



PROCEDURAL PRECURSORS

# Will the Real Populists Please Stand Up—or Perhaps Sit Down and Chill

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The following is Part One of a two-part exploration of contemporary populism and its various historical antecedents.

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development of a dynamic capitalist economy—and as anti-urban, anti-modern bigots and anti-Semites. As Princeton historian Eric Goldman depicted them in the early 1950s: “Populists thought of themselves as engaged in a work of restoration, a restoration of the good old days, when, as they liked to believe, there was open competition and plenty of opportunity for everyone.” Not coincidentally, the postwar New Left’s accommodation to 19 -century populism reflected its contemporaneous political sympathies, especially with the civil rights and antiwar movements but also the emergent black power, feminist, and environmental movements. Yet in short order, liberal as well as leftist Democrats were also presenting themselves to disgruntled “middle Americans” as populists.

Today, the sustained visibility and strength of the populist Right, not to mention Trump’s increasingly outrageous pandering to it, has rendered populism of Ubpolitical stripe suspect—and encouraged contemporary progressives to side-step this complicated history. They have also been too preoccupied responding to their adversaries to reflect on the origins of their

constraints provided by strong, institutionalized political parties, whose occupant is consequently dependent on volatile mass opinion, which he must alternately manipulate and be manipulated by.

From this vantage point, progressives bear more responsibility for the current populist ferment than they acknowledge, or even understand. Again, I am not talking about their substantive policy views on race and gender, trade, or even immigration, although these have been advanced with a stubborn self-righteousness that has provoked the ire of large numbers of their fellow citizens. What I ~~Ua~~ talking about is how in recent decades progressives and their allies have come to advocate and implement critical procedural and institutional reforms that, while arousing little attention and controversy, have inadvertently facilitated the right-wing populism that now looms so ominously. And now, more such procedural populism looms on the horizon.

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Considerable confusion, even obfuscation, envelops the term "populism." Drawing on the work of Cas Mudde and Cristobal Rovira Kaltwasser, I do not consider populism a full-blown, coherent ideology, but rather "a set of ideas that, in the real world, appears in combination with quite different, and sometimes contradictory, ideologies." How could it be otherwise? Populism reflects disaffection and alienation expressed by "ordinary people" when they arrive at the realization, however incorrectly or inchoately, that the elites in charge of "the big picture" have not only screwed up but also screwed ~~H\Ya~~ !

Populism has variants on the Left as well as on the Right, but in either mode it is fundamentally illiberal. Fixing it more precisely in the contemporary context, Mudde and Kaltwasser conclude: "In a world that is dominated by democracy and liberalism, populism has essentially become an illiberal democratic response to undemocratic liberalism." Populists assume an undifferentiated, monistic popular or general will that elites are ignoring or subverting. Counterpoising the pure people against a corrupt elite, populists inevitably introduce a moralistic element into politics. Yet as Princeton political scientist Jan-Werner Mueller argues forcefully, one can disagree strenuously with populist complaints, as he does, without dismissing them, as elites frequently do, with "psychologizing diagnoses" or references to "authoritarian personalities." Thus, while populism of any variety is worrisome and

the Left, especially with regard to political parties. Indeed, contemporary

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There is, however, one significant source of anti-institutional sentiment on the populist Right. It involves the not inaccurate perception that elites have relied on certain institutions, in particular the

courts and the media, to defend and advance the interests of various protected minorities in America, including blacks, women, gays, immigrants, and Muslims. As William Galston argues cogently in *5bh]! D'i fU]ga . H\YDcdi `]ghHvfYUhtc @]VfU `8Ya cVUWz* "populist movements . . . are not necessarily antidemocratic. But populism is always anti-pluralist." Similarly, Mudde and Kaltwasser emphasize: "Populism holds that nothing should constrain 'the will of the (pure) people' and fundamentally rejects the notions of pluralism, and therefore, minority rights as well as the 'institutional guarantees' that should protect them."

Yet however cogent, this contention that populism is simply anti-pluralist misses a key dimension of the present situation. It is possible, from a populist perspective, to see elite championing of pluralism and minority rights in a different light. Quite aside from whether they regard minorities as legitimate components of "the people," populists have reason to find fault with elites for advancing the interests of minorities while ignoring the fact that those interests invariably include the narrow, self-regarding interests of minority ]bX]j ]Xi U'g. In other words, populists might well object that the interests of some individuals are being elevated in the name of a pluralistic conception of the public interest, while those of others—"the people"—are being dismissed. Given this perceived hypocrisy, it should not be surprising that the focus of much populist anger on the Right is on the courts and the media.

While my emphasis here is on the cultural dimensions of populist outrage on the Right, I do not deny that economic factors have also been at work. Indeed, the emergence of the Tea Party beginning in 2009 is generally regarded as driven primarily by economic grievances and concerns. Nevertheless, economic populism is much more in evidence on the Left. Again, Occupy Wall Street is the prime example. In any event, populist ferment and energy on the Right are more in ascendance—and of much greater concern to elites—than on the Left.

Put differently, Occupy Wall Street typifies g Vg]Ubhj] Y populist grievances. My concern here is to refocus attention on the neglected topic of dfcWXi fU populism, which remains strong on the Left. Indeed, it pervades the ill-defined but critical territory shared by populism and progressivism. But again, this procedural populism has gone largely unexamined and unacknowledged. It will be a prime concern in what follows.

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**T**he best guide to the American Left's complicated relationship with populism is historian Christopher Lasch. Arguably the most insightful and influential member of the generation of leftist scholars who began their careers in the late 1950s and early 1960s, Lasch was an avid student of Marxist and neo-Marxist social theory and criticism. He was also a critic, albeit a sympathetic one, of late 19<sup>th</sup>-century populists for their naive understanding of economic interests under then-emergent "corporate capitalism." Unlike Marxists, populists simply assumed interests to be self-evident. They lacked (and still lack) any notion of how ideology may distort reality and obscure from view an



Convention were selected by party insiders, leaders, or elected officials. Indeed, these traditional power brokers had been relegated to the margins of or excluded completely from the process. As Byron Shafer, the leading student of party reform, concludes: "By 1972, a solid majority of delegates to the Democratic National Convention was selected in presidential primaries, while an even more crushing majority was selected through arrangements that explicitly linked delegate selection to candidate support." Moreover, scores of women, minorities, and others not previously in evidence were highly visible delegates on the floor of the 1972 convention.

Subsequent national conventions (Republican and Democratic alike, both parties having been transformed by revised state election laws) increasingly reflected the direct will of primary voters. Convention outcomes have become highly predictable, with delegates effectively reduced to passive emissaries who, in Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan's pithy formulation, "merely serve as scenery for the television cameras." This has led some to ask whether the time and expense of staging the conventions is worth it. The more salient point, however, is made by Kamarck: "The new nominating system is solely in the hands of voters. . . . But until 2016, it had never produced a nominee who was a total outsider with no government experience, demagogue-like qualities, and a





Parties have come to be understood less as private, voluntary associations and more as appendages directly implicated in the functioning of the state, fiscally as well as administratively.

from the social but also the natural sciences—has grown. And their assertiveness, indeed bravado, has grown commensurately. For instance, in the heyday of the post-Cold War economic boom presided over by the Clinton Administration, Princeton economist Alan Blinder served on the Council of Economic Advisors and then as Vice Chair of the Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve. Back at Princeton in 1997, he published an article in *Foreign Affairs* titled “Is Government Too Political?”, in which he argued, directly but diplomatically, that “we want to take more policy decisions out of the realm of politics and put them in the realm of technocracy,” more in the hands of “nonelected professionals.”

About 15 years later, one of Blinder’s junior colleagues in the profession that understands itself as the queen of the social sciences, MIT economist Jonathan Gruber, personified a major problem with Blinder’s perspective. A key architect of Obama’s health care reform, the Affordable Care Act (ACA), Gruber was caught on video at a policy forum trumpeting that the ACA’s controversial “mandate” was in fact a tax and that “the lack of transparency” around this and other aspects of the legislation were premised on “the stupidity of the American voter.” Even making allowance for the pedagogical value of an attention-getting line, it is hard not to see the contrast between this remark by Gruber and Blinder’s carefully framed proposal as a measure of the burgeoning arrogance of America’s mandarins. Even more telling than Gruber’s tone and substance was the license with which he expressed these views in numerous public fora. Such showboating before presumably like-minded audiences spotlights the cloistered universe of our policy elites. Consequently, no one should be surprised that politicians like Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton, who surround themselves with such talent, feel at liberty to express either condescension toward fellow citizens who “cling to guns or religion,” or outright contempt toward those they consider “a basket of deplorables.”

Broader and deeper bureaucratization, professionalization, and dependence on experts trained in the natural and social sciences are now routinely cited as critical factors in citizen disaffection with [c] [j] [f] [b] [a] [y] [b] [h] But equally important, these developments have also impacted dc [h] [w]—political parties in particular, and civil society institutions in general. Indeed, there have been significant sociological effects on how citizens and voters relate to politics.

As mentioned above, Peter Mair argues that parties have attained “quasi-official status as part of the state.” His further insight is that as party organizations in Western democracies have moved “from a position in which they were primarily defined as social actors . . . to one where they might now be reasonably defined as state actors,” they “are now less well rooted within the wider society” and are “now more strongly oriented towards government and the state.”

The transformative impact of pollsters, marketers, media advisors, and campaign consultants on contemporary electoral politics is now legend. Most recently, digital media have been transforming the terrain all over again, creating new opportunities for tech-savvy specialists. One obvious outcome is further diminution of the role of parties, as individual candidates have come to run their own show. Yet candidates are hardly free agents. On the contrary, they have become critically dependent on these coteries of consultants, and that dependence does not abate once the candidates get elected.

Less noted has been the impact of these campaign experts and technicians on how politicians relate to voters and citizens—and how voters and citizens in turn respond, or don’t. Marshall Ganz is a former union and community organizer who now teaches at Harvard’s Kennedy School. He points out how electoral campaigns have shifted from “gathering” together as many supporters and voters as possible to “hunting” the much narrower segments of the

electorate that can be most reliably and economically activated by means of targeted mailings and media messages.

In 6m-bj ]fU]cb`Cb`mpolitical scientist Steven Schier offers a similar perspective by differentiating between voter "mobilization" and "activation." The former relies on strong partisan appeals to stimulate maximum voter turnout. It characterized the era of classic party mobilization in late 19 -century America. By contrast, "activation" is what contemporary candidates and interest groups do to induce specifically targeted segments of the public to participate in elections, demonstrations, or lobbying. As Schier suggests, activation of specific segments of the populace is predicated on indifference to the rest, who are effectively demobilized: "Mobilization has given way to activation, a system by which minority interests manipulate the complex electoral and governmental system in the misleading garb of participatory democracy."

As Mair rightly observes, the sociological implications of these cumulative developments are profound. His point of comparison is " 'the golden age' . . . [when] the mass parties in western Europe strove to establish more or less closed political communities, sustained by reasonably homogeneous electoral constituencies, strong and often hierarchical organizational structures and a coherent sense of partisan identity." As he elaborates, "Voters, at least in the majority of cases, were believed to 'belong' to their parties, and rather than reflecting the outcome of a reasoned choice between the competing alternatives, the act of voting was seen instead as an expression of identity and commitment." Summing up, Mair quotes two colleagues: "'Choosing' a party is nearly as misleading as speaking of a worshipper on Sunday 'choosing' to go to an Anglican, rather than a Presbyterian or Baptist church."

Here in the United States, party affiliation and identity were never that all-enveloping. American parties have typically never had formal, paid memberships, though they did have strong roots in ethnic and religious institutions and communities. In any event, Western European parties are now suffering from drastically declining numbers of paid memberships. Back in America, church attendance and religious affiliation have come to resemble consumer choices among competing brands. Meanwhile, both domains, political and religious, are ruled by bureaucratic hierarchies staffed by functionaries who are increasingly perceived to be out of touch with "consumers," but who apparently have no alternative but to soldier on and endeavor as best they can to attract adherents.

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**T**he overall consequences of these varied developments in American politics and government are not straight-forwardly assessed. Without a doubt, our processes and institutions are more accessible, open, and transparent than they ever have been. There are certainly fewer "smoke-filled rooms"—unless we're talking about a different kind of smoke. Our politics are more democratic and more participatory, and dramatically less controlled by party regulars and insiders. There are more avenues open to inquiry and investigation.

Moreover, by any reasonable historical standard, there are far fewer barriers to the ballot box for most citizens. This is true in spite of the many issues raised about limited access to registration and voting for specific disadvantaged, marginalized populations. Without challenging the validity of such claims, one must recognize that they are advanced in light of the greatly improved

At the same time, however, Schier emphasizes that while the educational levels of Americans have been increasing over recent decades, voter turnout rates have been declining. One explanation might be that while politics and government are more open, procedurally and substantively, to scrutiny than