).

⁴² Charles Postel, *The Populist Vision*.

key industries like the railroads and telegraphs. First and foremost to the populists, though, was re-monetization of silver; it was their first plank in their Party Platform of 1892.⁴³

Furthermore, it was the framework behind which their other arguments were formed. To support the free and unlimited coinage of silver at the sixteen to one ratio was not only a sign that one was on the side of the populists, but more so that he or she was intelligent and politically savvy.⁴⁴ *The Advocate*, a populist newspaper based out of Topeka, Kansas—a populist stronghold—frequently used this technique in a recurring column titled “Preparing for Suffrage.” Writer Con Healy used a series of conversations between a husband, Cicero, and wife, Sophia, to put forward populist policy points while at the same time showing the political prowess of females and their right to have the vote. In the 10th installment, Cicero argues that silver cannot be remonetized because it is “cheap and dishonest,” to which Sophia points out, with stinging resentment, that it only became devalued because it was demonetized in 1873: “Well, perhaps it is because I am a woman I can’t reason backwards. It takes a man to do that. You take the effect and claim it is the cause. You tell me silver is cheap because it is demonetized, and then claim it is dishonest because it is cheap.”⁴⁵ Remonetizing silver, then, would return its value from before 1873.⁴⁶

Each volume of “Preparing for Suffrage” was deeply satirical, as Cicero would in one sentence degrade the intelligence of women while at the same time making a blatant grammatical or political gaff. In one instance, he must ask Sophia how to spell the word “sense” so he can add it to a sentence stating that women “do not have a horse’s sense,” and later is corrected by Sophia when he states that he is quoting the Constitution when in fact

⁴³ “Populist Party Platform, 1892,” *Populist Party Platform, 1892*, January 8, 2009, 1.

⁴⁴ Emery, *Seven Financial Conspiracies*; “The Advocate. (Topeka, Kan.) 1894-1897, June 13, 1894, Image 11,” June 13, 1894; “The Advocate. (Topeka, Kan.) 1894-1897, November 14, 1894, Image 9,” November 14, 1894.

⁴⁵ “The Advocate. (Topeka, Kan.) 1894-1897, August 15, 1894, Image 2,” August 15, 1894.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 15.

he is quoting the Declaration of Independence.⁴⁷ Suffrage remains a secondary issue, however. Powering each conversation is the economic stances of the populists—the right for women to vote only goes so far as their willingness to believe in populism, with the most important position being the silver question. No matter the issue, populists forwarded progressive social ideals only to the extent that those ideals could be drawn back to the economic and monetary questions of the day.

The money question would remain the most important issue for the populists, but not simply because of the potential for silver to pull millions of agrarian workers out of debt. This steadfast position was twofold, as it would not only begin the process of alleviating the private debt held by advocates of populism, but it would also signal that the government was once again working not for the interests of the banks but for the interests of the people.⁴⁸

Here rested the overarching ideology of American populism—that the government has the power to do what must be done to ensure that no citizen be left behind because of their economic situation. This naturally led to a vision of government that had a much larger hand in both the nation’s economy and its many industries, particularly those that were deemed to be public goods. It is here again that we confront Hofstadter’s “soft” and “hard” side. Whereas Hofstadter saw a nostalgic attempt to reject the evolving economic order and return the United States to the days of bimetallism, modern interpretations, like those from Postel, argue that this was in fact another expression of the “hard side” that fought for policies that would allow the agrarian sector not to retreat to the past but rather to have a chance at adapting into the future.⁴⁹ Populists believed that the government had a job to protect them further rested on the concept of Producerism, which was brought forward by

⁴⁷ “The Advocate. (Topeka, Kan.) 1894-1897, July 18, 1894, Image 2,” July 18, 1894.

⁴⁸ “Populist Party Platform, 1892.”

⁴⁹ Richard Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform: From Bryan to F.D.R.*; Charles Postel, *The Populist Vision*.

Lawrence Goodwyn's *Democratic Promise: The Populist Moment in America*. Producerism argues that the working classes (both industrial and agricultural) saw themselves as the producers of wealth in the nation. Without them, America's prosperity would be impossible, and therefore the government had a duty to make sure they could keep up with the privileged classes.⁵⁰

The importance of the Federal Government highlights the role of "hard side" populism in the Populist movement. "Soft side" elements certainly existed, but they resided in the undercurrents of the movement as a whole. The roles of the "soft side" and "hard side" mirror those of social issues and economic issues in the movement. While "soft side" tendencies spoke to sentiments held by individuals within the movement, the "hard side" was emblematic of the movement as a whole. Therefore, an American individual may be understood to be a "soft side" populist, but an American populist movement must implicitly represent populism's "hard side."

Controversy over the motivating factors of the Tea Party is mainly the result of the particular moment in which movement originated. On the one hand, analysts who purport the Tea Party to be a purely economic movement argue that the Tea Party is a response to the Great Recession and the big government recovery effort by the Obama administration. They see the Tea Party as "independent patriotic Americans who desire fiscal sanity."⁵¹ On the other hand, some point to the timing of the Tea Party—directly after the election of the first African American president—as evidence of a racial vindictiveness that fueled Tea Party anger. These critics, a term accurate for this particular group, point to an abundance of racist

⁵⁰ Lawrence Goodwyn, *Democratic Promise: The Populist Moment in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976).

⁵¹ "Tea Party 'Terrorists'? Palin Fires Back," Text.Article, *Fox News*, (August 2, 2011), <http://www.foxnews.com/transcript/2011/08/02/tea-party-terrorists-palin-fires-back.html>. Important to note is the connotation of "fiscal sanity" is one that comes from a Tea Partier, like Sarah Palin who said the quote. Critics of the Tea Party would disagree with the sanity of their policies.

imagery within Tea Party gatherings and media, as well as a comparatively monochromatic base of support, as indicative of their true motives.⁵² A third group sits outside this theoretical framework, however, and avoids the pitfalls of declaring the Tea Party to be a spurt of reaction-politics. They argue that the Tea Party did not just happen, but rather was the realization of larger political trends from at least the mid-1990s if not as far back as the 1950s.⁵³ This third path captures not only some of the contradictory nature of the Tea Party and the ensuing Trump movement, as Lisa Disch argued, but also explains the staying power of its radicalism that confounded almost everyone outside of the movement.⁵⁴

An underlying storyline to the primary for the Republican candidate for President was the extent to which the Tea Party supported Trump. More traditional Tea Party candidates, like Ted Cruz, certainly earned their share of Tea Party support in the primaries. While some polls suggested that Trump and Cruz had about equal support from the Tea Party in certain states, other national polls showed that Trump had a forty-point advantage with this crucial group nationwide.⁵⁵ Understanding this split requires a look at the creation of the Tea Party, the moment it exploded onto the scene, and how it developed from that point on.

The inundation of political fury by citizens who took the street during Tax Day in 2009 led to immediate calls that the Tea Party was a grassroots movement. Contrarians,

⁵² Zeskind, "A Nation Dispossessed."

⁵³ Alan I. Abramowitz, "Grand Old Tea Party: Partisan Polarization and the Rise of the Tea Party Movement," in *Steep: The Precipitous Rise of the Tea Party* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2012); Postel, "The Tea Party in Historical Perspective: A Conservative Response to a Crisis in Political Economy."

⁵⁴ Lisa Disch, "The Tea Party: A 'White Citizenship' Movement?," in *Steep: The Precipitous Rise of the Tea Party* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2012); Postel, "The Tea Party in Historical Perspective: A Conservative Response to a Crisis in Political Economy"; Chip Berlet, "Reframing Populist Resentments in the Tea Party Movement," in *Steep: The Precipitous Rise of the Tea Party*, ed. Lawrence Rosenthal and Christine Trost (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2012).

⁵⁵ "Trump's Appeal Divides Tea Party Loyalties in Crucial States," *Reuters*, March 15, 2016, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-election-trump-teaparty-idUSKCN0WH133>.

generally with the hope of disputing Tea Party support, argued instead that it was a puppet for big-money economic and political elites on the right. Money was being funneled into the movement by GOP backers like the Koch brothers, but there is no doubt of the fervor of its citizen support, which expressed itself in midterms in both 2010 and 2014 as well as during the Republican primaries of 2012 and 2016. The truth lies somewhere in the minutia of the Tea Party. Clarence Y. H. Lo argued convincingly that the Tea Party movement occurred in two waves. A first wave was comprised mostly of conservative activists who sought to determine what kind of backing could be garnered after Rick Santelli's now infamous rant calling for a "Chicago Tea Party."⁵⁶ Those who argue for the "Astroturf" narrative of the Tea Party point to this period of time, from February to April 2009, as the source of their claims as groups like FreedomWorks drummed up support behind the scenes for future movement. The second phase started on April 15, 2009, when some 300,000 citizens took to the street to voice their repudiations of President Obama's proposed policies and is generally viewed as being a sign of the Tea Party's grassroots nature.⁵⁷

While Lo's assessment of a "two wave" movement is convincing, it misses the some of the broader themes beneath the Tea Party. The Tea Party is not made up of two waves of movements, but of two movements entirely. The first made up the bulk of the Lo's first wave; it was what corporate backers bought and paid for, a group that fought for a small government and against many of the campaign promises of Barack Obama. They saw his stimulus package as an over step by the Federal Government into the marketplace, and were fearful that legislation to reform healthcare would be a further step outside the proper role of government. These reactionaries were predictable in the political economic moment:

⁵⁶ Clarence Y. H. Lo, "Astroturf versus Grass Roots: Scenes from Early Tea Party Mobilization," in *Steep: The Precipitous Rise of the Tea Party* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2012), 100.

⁵⁷ *Ibid*, 109.

hardline neoliberals who saw themselves facing the potential for a new progressive era in the United States. Economic conservatives feared these policies because they directly contradicted their guiding doctrine—rational fears, given the tenor of Obama’s “change” political message and the similarities between the Great Recession and the Great Depression that ushered in the New Deal eighty years prior. Obama’s victory, which was by all means a landslide, gave these anxieties additional validation, as it signaled that, as journalist and political commentator John Judis noted at the time, “liberal views have re-emerged... with a vengeance and can be expected to shift further leftward—especially on economic questions—in the face of coming recessions.”⁵⁸ This, of course, did not happen. Instead, the opposite was true: the Tea Party saw, came, and conquered.

The second movement of the Tea Party should be credited with this reversal. It can be characterized as mostly white, middle-class, and socially conservative—the same group that had been radicalized by Fox News over the previous decade. Importantly, these Tea Partiers did not conform to some of the neoliberal tendencies of other staunch Republicans; having been brought into the Republican fold after the 1960s, they had favorable views of social programs to the extent that they existed decades prior, and opposed welfare expansion, rather than welfare outright.⁵⁹ While opposed to previous Democrats like Bill Clinton, these Tea Partiers could at least identify with Clinton to a greater extent than Obama, as a 2011 study found that only 41 percent of Tea Partiers thought Clinton was “not at all” like them while 81 percent felt the same about Obama.⁶⁰ They were not opposed to Social Security and Medicare outright. In fact, a poll showed that a majority of Tea Partiers

⁵⁸ Larry M. Bartels, “Political Effects of the Great Recession,” *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 650, no. 1 (November 1, 2013): 48, doi:10.1177/0002716213496054.

⁵⁹ Disch, “The Tea Party: A ‘White Citizenship’ Movement?”

⁶⁰ Andrew J. Perrin et al., “Cultures of the Tea Party,” *Contexts* 10, no. 2 (May 1, 2011): 74–75, doi:10.1177/1536504211408945.

in 2010 supported the programs as they currently stood.⁶¹ However, that same poll showed that Tea Partiers least favorite attribute of Obama, other than simply disliking him has a person (19 percent) was fear that he was “Socialist/Turning the U.S. into a socialist country.”⁶² (Further questions showed that Tea Partiers generally interpreted this to mean “government ownership,” a “redistribution of wealth,” and “taking away rights.”) 92 percent believed that Obama was turning the nation “towards socialism.” And while a combined 33 percent were “most angry” about healthcare reform, the Obama administration, or government spending, only one percent said the same about the economy (which is one percent less than those who answer “socialism”).⁶³

Tea Party sentiments were more representative of negative Fox News coverage, particularly that of primetime broadcasters like Hannity, than of reality. Despite Obama’s stimulus featuring tax-cuts for the majority of Americans, 64 percent of Tea Party responders believed that taxes had increased since he took office (thirty points higher than the general electorate), while only 2 percent thought they had decreased. Further, while Fox News and CNN depicted the Tea Party as a group of individuals who were politically motivated by economic factors, they were in fact no more interested in the economy than the rest of the electorate as a whole.⁶⁴ A vast majority of Tea Partiers stated that economic issues were of greater importance than social issues, but that percentage was lower than the electorate as a whole (78 to 80 percent). 82 percent found that illegal immigration was a “very serious” problem and 52 percent believed that “too much” had been made of problems facing African Americans (only one percent of Tea Partiers were black, as compared to 12 percent of the general population). The Tea Party certainly had some

⁶¹ “New York Times/CBS News Poll: National Survey of Tea Party Supporters.”

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Guardino and Snyder, “The Tea Party and the Crisis of Neoliberalism.”

economic motives—55 percent said either the economy or jobs were the most important issue facing America—but they were less interested in these factors than the general population. Despite being more pessimistic about the economy, Tea Partiers consistently polled at lower levels of interest in economic factors, and instead focused their anger towards a liberal government and the Obama administration. Only one percent of Tea Partiers approved of Congress, and 24 percent thought that Obama was more to blame for the budget deficit than George W. Bush (as compared to 17 percent and 8 percent, respectively).⁶⁵

Meanwhile, 73 percent of responders stated that they were either somewhat or very conservative and 64 percent received their news on politics and current events from Fox News. When asked whether they perceived shows by Glenn Beck and Sean Hannity as more news or entertainment, 64 percent of Tea Partiers responded with either news or both, as compared to 29 percent for the population as a whole.⁶⁶ In the months surrounding the CBS/New York Times poll (which took place over six months, from April to December 2010) Hannity's discussions on television mirrored the responses given by Tea Party supporters. Issues of racism were frequently turned on their head as Hannity pushed the narrative that black-against-white racism was the real problem. When talking with a panel about comments by Bill Maher—who stated, “it’s not true that... all Republicans are racist. That would be silly and wrong. But nowadays, if you are racist, you’re probably a Republican”—Hannity turned the blame for institutional racism on Democrats, arguing that the Republican Party was simply “full of individuals who want to protect their freedom,”

⁶⁵ “New York Times/CBS News Poll: National Survey of Tea Party Supporters.”

⁶⁶ Ibid. Perhaps more striking was the result that only 8 percent of Tea Partiers responded “Don’t know” to this question, as compared to 23 percent of the electorate, which would indicate that Tea Partiers were much more likely to have watched these programs than other citizens.

whereas the Democratic Party “forced” the black community into “broken schools.”⁶⁷ When discussing immigration, Hannity and his guests (often former Governor of Alaska and Tea Party sweetheart Sarah Palin) focused on the increased strain on law enforcement and on the economy placed by undocumented immigrants, despite resounding evidence—both anecdotal and statistical—to the contrary.⁶⁸ When guests on his show would try to point this out, as Katherine Culliton did when she referenced Alan Greenspan’s statement that “major sectors of the U.S. economy would collapse without the current immigrant labor,” Hannity would counter that the immigrants were dangerous, unproductive, and should not be rewarded for breaking the law with a path to citizenship.⁶⁹ Coverage of Mexicans focused instead on the violence brought by gangs and cartels. In one conversation, guest Robert Clark argued that because “illegal” Latin American immigrants came from violent situations “they were very used to violence. So a lot of violence was very natural for them. And they were able to engage in that very regularly.”⁷⁰

Hannity was unrelenting with his characterization of Obama as a socialist tyrant. His nickname for the President was “the Anointed One,” which referenced both the belief in Obama as an authoritarian who invalidly ascended to power. Press Secretary Robert Gibbs was the “propaganda minister.” Michelle Bachmann, while on Hannity, stated, “the main thing right now is the government takeover of private industry and we’re seeing it in one

⁶⁷ “Bill Maher Plays the Race Card,” Text.Article, *Fox News*, (May 4, 2010), <http://www.foxnews.com/transcript/2010/05/04/bill-maher-plays-race-card-785419470.html>.

⁶⁸ Rupert, “Reports Find That Immigrants Commit Less Crime than US-Born Citizens.”

⁶⁹ “Loosening U.S. Immigration Policy.”

⁷⁰ “The War Next Door: Transnational Gangs Terrorizing American Cities,” Text.Article, *Fox News*, (August 13, 2010), <http://www.foxnews.com/transcript/2010/08/13/war-next-door-transnational-gangs-terrorizing-american-cities.html>.

sector after another.”⁷¹ Hannity and Newt Gingrich agreed that Obama was “the most radical president in American history.”⁷² Obama’s legislative agenda was described as being “rammed through Congress against the will of the people,” and the administration as a whole was a “corrupt” result of Obama’s background in the Chicago political machine.⁷³ Obama had ridden the “conveyer belt from socialist activism to community organizing to electoral politics.” This characterization was part of a larger story Hannity and fellow conservatives pushed, that Obama’s secret socialist ties were a part of a grander scheme to “realign the Democratic and Republican parties along class lines,” with the end goal of creating a “populous anti-business movement on the left” that would “surely gravitate toward increasingly socialist ideas.”⁷⁴

Finally, Hannity repeatedly chastised Muslims and offered outsized criticisms of particular topics that degraded the Islamic faith. His extensive coverage of a proposal to build a mosque on the site of Ground Zero focused solely on the “radical” views of Imam Rauf, the religious leader behind the proposal, arguing that he supported terrorist organizations and blamed the United States for the 9/11 attacks.⁷⁵ Rauf instead made the point that past U.S. aggressions in the Middle East in the 1990s were most likely responsible for garnering a retaliatory strike by Osama Bin Laden. Coverage spanned weeks, often

⁷¹ “Do Democrats Want to Silence Dissent? Rep. Bachmann Responds,” Text.Article, *Fox News*, (April 20, 2010), <http://www.foxnews.com/transcript/2010/04/20/do-democrats-want-to-silence-dissent-rep-bachmann-responds.html>.

⁷² “Democrats’ Radical Hold on Washington,” Text.Article, *Fox News*, (April 26, 2010), <http://www.foxnews.com/transcript/2010/04/26/democrats-radical-hold-on-washington.html>.

⁷³ “What’s Next for Obama’s Radical Agenda?,” Text.Article, *Fox News*, (March 30, 2010), <http://www.foxnews.com/transcript/2010/03/30/what-next-for-obama-radical-agenda.html>; “Democrats’ Radical Hold on Washington.”

⁷⁴ “‘Radical-in-Chief’ Details Obama’s Socialist Convictions,” Text.Article, *Fox News*, (October 18, 2010), <http://www.foxnews.com/transcript/2010/10/18/radical-chief-details-obamas-socialist-convictions.html>.

⁷⁵ “Haunting Words From Imam Behind Ground Zero Mosque,” Text.Article, *Fox News*, (August 6, 2010), <http://www.foxnews.com/transcript/2010/08/06/haunting-words-imam-behind-ground-zero-mosque.html>.

focusing on the belief that Rauf wanted to bring Sharia Law to the United States, another theme of Hannity's coverage of Islamic issues. Much like the coverage of Mexican immigrants bringing crime to the United States, Hannity stoked fear that an increased Muslim population in the United States would lead to a degradation of American values and that Sharia Law would spread across the nation. According to Hannity, proponents of Sharia, like Rauf, wanted a second judiciary with the authority to circumvent the Supreme Court and the Constitution.⁷⁶ Hannity praised an Oklahoma law that would ban its courts from considering Sharia Law as a preemptive strike against this apparent inevitability. Indeed, Oklahoma's Governor falsely stated on Hannity that there "have been some efforts I believe to explore bringing that to America."⁷⁷

Donald Trump began his run for President with the same inflammatory statements that would characterize his campaign for a year and half. However, the points that he would make, and the platforms that he would run on, were not new to those who had been tuning in to Hannity for the previous 6 years. His statement that Mexico was not "sending their best," and that "they're bringing drugs, they're bringing crime, they're rapists," was simply an extension of the points Hannity had been stating for years.⁷⁸ He extended those same descriptions to Muslim immigrants as well when he postulated that these "dangerous" people could be coming from "all over, South and Latin America and probably, probably from the Middle East."⁷⁹ Radical Islamic terrorism was taking over the Middle East, which had been destabilized by an incompetent government who went to war in Iraq, something

⁷⁶ "Oklahoma Lawmaker Wants Sharia Law Banned," Text.Article, *Fox News*, (June 21, 2010), <http://www.foxnews.com/transcript/2010/06/21/oklahoma-lawmaker-wants-shariah-law-banned-1466064483.html>.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ C-SPAN, *Donald Trump Presidential Campaign Announcement Full Speech (C-SPAN)*, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=apjNfkysjbM>.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

Trump wouldn't have done because he had foreseen the implications years in advance.⁸⁰ Only third on Trump's list of problems in America was a struggling economy, which again was scapegoated on foreign agents. While claiming that unemployment was fifteen to twenty points higher than government agencies stated, Trump argued that the reason no jobs could be found was because "China has our jobs, and Mexico has our jobs, they all have our jobs."⁸¹ It was this last claim that earned Trump his "populist" tag, as his supporters were fed up with poor job growth in particular industries. An anti-trade rhetoric contradicted the stance of economic conservatives, and led to the declaration that Trump was running in the Republican primary despite being more of a third-party candidate.

Trump's numbers in the primary suggest a different story, one that labels Trump as the poster-child of the "cable conservative" movement and situates his supporters not as grassroots populists but rather as followers of a right-wing media establishment. Trump's fiery words earned him a small gain in the first few weeks after his announcement, not unlike upticks seen by Republican candidates in both 2012 and 2016 like Herman Cain, Ben Carson, Michelle Bachmann, and Rick Perry. However, Trump received a major boost after the shooting of Kate Steinle by an undocumented immigrant who had been deported five times prior. The fact that Steinle was killed in San Francisco—a sanctuary city since 1989—made the murder a national story and helped put the spotlight on Trump's provocative claims from just a few weeks earlier. After looking like he might level out at eight percent in the polls—a relatively reasonable assumption, given a historically crowded primary field—Trump skyrocketed to 24 percent in a month, and climbed an additional five points in August before peaking at 29.4 percent on September 11, 2015, according to poll-tracking

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Ibid.

data by Nate Silver's website *FiveThirtyEight*.⁸² His numbers were the same on December 2, 2015, when 14 people were killed in a terrorist attack in San Bernardino, California. Six days later, Trump called for a "complete shutdown of Muslims entering the United States until our country's representatives can figure out what the hell is going on."⁸³ After the proposal, Trump received a crucial six-point bump in his numbers, bringing him to 36 percent and allowing Trump to pick up enough delegates to slowly grind away the competition and win the Republican primary. In each case, Trump's ascension in the polls was not due to his economic message, but rather to his social and cultural rhetoric.

During the same periods in which Trump saw upticks in his poll numbers, the U.S. economy saw signs of growth. From July to September of 2015, the U.S. economy added over 500,000 jobs, and saw the unemployment rate drop from 5.25 to 5.0. In December 2015 and January 2016, the next period of Trump's ascension, the economy added an additional 390,000 jobs and saw the unemployment rate fall to 4.9 percent.⁸⁴ There was in fact no correlation between the economic outlook and Trump's poll numbers. The only evidence that Trump's poll numbers were connected to the economy suggest that a worse economy hurt him. From the period of March 2015 to March 2017, the smallest month of job growth occurred in September of 2015 (where the economy added 100,000 jobs). September of 2015 also marks the steepest drop in Trump's primary poll numbers: he fell three points from mid September to early October, marking the greatest decline in his polls for the entire primary season.⁸⁵

⁸² Nate Silver, "National Republican Primary Polls," *FiveThirtyEight*, January 26, 2015, <http://projects.fivethirtyeight.com/election-2016/national-primary-polls/republican/>.

⁸³ C-SPAN, *Donald Trump on Muslims (C-SPAN)*, accessed April 8, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-sz0KY-3PbQ>.

⁸⁴ "The Employment Situation - March 2017" (Bureau of Labor Statistics, April 7, 2017).

⁸⁵ Silver, "National Republican Primary Polls"; "The Employment Situation - March 2017."

To the extent that Trump's message was economic, it was nostalgic, backward, and scapegoated the wrong characters. Unlike the populists of the 1890s, who sought policies designed not only to keep farmers out of debt, but also to face the changing economic landscape head on by pushing for job development plans that would help the agrarian sector fit in with the times, Trump's message was one that embraced policies and economic sectors of a bygone era. More importantly, though, Trump's economic platform was one that embraced the same idea that had been pursued by the likes of Hannity for years, that the government was not operating in the best interests the people. It did not seek legitimate solutions to real problems faced by Middle America, but rather sought to validate the feelings of disaffection that had been fostered for years and acted as proxy wars for other traditional Republican talking points. Arguments to bring back coal can be seen through an environmental lens. Rather than being a statement on jobs, this effort was in reality a manifestation of the ideological debate on climate change. His insistence on "clean coal" frames the issue in this environmental context. But, as the *New York Times* pointed out, coal was in decline less because of environmental regulations by the Obama administration than its failure to be economically feasible, as cheaper natural gas and renewable energies took up market shares. If Trump's message was truly about the economy, he would be pushing for clean energy jobs, which already outnumber coal and gas jobs five to one and have a much clearer path for growth given their economic efficiencies.⁸⁶ The same could be said about manufacturing, where Trump used easy nationalistic targets to ferment anger, rather than focusing on the true problem. While scapegoating the same cast of characters as those besmirched by Fox, Trump ignored that 85 percent of the 5.6 million manufacturing jobs

⁸⁶ Natasha Geiling, "Clean Energy Employs More People than Fossil Fuels in Nearly Every U.S. State," *ThinkProgress*, March 27, 2017, <https://thinkprogress.org/clean-energy-more-jobs-than-fossil-fuels-32f615915399>.

lost between 2000 and 2010 were the result of technological changes, not outsourcing.⁸⁷ Time and again, Trump's economic messages were only extensions of the same social and cultural stances that had been calling cards of parts of the Tea Party and that had developed support after being repeated by Hannity and other Fox News anchors for well over a decade. In this most crucial sense, the Trump movement is opposite to the populists, who framed their social and cultural discussions within their economic message. Trump framed his economic message with the same socio-cultural discussion that had radicalized the right-wing portion of the American polity for years, if not decades.

The slogan "Make America Great Again" captured Trump's "soft side" message. It is immediately nostalgic, harkening back to the "good old days." What it doesn't tell us, however, is what Trump's movement believes made the old days good. A "Trump-as-populist" interpretation argues that it is a reminder of a time when the United States dominated industry. Trump's rhetoric on jobs—namely, the type of jobs he would like to bring back—certainly seems to back this up. However, connecting Trump to the socially and culturally motivated wings of the Tea Party show a different meaning behind his "Again." Lisa Disch argued in "The Tea Party: A 'White Citizenship' Movement," that the Tea Party was "a constituency formed by the powerful framework for in-group/out-group politics that is an inheritance of liberal social welfare policy, and that has grouped individuals by race."⁸⁸ Therefore, the interpretation of "Again" can be seen as a call back to when the Federal Government worked almost exclusively for *white* Americans, and when America itself looked and acted more white. Again, while Tea Partiers supported a smaller government, they still believed that the services benefiting themselves—Social Security and Medicare—should be

⁸⁷ "Most US Manufacturing Jobs Lost to Technology, Not Trade," *Financial Times*, accessed February 25, 2017, <https://www.ft.com/content/dec677c0-b7e6-11e6-ba85-95d1533d9a62>.

⁸⁸ Disch, "The Tea Party: A 'White Citizenship' Movement?," 134.

kept at the same levels.⁸⁹ This sentiment was captured in the seemingly ironic sign held at Tea Party rallies stating, “Keep your government hands off my Medicare.”⁹⁰ As Disch notes, this was not poetic ignorance, but rather a fundamental characteristic of the Tea Party: that the government should be limited by the extent to which its services help only white citizens. Trump echoed this message. Jon Lovett, former speechwriter for Barack Obama, summed up Trump’s attractiveness to the Tea Party, when he stated: “Donald Trump appealed to the white working class by reminding them that they were white.”⁹¹

Conclusion

It is not enough to analyze the makeup or the goals of a particular movement, whether it is political, social, economic, or some combination of them all, in order to determine what term they fall under. A movement is not populist because it is made up of “the people,” or because it is grassroots, or because it wants some form of economic revitalization that emphasizes particular industries. These are characteristics of populism—they are necessary, but they are not sufficient. Particularly in the United States, where a defined, reasonably self-contained populist movement occurred, it is fair to assess further movements as either populist or not by whether they fit the mold of the original movement. If for no other reason, failing to do so will devoid the word of any meaning. It is not enough for a populist movement to be one brought about by “the people” because we already have a term for that: grassroots. So necessarily, populism must have additional characteristics that differentiate it from other forms of political expression.

⁸⁹ “New York Times/CBS News Poll: National Survey of Tea Party Supporters”; Disch, “The Tea Party: A ‘White Citizenship’ Movement?,” 136.

⁹⁰ Disch, “The Tea Party: A ‘White Citizenship’ Movement?,” 133.

⁹¹ Jon Favreau and Jon Lovett, *Think Globalist, Act Localist*, Pod Save America, May 8, 2017, accessed May 8, 2017.

The populist tradition in the United States is long and complicated, but returning to the 1880s and 1890s offers clarification. In an era of rapid industrialization and urbanization, a movement started mainly by agrarian workers sought to return power to the people. Crucially, they believed that this could be achieved through an economic policy that expanded the money supply, enabling farmers trapped in debt to pay off their loans; an expansion of federal powers that would effectively nationalize several key industries, such as railroads and telegraph lines, with the goal of creating some semblance of equality between the cities and the agrarian sectors; and an education system that reached all portions of the country so that those raised on farms would have the opportunity to earn a quality education that would allow them to keep up with the rapidly changing world. These views were formed when dissatisfied farmers met to discuss political and economic issues, and once solidified, the populists turned towards an evolving media landscape to spread their gospel. Social movements were included or excluded to the extent that they could be folded into these steadfast beliefs. At best, issues of gender and race were ambiguous, as prejudices balanced against a “big tent” atmosphere that accepted any disaffected group that sought a party that spoke for them, as long as they signed on to the main tenants of American populism. Additionally, to the extent that religion played a role in populist rhetoric, it would seem that this was more a cause of correlation than causation, as the areas of strong populist support were also the epicenters of evangelical fervor in the United States.

The Tea Party and Trump campaign certainly resembles American populism in certain elements. Large factions of its supporters come from industrial work, which is roughly comparable to the agrarian sector of the nineteenth century, and it has at least the arguable appearance of being the result of a grassroots movement. While cries for a reduced deficit and stronger economic development are certainly key to these movements, they do

not make either populist. These are the long-term economic goals of every political party. How they seek to achieve these goals only differentiate them more from American populism, as calls for a smaller government with less control on industry and a call for a return to a previous era in American manufacturing operate as a polar opposite to the positions of American populism. Further, and more importantly, the Tea Party and Trump movement have been shown to be marginally less interested in the economy than the average adult in the United States. Instead, their concern is with social and cultural matters. While can see the roots of Trump's movement in polling data of the Tea Party as early as 2010, the roots of the Tea Party sit much earlier, in the late 1990s and early 2000s when Fox News began to radicalize the republican base on a series of social and cultural issues. These focused largely on immigration and terror, and while coded language was used on television, Trump took it to another level by explicitly calling Latin Americans and Muslims "rapists" and "murderers."⁹²

Trump's base did not want to take "their" country back from big-money elites, but rather from Latin American immigrants who they thought brought crime and drugs and from Muslim's who they believe would institute Sharia Law were they given the chance. Trump's economic message was rooted within these nativist ideals and the additional conversation around climate change. It is no surprise that Sean Hannity outperformed Bill O'Reilly and Megyn Kelly frequently during the election cycle as he unofficially but not so subtly endorsed Donald Trump for President during the campaign; Views Hannity pushed on a nightly basis acted as the basis for Trump in the first place. Trump's movement was not

⁹² C-SPAN, *Donald Trump Presidential Campaign Announcement Full Speech (C-SPAN)*.

made up of populists.⁹³ Rather, it was a movement of “cable conservatives,” voters who turned their political disaffection towards immigrants and Muslims after they were portrayed as America’s antagonists by right-wing cable news. These motivating factors were illuminated by Trump’s two large gains in the polls, which came directly after violent acts by an undocumented immigrant and two Islamic terrorists, while his numbers were largely unaffected by economic news.

The words we use matter, particular when dealing with issues such as who might be the next President of the United States. While certainly not the only factor, the label given to Trump as a “populist” almost undoubtedly helped him win the election. Bernie Sanders famously beat his polls by as much as 25 points in the Michigan primary, carried Wisconsin easily, and held strong in Pennsylvania. And as Postel noted, Sanders comes much closer to truly characterizing a populist and was rightly given that title.⁹⁴ Trump instead embodies the opponent of a populist. He does not fight for the words of William Jennings Bryan, but for those of William McKinley. He wants a reduced role of government; more lenient, business friendly policies; and believes in tariffs as a means of increasing production. More importantly, he does not lead an economic movement, but a social and cultural one. His aforementioned economic stances are only manifestations of nativist policies that scapegoat American problems on Latin Americans and Muslims from the Middle East. Still, Trump was incorrectly labeled as a populist, connecting him with Sanders in the minds of voters. We may never know if this comparison tipped the election, but there is certainly evidence that it did. This is not to say that the outcome was inherently a good or bad thing. But if the

⁹³ Maxwell Tani, “Sean Hannity Sees His Biggest Ratings in Years amid a Wave of Trumpism,” *Business Insider*, accessed April 11, 2017, <http://www.businessinsider.com/sean-hannity-ratings-trump-election-2016-11>.

⁹⁴ Charles Postel, “The American Historian: If Trump and Sanders Are Both Populists, What Does Populist Mean?,” *The American Historian*, accessed February 9, 2017,

words we use are going to affect our most sacred political process, then they should at least be right.

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