

America's Peculiar Mix of Plutocracy and Populism

Jacob S. Hacker and Paul Pierson

Why is the “populism” of US President Donald J. Trump turning out to be so plutocratic? Why have the two biggest 2017 Republican policy drives—the failed attempt to “repeal and replace” the Affordable Care Act and the hugely regressive tax legislation recently signed into law—both turned out to be radically inegalitarian, with particularly dire effects for Trump’s most loyal voters? Why have Trump’s populist campaign promises and appeals mostly been jettisoned except as rhetorical flourishes to sustain his electoral base?

After all, Trump’s nativist rhetoric and core constituency aren’t so different from those of right-wing populists abroad. Moreover, he has elicited a remarkable level of loyalty from the congressional GOP when it comes to the serious ethical and legal challenges he faces. Republicans have proved willing to defend Trump in the face of accusations that would have sunk previous presidents, and they have even attacked organs of government, such as the FBI, to which they have long showed deep allegiance.

There is no neat resolution of these riddles. The start of an answer, however, can be found in America’s distinctive political context. For all of Trump’s outsized effects on contemporary public debates, he is a product of—and operates within—a totally different kind of party and political system than do right-wing populists abroad. In particular, American political institutions give congressional Republicans a pivotal role in domestic lawmaking. The result is that plutocracy has tended to “trump” populism, when campaigning gives way to governance.

To begin with, it’s crucial to recognize that Trumpism is less a departure from than an intensification of the contemporary GOP’s long-term coalitional strategy. Since the 1990s, Republicans have evolved into an anti-system party that wins by tearing down government. This anti-system approach has always involved a large dose of racism, though this element has become much stronger with Trump’s rise. Even before Trump’s ascendance, moreover, it was increasingly clear that the GOP strategy was producing a “Frankenstein’s monster” problem, in which Republican elites needed the support of an outraged voting base that they had created but in many ways could not fully control.

Electoral geography is a key contributor to and enabler of GOP radicalization. Over the past two decades, rural areas have grown more Republican and urban areas more Democratic. This has gone hand in hand with the growing concentration of prosperity in urban and coastal areas. The most affluent regions of the country are increasingly Democratic; the most depressed, increasingly Republican. In pursuing a plutocratic agenda, Republicans are thus hurting their downscale voting base even more than in the past.

However, these very same trends are also giving Republicans a solid edge in the battle for House and Senate seats, an edge further enhanced by GOP gerrymandering. That's because America's electoral system—its malapportioned Senate; its single-member, winner-takes-all districts—rewards parties that are broadly distributed across large swaths of sparsely-populated territory. This GOP edge has, ironically, heightened its audacity in pursuing upwardly redistributive policies that will be devastating in many of the areas of the country where Republican electoral strength is greatest. Republicans can adopt more extreme stances with less fear of backlash from moderate voters. Meanwhile, they fear primary challengers from their right flank at least as much as general-election opponents.

The conservative media bubble has added to this insulation, creating a GOP electorate that is motivated primarily by "negative partisanship"—in other words, hatred of the other side. This is a key reason why Trump won the support of Republicans who thought he was unqualified; they couldn't bring themselves to vote for Clinton. Many core Trump voters come from places prosperity has left behind. But he couldn't have won without the support of many suburban and upscale Republicans who were motivated mainly by negative partisanship.

There is a debate in economic circles about whether economic dislocation or racial animus are key to Trump's support. But this is a false opposition: Racial animus and a sense of decline are part of a poisonous stew, stoked by conservatives, that has been simmering for decades. Appeals to cultural hostility are being used to gain the support of downscale voters for politicians like Trump who end up pushing a plutocratic agenda.

Which brings us to present policy developments: In the same way that Trump won only because he gained the support of voters who don't share many of his populist views, he must govern by working with Republican elites who are interested primarily in pursuing a stunningly conservative (and unprecedentedly unpopular) economic agenda. In other words, America's unusual model of two-party presidentialism is a double-edged sword. It makes it easier (when combined with negative partisanship) to grab the presidency. But it doesn't give the president full authority. That must be shared with the congressional GOP, which, despite occasional populist optics, is firmly in the hands of the plutocrats.

Back in 2012, conservative activist Grover Norquist described the key qualities a future GOP president needed to have:

We are not auditioning for fearless leader. We don't need a president to tell us in what direction to go. We know what direction to go. We want the Ryan budget. ... We just need a president to sign this stuff. We don't need someone to think it up or design it. The leadership now for the modern conservative movement for the next 20 years will be coming out of the House and the Senate. Pick a Republican with enough working digits to handle a pen to become president of the United States ... His job is to be captain of the team, to sign the legislation that has already been prepared.

Republicans have struggled to pass their inegalitarian agenda. But despite the abnormality of his behavior and rhetoric, Trump as president has largely stuck to the Norquist script.

Trump's volatility and aggression, his unprecedented unpopularity, and the darkening shadow of the Mueller investigation loom over American politics. The turbulence in the White House is now mirrored by the stunning unpopularity of the Republican Congress. The GOP elite's anti-system strategy is ever more dependent upon the unholy alliance between its super-wealthy donors and its less affluent electoral base—which has to be worked into an ever more dangerous frenzy to distract it from what is happening in Washington.

Back in the quaint old days of 2010, President Obama observed that perhaps we just had to wait for the fever to break. Indeed, it is clear this can't go on. But whether the resolution of the GOP's three-decade march away from normal democratic politics will take the form of a salutary electoral backlash or a devastating crisis of the American political regime is very difficult to say. What can be said is that the future of American democracy hangs in the balance.