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1. Introduction

1   The theme of "change" is one of the most common slogans bandied about in U.S. elections, by both Republicans and Democrats, and the 2016 presidential race was no different in that regard. The difference was the greater degree to which the idea resonated with voters, including new ones, making for an actual *election of change* rather than serving as a mere rhetorical move. The term "election of change" is particularly relevant here, as it is used to describe sharp shifts in government caused by people rebelling against the current establishment. Historically speaking, such elections are marked by large alterations in voting patterns (e.g., 1932, 1980, 2008), and this was also the case in 2016, as seen by the dramatic mobilization of new voters in the primary season. Involving much more than just electoral changes, however, this presidential race also reflected a transformation in how people saw the candidates and the United States overall. As such, the election of change in this case can also be defined as a collision of worldviews due to a rise of the popular, including expressions of populism and popular culture in competing metanarratives.

2   To understand how metanarratives functioned in the election, it is necessary to open the scope of analysis to an interdisciplinary discussion, integrating aspects of history, political philosophy (e.g., teleology), media studies (especially social media), discourse analysis, and visual semiotics, in order to encompass such diverse data as electoral statistics, emerging campaign strategies, and elements of U.S. popular culture. Each of these angles tells an important part of the story—filling in different key pieces of the puzzle, so to speak—but the larger goal of this article is to examine their respective influences. For example, online media and memes had a strong impact on the campaigns

and on voters' perceptions, starting during the primaries and continuing until the general in November, but the attention drawn to memes was also very important. The same could be said of the meta-level discussion about the candidates' competing rhetorical approaches, the leanings of the media (e.g., the disproportionate attention given to Donald Trump), and the repeated use of the term "populism" to describe the general mood. In each of these cases, there was a self-reflexive element and even antagonistic quality: memes played on other memes; media pundits located their version of truth in relation to competing outlets, inviting analysts to question the value of news itself (e.g., "fake news"); and the candidates not only deconstructed their opponents, but were criticized (especially Trump) for the way in which they did it. The multiple agents—including the "audience" of voters—involved in analyses of the race thus sought to privilege their own interpretations, positioning themselves in relation to the construction of a story which included heroes, villains, and nothing less at stake than the fate of the land. Like many other stories, the plot of this one was overwhelmingly built around the idea of change, yet in this case it was not merely a tired trope or formulaic slogan. Functioning in a dynamic way, change ended up not only being part of the story but also included contestations over how the story should be written. Thus, "changing faces of change" also hints at how actors framed themselves while simultaneously being highly aware of their participatory significance: perhaps more than ever before, this election largely took place in a mirror. It is in light of this self-reflexivity that one can speak of metanarrative, which both critiqued the artificiality of the U.S. political process (as constructed) and sought new forms of overarching meaning.

3   The shift in the term "change" in the 2016 election can be seen as a perfect storm of causes and conditions, both tangible and ideological. Indeed, the political value that people accorded to popular narratives competed with real-world concerns. Among other things, the soft causes behind the storm included the use of new forms of media to create these popular narratives, the pervasive and participatory nature of online technology to engage in and contest them, and the ability of the candidates to effectively speak to—or define—the things (rather than issues per se) that resonated most strongly with the electorate. The hard conditions included a dissatisfaction with government (only 27% were satisfied),[i] a historical lack of trust in government (at an all-time low of 19%)[ii] and mainstream media (all-time low of 40%),[iii] a significant decline in quality of life and net worth among the middle and lower classes (down 60% for the latter over the previous decade),[iv] and a growing cultural divide between urban and rural populations. As outliers from the establishment, candidates like Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders took full advantage of all these, offering a new narrative and painting themselves within it. But they also benefitted from existing fractures in both parties, which had been building for some time. Before moving on to a discussion of shifting representations and narratives, therefore, it is first necessary to briefly contextualize how the time was ripe for change.

2. Fractures in the Façade and Outsiders Taking the Stage

4   At the time of the last election in 2012, Eldon Eisenbach warned that the Democratic Party's lack of ideological force in the preceding decades made it vulnerable to the seemingly cohesive agenda of the Republican party, movement conservatism, and the activism of the Tea Party (formed in 2009).[v] At the outset of the 2016 election, this may

have seemed like the greatest threat to the Democrats. Yet approximately twenty years ago, the philosopher Richard Rorty identified another danger when writing critically about "the decline of the American Left": "The nonsuburban electorate will decide that the system has failed and start looking around for a strongman to vote for—someone willing to assure them that, once he is elected, the smug bureaucrats, tricky lawyers, overpaid bond salesmen, and postmodernist professors will no longer be calling the shots."[vi] This quote was cited widely during the election as a prescient warning of Trump, and it is poignant enough to be included here. But perhaps more important is what lies behind it, namely, Rorty's identification of another vulnerability of the Left—a split between what he identified as its progressive side and a "cultural" side.[vii] This election saw that fault line crack wide open. In very general terms, Sanders sought to push the Democratic party back to core economic issues by appealing to both existing and new voters with his progressive platform, but the Democratic National Committee (DNC) chose instead to rely on its perceived base, including "marginalized others" attracted over the previous decades, while also engaging explicitly in culture wars. Last but not least among the splits in the Democratic Party, it is also necessary to contrast progressivism and the more recent tradition of neoliberalism championed by Hillary Clinton.

5   The Grand Old Party (GOP) would undergo its own ideological crisis when Trump won the nomination. In his review of George Hawley's *Right-Wing Critics of American Conservatism*, Samuel Goldman explains, "Of all the illusions Trump has dispelled, however, none is more significant than the illusion of the conservative movement. Rather than being the dominant force in the Republican Party, conservatives, Trump revealed, are just another pressure group. And not an especially large one. In state after state, voters indicated that they did not care much about conservative orthodoxy on the economy, foreign policy, or what used to be called family values."[viii] Thus, while the GOP's ideological crisis did involve competing visions of different types of Republican candidates (e.g., liberals/ moderates, "somewhat conservatives," very conservative evangelicals, and very conservative seculars), it also reflected a decline in the importance of ideology itself, as signaled by the voters' willingness to instead accept Trump's messaging on other aspects.[ix]

6   The existence of fractures in the two parties was known prior to the election, but in the beginning it was not clear that they were so acute. This became more evident with the passing of many long months, during which the outsiders Trump and Sanders moved inexorably forward—in the Republican pack and against the presumptive Democrat nominee. The length of the election season gave their movements time to grow, as well as time for the public to gain familiarity with them. This happened in stages, as shown by a set of photos of Bernie Sanders, first at a local event in June 2015 at the house of a Hollywood actress (Figure 1) and then in a stadium packed to overflowing with Sanders supporters nine months later (Figure 2).

7   Figure 1. Sanders campaigning in the yard of actress Mimi Kennedy in Van Nuys, California (June 20, 2015). Photo credit (still frame from video): Charles Fredricks and Lionel Heredia.

8   Figure 2. Sanders at a rally with 10,000 people in Madison, Wisconsin (March 26, 2016). Bernie Sanders campaign photo.[x]

9   At the beginning of the presidential race, Donald Trump was similarly perceived as a non-contender. An *NBC/Wall Street Journal* survey conducted in March 2015 (before he announced his candidacy) found that only 23% of Republicans could see voting for him. Four months later, that number had doubled. By January 2016, it had risen to 65%.[xi] A scenario that many could never have imagined was becoming a reality. For both candidates, a shift in perception of what was possible led to further growth. This feedback loop made for an explosive situation.

3. Strategic Shifts in Representation

10   Both candidates would not have gotten as far as they did without going outside the traditional bases of their parties.[xii] In their quest for new voters, they employed conventional techniques but also exploited new ones. Campaigns typically use a range of techniques to find and register fresh faces, including door-to-door canvassing, signage, phone banks, events, rallies, and mass media, each of which offer different degrees of conversion success. But the how-to aspects of targeting, covered elsewhere in great detail,[xiii] are not core to the current discussion here. More applicable to the discussion of change is the organic process by means of which the grassroots movements formed and how in turn they spread like wildfire.

11   First and foremost in this regard is new media, which has been recognized as a powerful means of fueling populism and driving increased voter engagement since the dawn of the Internet.[xiv] Improvements in technology and increased networking of virtual communities over the succeeding two decades have only accentuated its strength. Social media serves as a mode of communication between candidates and their supporters, approximating a direct social bond instead of messaging filtered through mainstream media. This was very important for the Sanders campaign, considering that the television networks mentioned Trump twice as much as Clinton and nearly ten times more than the Vermont senator.[xv] In addition, sharing functions can provide dramatically increased numbers of impressions for a single post or photo or tweet. Trump and Sanders used social media to great effect, not only in terms of activity but engagement. In a snapshot taken late in the primary season (April 4 – May 4, 2016), Crowdbabble showed how much they were succeeding on social media compared to Clinton: on Facebook, Trump led with a 218% engagement rate, nearly twice that of Clinton; on Twitter, Sanders was particularly strong, with nearly five times more retweets than Clinton and twice as many as Trump; and on Instagram, particularly popular among Millennials, Sanders and Trump were virtually tied with nearly a 50% margin over Clinton.[xvi]

12   Online media also disrupts other traditional models of political engagement. For example, in its fundraising efforts the Sanders campaign was able to leverage a long-tail movement. This term, coined in 2004 by Chris Anderson of *WIRED* magazine, describes the displacement of "mainstream" content, determined by marketers and served to consumers, by niche content that people really want. Companies that use this strategy are organized to listen to consumers, but they also rely on user-driven innovation and community-building with large numbers of people. The idea was first used in a political sense in the 2008 presidential election,[xvii] primarily to describe the ability of a grassroots campaign to raise large amounts of money via the Internet. This happened again in 2016 with an even greater degree of success. With nearly seven million individual campaign contributions, Sanders—or, more accurately, his supporters—demolished the previous record of 2.2 million set by President Obama four years before.[xviii] Trump set a new record for Republicans with 2.6 million contributions.[xix]

13   Furthermore, as suggested by the sociologist Nick Couldry, social media activism can support negative reactions against the establishment: drawing attention, amplifying rhetoric and applying strong pressure on institutional actors.[xx] This was an undeniably important factor in the 2016 election. However, on the downside (or what Couldry calls the demand-side), increased connectivity comes at a cost: how much time people have to

analyze all of the data in their feeds and the common tendency of people to believe that they are an expert. These two phenomena fed the propagation of "fake news" and extreme ideological positions, informed by alt-right networks like *Breitbart News* and InfoWars (streamed via YouTube) and, alternatively, by fly-by-night "liberal" websites. More often than not, voters were taken in by these: as many as 84% of Republicans and 71% of Democrats were likely to view fake news stories as accurate.[xxi] In many cases, the news bordered on conspiracy theory or went beyond the pale. The demonization of Clinton ranged from charges of involvement in a child-sex ring (according to fake news sites, the candidate and the chairman of her campaign, John Podesta, engaged in pedophilia and Satanic rituals; on Reddit boards and Twitter, this rumor was spread under the handle of #pizzagate) to stories of assassinations carried out by her and her husband. These drove the Trump-supporter Alex Jones to rant, "When I think about all the children Hillary Clinton has personally murdered and chopped up and raped, I have zero fear standing up against her. [...] I just can't hold back the truth anymore."[xxii]

14   As sensationalist as these tales were, they were incredibly viral. And despite their odd inversion of reality, these politically motivated negotiations of "truth" carried weight among certain segments of the population—particularly a younger demographic—bringing new voters into the ranks. In the same month as the RNC, the audience of InfoWars swelled to 40 million unique visitors a month[xxiii] and *Breitbart News* rose to claim 9% of the entire general news audience, with 18 million visitors.[xxiv] The demand for change among Trump supporters can thus be seen in how they turned the dial away from mainstream media, which they distrusted. Truth was made relative, employed when and where it fit, and in echo chambers led to little cognitive dissonance. Those who were crucifying Clinton for being the great #liar did not seem to care that Trump was constantly changing stories and backtracking. In his case, it only proved the rule to the old adage, "all press is good press," as he himself boasted in response to his wife Melania's plagiarism of Michelle Obama's speech during the Republican National Convention.[xxv]

15   Often crossing the line between truth and "post-truth"—defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as "relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief" (and added as its word of 2016, based on a 2000% increase on its usage from the previous year [xxvi])—Trump was a storyteller whose tale featured him as the main star. It was not hard for his audience to engage in suspension of disbelief. After all, he was the host and producer of a reality show which the audience knew to only be quasi-real.[xxvii] Set in a political context, this dynamic evoked the famous warning of Hannah Arendt, "The ideal subject of totalitarian rule is not the convinced Nazi or the dedicated communist, but people for whom the distinction between fact and fiction, true and false, no longer exists."[xxviii]

16   Hollywood has a peculiar phrase, "to jump the shark." It is used to describe when completely unbelievable elements are included in a story in order to spice things up for a tired audience. Based on the infamous episode of *Happy Days* when Fonzie literally jumped a shark on water-skis,[xxix] this device is commonly taken as an indication that a movie or TV series has hit rock-bottom. During the election season, political commentators used the term in relation to Trump's increasingly controversial remarks, debating how low he could go before his campaign was irrevocably sabotaged. But the inversion of reality and fiction meant that there was no limit. Trump was larger than life, being more of a caricature than an ordinary person operative in the same world as his supporters.

17   In line with their ideal of a populist champion fighting for them against the system, supporters of both Trump and Sanders generated visual representations of heroes and actively disseminated political cartoons with that theme. Images of Trump typically presented figures characterized by extreme strength and invulnerability, even featuring rage and martial motifs (see Figures 3 and 4 with Trump Photoshopped onto Marvel's Incredible Hulk and as a positively caricatured superhero).

18   Figure 3. Meme of Trump as the Incredible Hulk from *The Avengers*.[xxx]

19   Figure 4. "Triumphant Trump" by Ben Garrison (GrrrGraphics). Permission granted by the artist.[xxxi]

20   The "warrior" motif fit Trump well, reflecting his ability to resist attacks. Set in a narrative context, it also provided him with justifications for his more boorish behavior, whether it was aggressive (e.g., inciting supporters to violence at rallies) or sexually inappropriate (e.g., his lewd remarks about groping women or his sexualizing comments about his daughter, Ivanka). For example, although it may be crudely put, fans of Conan the Barbarian might not begrudge their hero a toss in the hay with a wench on his way back from battle. They allow it because the story is not real, because it accords with a certain archetype, and perhaps even because it expresses an impulse that they themselves have sublimated. Thus, following in the footsteps of Arnold Schwarzenegger, who successfully ran as governor of California in 2003, Trump directly combined populism and popular culture.

21   Contrasted against this narrative of "might makes right" was the "right makes right" of Bernie Sanders, whose supporters framed him as the wise, old man archetype or superhero (see Figures 5 and 6 with Sanders as DC's Superman and assorted characters from fantasy stories). Superman, of course, defends the "little guy" who has been increasingly marginalized and disempowered. Sages are commonly cast as outsiders, even loners, facing long odds in a fight for the common good; another one of their qualities is knowledge of the truth. This image went a long way with Millennials, who tend to have more trust issues than their older peers: only 19% say that most people can be trusted, compared to 31% of Gen-Xers and 40% of Baby Boomers.[xxxii] It could be argued, of course, that such portrayals of Sanders were done within the context of fantasy—no one expected that Gandalf or Superman was actually going to come and save them. And yet popular cultural symbols are embedded with powerful signifiers that deeply resonate with people, affecting how they approach the world, even politically. One need only look at the history

of propaganda, especially that of World War II, which employed both film and superhero comics to great effect.[xxxiii]

22   Figure 5. Meme of Sanders as Superman.[xxxiv]

23   Figure 6. Sanders compared to Albus Dumbledore (*Harry Potter*), Gandalf (*Lord of the Rings*), and Obi-Wan Kenobi (*Star Wars*).[xxxv]

24   Although the visual examples given here reflect only a limited selection of ways in which the candidates were perceived, they are valuable insofar that they also illustrate how the voters perceived themselves. So-called "Berners" tended to frame their struggle in moral terms, and through identification with their hero they were able to see themselves on the side of good. In light of such a highly polarized narrative, it is no wonder that many found it difficult to embrace Clinton or believed that Sanders lost his credibility when he went over to the "dark side" (by supporting her nomination at the DNC). They were part of the war of truth that had been waged in the election, and they felt personally affected by the perceived injustices dealt to their hero: voter suppression (e.g., the elimination of polling locations), registration purges (e.g., 120,000 in Brooklyn), fraud (e.g., indications of variances between vote totals and exit polls), and the machinations of the DNC (in specific states like Nevada and nationwide).[xxxvi] It is ironic that Sanders' supporters were treated as conspiracy theorists for raising these issues, given the post-truth environment in which Trump ultimately prevailed.

25   For their part, the Trump army followed the battle cry of their fearless leader, not just verbally but physically. If the attacks on Trump from the media and the Left only seemed to make him stronger in their eyes, it was in equal part due to his ability to portray himself as persecuted and the tendency of his supporters to see themselves as persecuted and stigmatized as well. Most important in their eyes was that he fought back, a culture warrior who would reclaim the territory lost in the name of political correctness. In this sense, Trump did not claim the moral high ground—certainly not in the way that the Moral Majority had (e.g., Reagan and Jerry Falwell casting liberals as hedonistic)—and in fact he renounced it. Changing the currency of how a candidate is valued, he upset the entire cultural economy, in the process opening the door for free expression, consequences be damned. Furthermore, because Trump did not feel the need to contain himself, his followers dared to push the limits, expressing their anger not just at rallies but in wider society. It was a profound shift that many of his followers—and perhaps even he himself—could not have previously anticipated or articulated, and yet, once it came, it aligned with their demand for change.

26   As catalysts of transformation, the elements discussed above can be seen driving a collision between politics and popular culture. For the sake of visualization, one can illustrate their relationship as a set of spheres (see Figure 7), each with their own specific contexts but also an area of crossover, encompassing dynamics affecting both political agents and their broader audience. In the context of 2016 as an election of change, this crossover area was especially in play, both implicitly and explicitly. Politicians struggled with traditional forms of representation and/or leveraged new models, based on shared cultural assumptions. Identity formation not only pertained to voters (i.e., how they would align themselves on Election Day), but also the candidates, as their constructed personae were impacted by reinterpretations (e.g., social media memes, such as those shown above) infused with references to popular culture. Mirrored perceptions of the election as show and elements of show business imported into the election made it a spectacle, leading to different types of expectations on the part of the voting "audience."
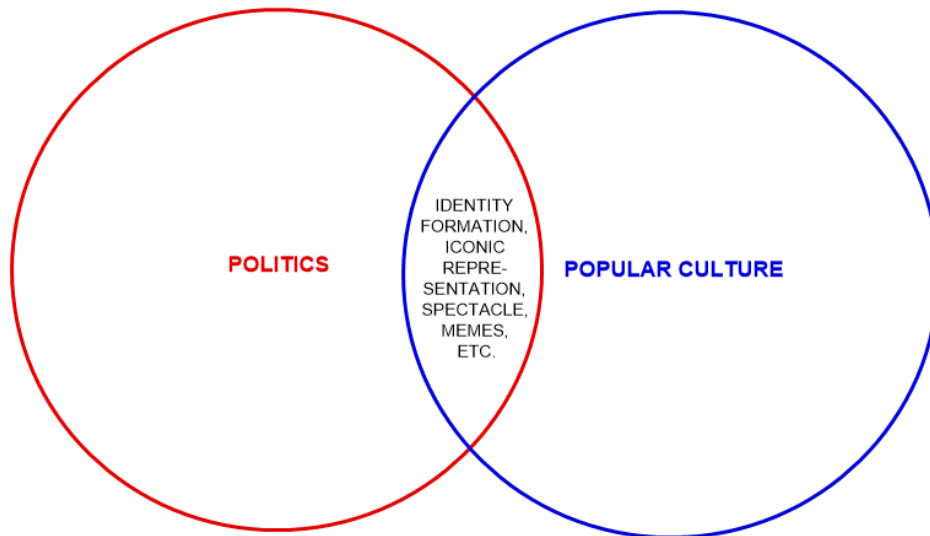
27   Figure 7. Crossover of political and popular cultural spheres.

28   Yet this this election also revealed how it is becoming more and more difficult to delineate where politics leaves off and popular culture picks up, or vice versa. The intersection between the two spheres appears as increasingly uncharted waters, in which pundits and political commentators—journalists and scholars alike—are trying to get their bearings. All too soon, such neat categorizations break down. For example, the category "popular culture" informs only one aspect of crossover of the popular with the political domain. To accurately reflect the fuller set of forces at work in the election, it is also necessary to add media in its various forms (e.g., mainstream media, alt-right media, social media), where the aforementioned competing elements of spectacle, identity formation, memes and so forth played out as well. This relationship can be represented with media as a type of filter—indeed, mediating—between voters and the political sphere. Traditionally, the influence has been top-down (see Figure 8).
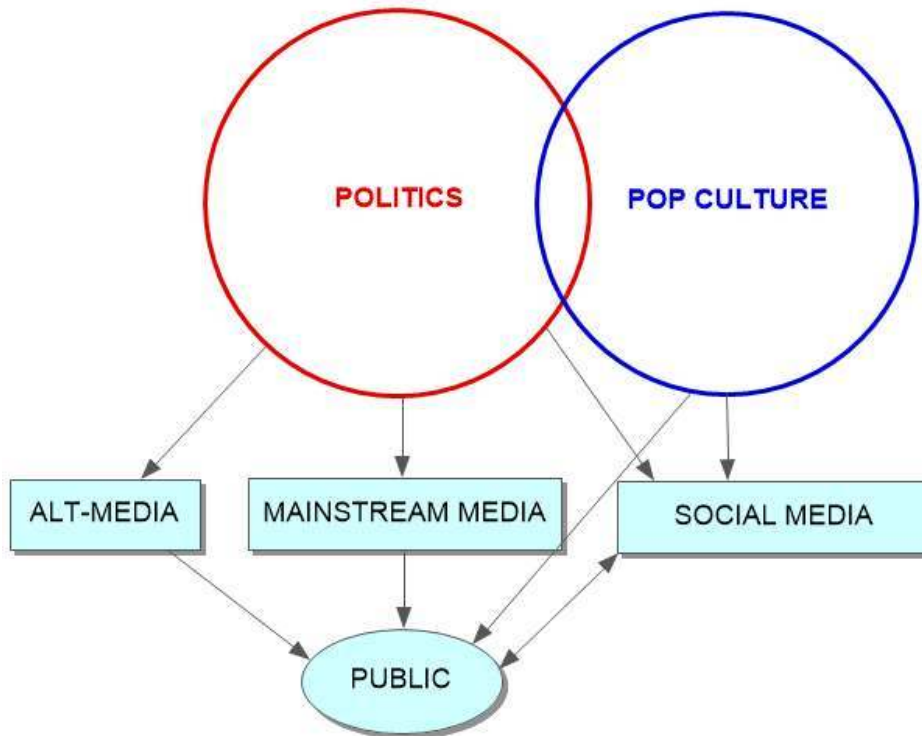
29 Figure 8. Traditional model of mediation between the political and public domains.

30 During the course of the 2016 election, however, there emerged game-changing factors that leveled the playing field and dramatically altered the conventions that politicians were used to: the increased importance of alternative forms of media, decreased trust in mainstream media, and the ubiquitous and participatory nature of social media. These manifested in different ways. For example, Bernie Sanders' campaign was grassroots-based, and the bottom-up power of social media was especially apparent; the effect of mainstream media was minimal (see Figure 9). Donald Trump also used "fan-based" social media to great advantage, and he capitalized on the traditional top-down attention of the mainstream media through sensationalism. In his case, the alt-right not only mediated his message, but informed it (see Figure 10).
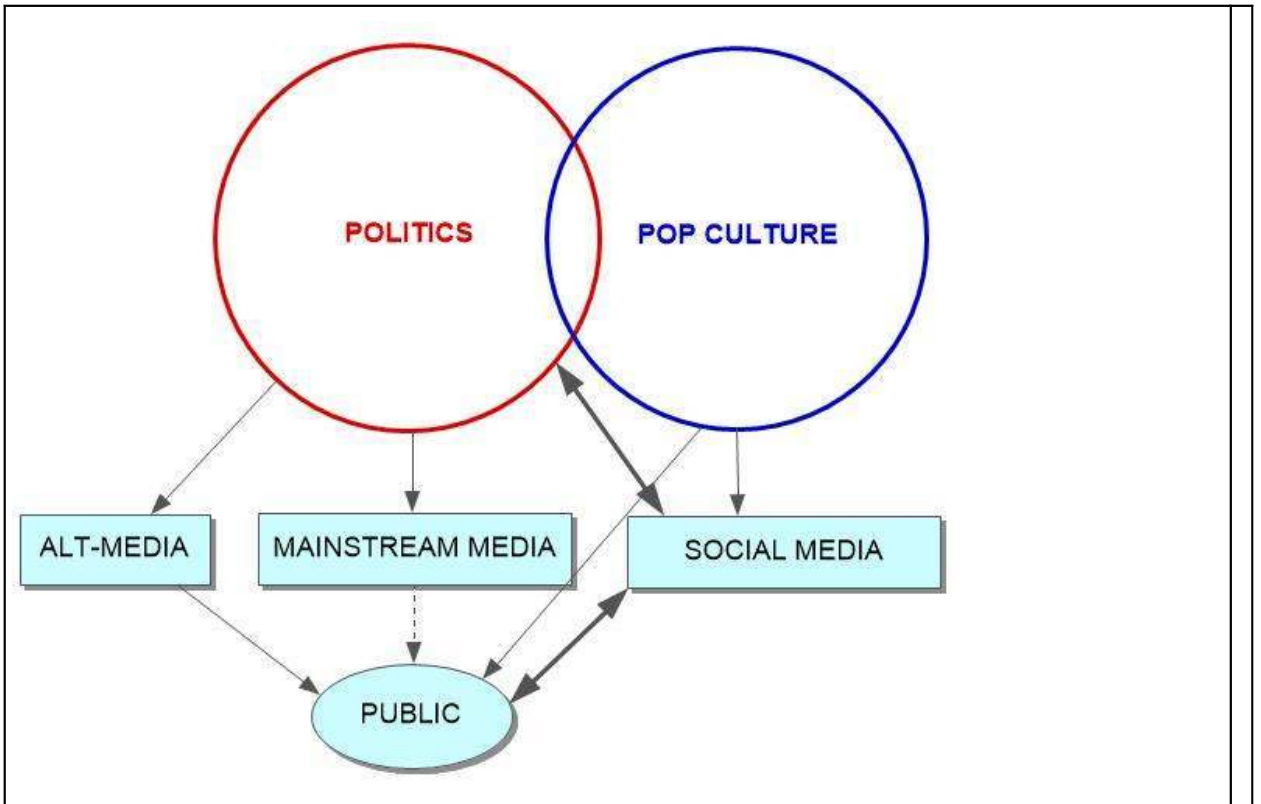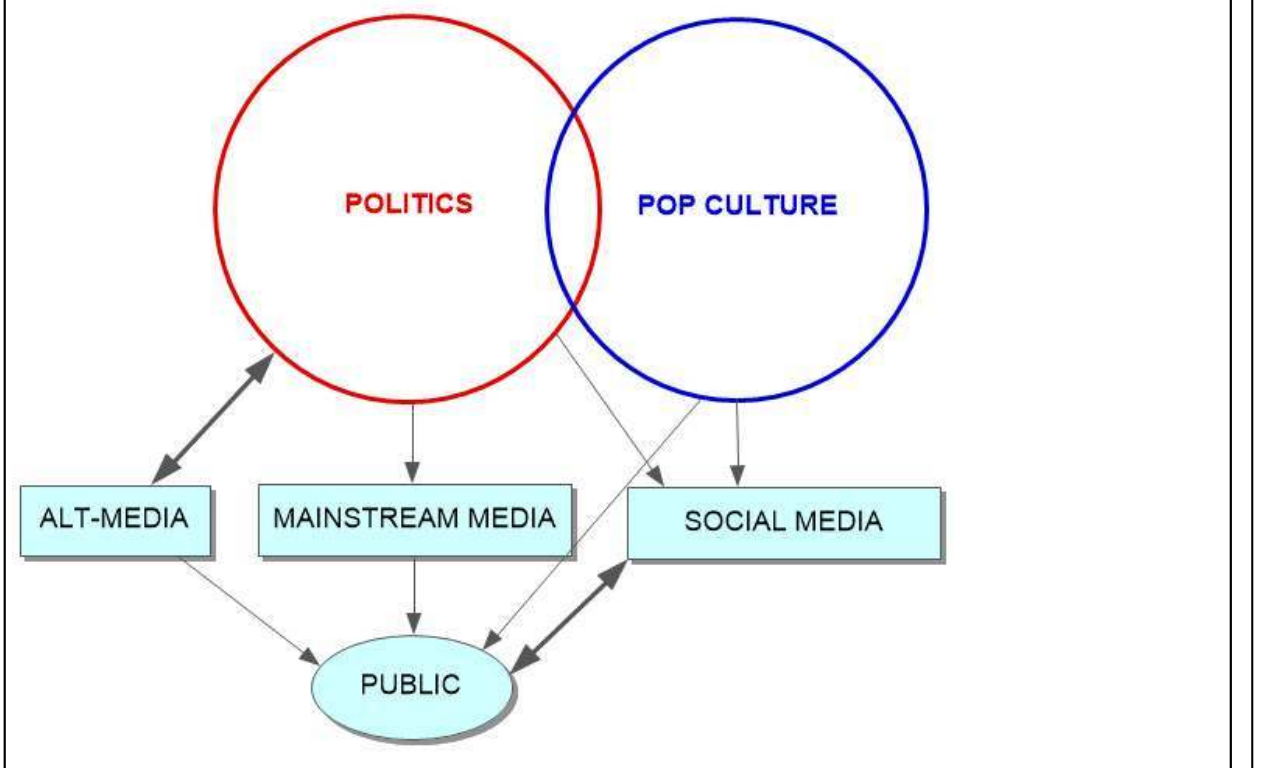
Figure 9. Media and the Sanders campaign.

31   Figure 10. Media and the Trump campaign.

32   Thus, the 2016 election was different from previous ones in the way voters received information, how they perceived and reshaped it, and the extent to which especially engaged (and creative) participants pushed it back into the public arena. The shifting importance of the various types of media also signaled a movement of vectors of influence, with significant impacts on the voters, the candidates, and the media organizations themselves. In each of these, there arose questions of truth and authenticity (e.g., the phenomenon of "fake news"), further complicating the messages of the campaigns and creating wider divides between the competing camps of voters.

4. Changing Identities

33   When voters demand change, it is usually predicated on a sense of self. People want things to be different for themselves, for their family and community, or for the country. Identity, both individual and collective, is an important aspect of desiring something new and aversion to the way things are. In all previous elections, people have organized themselves on this basis. For example, 2012 saw the Occupy movement and Tea Party movement as new expressions within the larger political parties, which themselves have historically provided a context for identification, dating back to the birth of the nation. In 2016, however, the disruptive entry of outliers into the race provoked an identity crisis, demanding the electorate to define itself in new ways. To provide some context, pundits called Trump a populist and Sanders a progressive (or a populist as well),[xxxvii] but conservatives and liberals alike faced a challenge in aligning these terms—and candidates —with the parties they knew.

34   This identity crisis was not entirely new. In *Our Divided Political Heart: The Battle for the American Idea in an Age of Discontent*, the political commentator E.J. Dionne points to the historical tension between individualism versus the community, but also problematizes populism and progressivism as they have been coopted by Republicans and Democrats, to expose the underlying divide of the country today.[xxxviii] He concludes that the fundamental problem is one of identity, as U.S. citizens have lost sight of the original vision of the Founding Fathers. As he succinctly states, "We don't know who we are, because we don't know who we've been."[xxxix] Needless to say, this problem was not resolved before the 2016 election, leaving an open stage for Trump and Sanders to offer their definitions—not surprisingly, in terms of individualism and collectivism, populism and progressivism.

35   For many, the identity crisis was the moment they had been waiting for. Some considered themselves independent, whether they were registered that way or not, perhaps belonging to a certain party but not necessarily adhering to its dogma. Others felt very disconnected from the current administration, but traditional types of candidates as well. One could say this of previous elections, of course. But the redefinition of the political landscape in 2016 was very different from what Obama had offered four years before, or eight years before, or what other politicians had offered before that. In this election, there was a pronounced space for existing voters to define themselves anew. It was even more true for new voters—from Millennials to "angry white guys," to quote Senator Lindsey Graham (R-South Carolina)[xl]—finding their voice.

36   In a way, this space offered a reverse type of identity politics. In a departure from Obama's popularity among blacks in 2008 and Clinton's appeals to women both then and

in 2016, Trump flipped the dialogue by othering, listing those who had no place in the United States and disparaging some who already were. His definition of the nation was based on what the U.S. was not, leaving a void that his followers—who knew that *they* were American—were eager to fill. By employing reverse identity politics, no one could say that he was explicitly targeting whites. And yet that was its effect. Eliciting controversy but not to the point where it led to civil unrest, he got the votes he needed.

37   While Sanders completely differed in tone from Trump, using inclusive language that invited diversity, he did not "play" identity politics. Even that concept, which demands problematization as potentially dismissive of minorities and disenfranchising of their agency, was not visible in his rhetoric or campaign ads. Instead, he presented a vision of the United States as offering a different kind of space for people to enter, where people had room to define themselves.

38   As became very clear, change means different things to different people. For Trump, "the change you've been waiting for your entire life"[xli] meant replacing the establishment, which could only be done by someone like him: "Change has to come from outside our very broken system."[xlii] Sanders also blamed the administration, but noted that change comes from the bottom up, not the top down: "What the system always tries to make us feel is that real change is impossible."[xliii] The incongruity between these perspectives signals a deeper difference between the candidates—namely, the way in which they approached their supporters.

39   In his language, Trump often painted his followers as passive (e.g., "waiting"), while he was the active agent of change. At the Republican convention, for example, he proclaimed, "I am your voice. Believe me. Believe me." And at his rallies, people called out what they wanted *him* to do to Clinton and in Washington: "Lock her up!", "Drain the swamp!" Ironically, Trump's supporters sought a forceful leader in their revolt against those in office. Moreover, in line with theories on authoritarianism,[xliv] they also appreciated his strongman position against outsiders (e.g., immigrants, countries with trade agreements perceived as unfair), whose vision of change conflicted with theirs. Trump would be their protector.

40   In contrast, Sanders spoke to an empowerment of the people and *their* engagement with a larger movement of change. This sentiment was summed up succinctly in a Tweet from January 2016: "I've said it since day one: this campaign is not about me, it's about you. #NotMeUs."[xlv] After losing the nomination, Sanders directed his supporters' attention beyond the presidential election and toward advancing the progressive agenda through smaller races around the country and a transformation of the Democratic Party. He did not give them orders whom to vote for. To be sure, he urged people to vote for Clinton to prevent a Trump presidency, but ultimately he admitted, "People have to vote their conscience."[xlvi] This ceding of authority is what gave him power.

41   Although the resistance movements of Trump and Sanders differed greatly, they shared a common strategy of destabilizing existing political narratives by reinforcing public perceptions that these were tired and ineffective, but also duplicitous and serving other interests than those of the people. In this polarized environment, political authority became a liability. The fact that Trump had never been elected to public office was a taken as a badge of his qualification to serve. Indeed, his supporters cited that their primary reason for voting for him was because he was an outsider.[xlvii] For his part, Sanders offered more than two decades of challenging Congress as an independent, not to mention being a self-described "Democratic Socialist." One could argue that these two

candidates' popular appeal was based on a short-term disruption of established actors rather than an extensively planned agenda. But being fuzzy on the details did not harm them. On the contrary, it played to the general atmosphere surrounding the election.

5. Changing Narratives

42   Although the conditions were right for a protest vote, there was no central cause that people self-organized and rallied around. In this instance, the catalyst for mobilization was a more abstract vision for change. How did Sanders and Trump prove especially capable in this regard where other candidates, both historically and in the current election, did not? One way of understanding their success is in terms of the story they told. More specifically, this can be seen through the philosophical theory of teleology, applied in a political context, to describe the advancement of the nation along a historical trajectory toward an ultimate goal. The way in which Trump and Sanders positioned the current state of the country provided their supporters with a sense of purpose, which in turn converted into votes.

43   Richard W. Leeman's analysis of the 2008 presidential election offers a valuable introduction to this discourse of change. By examining campaign speeches, Leeman was able to show how Obama framed the United States as a *telos*, a transcendent goal yet to be achieved.[xlviii] This rhetorical move—marked by the use of words like "quest" and "journey," which even featured prominently in Obama's presidential announcement—effectively led voters to feel as if they were part of a story, even a movement, rather than a mere political campaign.[xlix] Both Trump and Sanders employed a teleological message as well, albeit in different ways, to effect a similar experience for voters.

44   With his slogan "Make America Great Again" (lifted from Ronald Reagan's 1980 campaign), Trump effectively harnessed two powerful yet contradictory beliefs: declinism (i.e., the country is falling apart) and exceptionalism (i.e., the U.S.A. is special, which for the Trump campaign translated as a call to keep out those people who would degrade that). For decades, exceptionalism had been the standard storyline for presidential candidates, and the well-established tenet served as the guiding principle of Obama's campaign message: "'We Americans move forward as one people,' and the question we continually face is 'how we will write the next chapter in the great American story.'"[l] The idea of moving along a preexisting essence of greatness was what made teleology possible and informed its transcendent aspect; being part of that history defined what it meant to be "American" and provided a sense of purpose. For Trump, however, the exceptionalism of the United States was debatable. Shortly before announcing his candidacy, he declared that he did not "like the term" or find it accurate. Instead, he explained, "I'd like to *make* us exceptional."[li]

45   This seemingly simple move was very significant for Trump's overall narrative of change. By not denying exceptionalism altogether but pushing it into the future, Trump kept the proven theme of a *telos* but moved it further out on the horizon. In the process, this opened the space for a redefinition of where the United States is now, which Trump clearly articulated in the same speech: "we're dying." Thus, before even entering the race, he had already introduced the negative, declinist message that would come to define his campaign. It marked a profound ideological shift, not just from Obama but also the Republican establishment, as "American exceptionalism" had been an explicit and notable element of the 2012 GOP platform.[lii]

46   More specifically in terms of the discourse of change, declinism not only expanded the teleological frame, but introduced a starting point for the journey, offering a greater narrative arc in which voters were embedded. The addition made for a more epic quest while simultaneously framing the present in terms of dysfunctionality, which provided the hero—Trump, of course—with a compelling set of obstacles to overcome. All this made for a more compelling story. Nor did the audience have a hard time identifying with it. Trump's portrayal of the nation as dying resonated deeply and emotionally with large segments of the electorate, in direct alignment with their experience. For example, in a Pew Research survey conducted in March 2016, a majority of Trump supporters (75%) asserted that life is worse than fifty years ago; by comparison, only 34% of Sanders supporters and 22% of Clinton supporters felt the same way.[liii] The call to action for Trump's audience was not subtle: make America great again or continue to suffer. It would not be easy—their champion's bellicose tone left no doubt that they would have to fight—but this only reinforced their sense of teleological purpose in the restoration of the country. It could be said that if Obama forged a movement for change by an almost religious message of hope, Trump's narrative of decline, leveraging a combination of pain and nostalgia, was used to build an army.

47   Sanders also challenged U.S. exceptionalism, but in different ways. Instead of playing to the past like Trump, Sanders' campaign slogan looked forward: "A Future to Believe In." This implied a need for change, but also the possibility that the teleology may not uniquely involve the United States. For example, when George Stephanopoulos criticized him in an interview for wanting the U.S. to "look more like Scandinavia," Sanders answered that there is nothing wrong with that—and then followed up with reasons *why* the Nordic countries are better (e.g., less inequality of wealth, a stronger middle class).[liv] Instead of harming him, this position played well to a younger audience, especially Millennials, only a third of whom (32%) agree that the U.S. is the greatest country in the world.[lv] If one might wonder why they believe that, considering that probably only a fraction of them have been outside of the country, the abstract nature of the change they imagined can again be highlighted.

48   Whether Sanders adhered to declinism is a matter of debate. His rhetoric did not use it to frame change in the same way as Trump, but rather as the term was first used by Samuel Huntington to pejoratively describe those on the ideological left who eschewed exceptionalism.[lvi] Furthermore, by lambasting the direction that nation has moved in—primarily meaning the government but also its relationship with Wall Street and multinational corporations—Sanders opened a narrative that his supporters adopted and made their own. Specifically, this involved a personification of decline in the political arena in the form of Hillary Clinton, whom they vilified far more than Sanders ever did. She provided the face for what they wanted to change. Within a wider context, of course, the more that Sanders supporters bought into this negative image, which not only reflected Trump's negative rhetoric but was fueled by ultraconservative super PACs (e.g., Karl Rove was behind the ubiquitous hashtag #neverhillary),[lvii] the more it was detrimental to the Democratic Party's attempts to get them on board for the general. The narrative of the party's decline was thus a self-fulfilling prophecy.

6. Conclusion

49   The change that was wrought not only bears on the historical moment of the 2016 election as past, but the political landscape of the United States going forward. For both parties, it was a watershed moment, and after the shifts that took place, it may be impossible for them to recover their previous identities. The future of the Republican Party depends largely on Trump—how closely he works with the existing Congress or burns bridges, the way in which he goes about "draining the swamp," to what extent he keeps his campaign promises to those who voted for him (and are not going away soon), and many other things besides. Furthermore, just because he ran on a platform of change does not mean he will necessarily deliver it. As Rorty observed, "The Right thinks that our country already has a moral identity, and hopes to keep that identity intact. It fears economic and political change, and therefore easily becomes the pawn of the rich and powerful—the people whose selfish interests are served by forestalling such change."[lviii] As a billionaire, Trump may very well prove to fall into the latter category.

50   On the Democrat side, although Sanders did not make it past the primaries, the level of groundswell support that he was able to build has considerable ramifications for future elections. In combination with the sustained growth of independent voters, one can see it as the potential beginning of a long-tail movement, not in the sense of fundraising but as a model of new voters expressing their voice and asserting their will outside a political party telling them what to expect.

51   Finally, while the theme of demanding change is nothing new, the ways in which it is expressed have changed. Accordingly, Trump's largely unexpected victory not only points to the significance of the 2016 election, but wider shifts in agency and representation that promise to inform elections to come. Many of the voters who experienced the power of a grassroots movement for the first time will likely be looking forward to making their voices heard again, if not more forcefully. Cracks have plainly appeared within both the parties, while the hold of the traditional media has loosened, with participatory engagement in pop politics only expected to only grow. To be sure, the competing stories in 2020 will be different from those of 2016, but particularly important to watch will be the metanarratives employed in creating them.

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ABSTRACTS

This article explores the significance of the theme of "change" in the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election, going beyond its rhetorical use by the candidates or as a way of defining a historic electoral shift (making an "election of change") to examine how change played a critical role in the political landscape itself. One can locate voters' desire for change in many existing conditions leading up to the race, but also ideologically and as a force in its own right. Framing of the election as a story reveals that the various actors were increasingly aware of their shifting identities, representations, and agency; thus, change was not just a plot of the story, frequently expressed in terms of populism and popular culture, but a fundamental dynamic behind competing metanarratives and contestations of how the story should be told.

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