American hybrid: Donald Trump and the strange merger of populism and plutocracy

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Abstract

Any effort to situate Trump’s ascendance in the broader currents of cross-national developments, or in the longer course of American political development, must begin by recognizing it as a curious hybrid of populism and plutocracy. Although American right-wing populism has real social roots, it has long been nurtured by powerful elites seeking to undercut support for modern structures of economic regulation and the welfare state. American political institutions offered a distinctive opportunity for a populist figure to draw on this fury to first capture the nomination of the GOP, and from that position to ascend to the White House. Yet the administration’s substantive agenda constitutes a full-throated endorsement of the GOP economic elite’s long-standing demands for cuts in social spending, tax reductions for the wealthy, and the gutting of consumer, worker and environmental protections. The chasm between Trump’s rhetoric and his actions justifies a more skeptical assessment of the breadth and depth of American populism, one that acknowledges how its contours are shaped by the nation’s unusual political institutions, its intensifying political polarization and the out-sized influence of the wealthy.

Keywords: populism; Trump; presidentialism; inequality; polarization

In little more than ten months, elections featuring Brexit, Donald Trump and Marine Le Pen took place in three of the world’s oldest democracies. Understandably, this combination has intensified an already growing interest in right-wing populism. The evidence that this is a cross-national phenomenon is abundant. Populist politics in France, Britain and the United States and much of Europe share striking commonalities in rhetoric (anti-globalization, anti-immigrant, anti-technocrat) and core bases of support (older white voters with limited education, in areas outside the most economically dynamic urban centres).
Yet when one looks beyond polling and election results, the image of populism as a relatively uniform wave of social change sweeping across the landscape of liberal democracies begins to break apart. If one shifts from thinking about populism as a cultural or electoral force to examining its influence on governance – its actual impact on the control of public authority, and the priorities towards which that authority is directed – the story becomes more complicated. Indeed, the cross-national variation is likely more significant than the points of similarity.

The transition of Donald Trump from campaigner to president has highlighted the complexity and variability of right-wing populism as a social phenomenon. Populism’s ostensible tribune, Donald Trump, had no real affiliation to any durable populist organizations. Moreover, while he occupied the most visible site of political authority in the US, the American presidency is quite far from hegemonic. Thus, once the election was over, ‘Trumpism’ – itself largely inchoate – had to be grafted onto a set of organizations and institutions that predated his ascendance. Those already in place possessed their own concerns, as well as formidable capacities for action (Hacker and Pierson 2010; Hertel-Fernandez and Skocpol 2016).

Once the drama shifted from campaign to governance three extant features of American politics reasserted their centrality. First, the divisions in political authority associated with the country’s unusual political institutions limited Trump’s room for action while strengthening the role of ‘establishment’ conservatives in Congress. Second, the same wide and increasingly bitter divide between the two major political parties that helped Trump gain office also made it difficult for him to assemble an effective governing coalition. Third, and probably most significant, the ever-greater concentration of economic and political resources within a tiny stratum of wealthy Americans has limited the impact of a diffuse ‘populism’ and diverted it towards the Republican Party’s already well-established policy agenda. In the realm of rhetoric, right-wing populism remains robust. In actual government, the interests and concerns of plutocrats have typically prevailed.

What has emerged in the United States is not populist governance but a peculiar hybrid – one quite distinct from what might emerge in other national contexts. Initially, key features of the American setting played a critical role in amplifying the populist impulse, catapulting a populist candidate into a central political position. Yet if the American setting amplified populism’s electoral expression, it has diluted its impact on governance. Populism’s cultural resonance greatly exceeded its organizational capacity and its institutional reach. In office, Trump has only limited incentives to pursue a ‘populist’ agenda, and limited capacity to advance that agenda even when he might wish to.

Trump has continued to present himself in populist garb, but it has rarely carried over to policy. Whatever label one might attach to his substantive actions as president, one would be hard pressed to call most of them populist. Trump has filled his administration with a mix of the staggeringly wealthy and the
staggeringly reactionary. On the big economic issues of taxes, spending and regulation – ones that have animated conservative elites for a generation – he has pursued, or supported, an agenda that is extremely friendly to large corporations, wealthy families, and well-positioned rent-seekers. His budgetary policies (and those pursued by his Republican allies in Congress) will, if enacted, be devastating to the same rural and moderate-income communities that helped him win office.

The political context for Trump’s historic victory

Despite its chaos and inconsistencies, Trump’s campaign represented a clear populist departure from conventional presidential politics. Trump himself was an outsider – he would be the first person to ascend to the presidency with no prior record of governmental service in either the military or public office. Though piled high with contradictory or unattainable promises, his campaign diverged sharply from Republican orthodoxy on trade and social policy (promising to protect big social welfare programmes) in ways likely to appeal to downscale voters and those living in regions struggling with economic dislocation. He hardened and highlighted the party’s populist positions on immigration and criminal justice. Moreover, he effectively packaged these stances in stark messages of ethno-nationalism and visceral contempt for political and cultural elites.

All of this was broadly consistent with the tone of surging right-wing populism in other countries. What was more unusual was Trump’s stunning success in carrying this unconventional politics all the way to his nation’s most powerful political office. Distinctive features of the American political context, rather than the size of Trump’s political base, made this result possible. Trump’s populist appeal was considerable but limited – and easy to exaggerate in the light of the election outcome. His core electorate would have been insufficient to carry him to power absent an institutional arrangement that enforces a two-party system, a nomination process that gave room for an upstart to win, an atmosphere of ‘negative partisanship’ that led many Republicans to vote for a candidate they viewed with great scepticism, and the vagaries of an Electoral College system that swept the loser of the popular vote into office.

Notwithstanding his rapid ascent in early polls and unprecedented ability to garner free publicity, Trump’s campaign initially failed to attract any discernible support within the Republican establishment. This fact deserves emphasis. In recent years, prominent political scientists have argued that the selection of presidential candidates involves an ‘invisible primary’ in which party elites gradually coordinate around a figure who is both electable and ideologically reliable (Cohen, Karol, Noel and Zaller 2009). From this perspective, establishment support (signalled by robust fundraising and endorsements from public officials) is a virtual requirement to win a major party nomination – 2016 was not a good year for this school of thought.
It makes sense to attach the ‘populist’ label to the events of 2016 not only because of Trump’s policy stances, but because he triumphed in spite of the preferences of his party’s elites. Scepticism about both his electability and reliability, including the prospect that he might lead the Republican Party to a humiliating defeat, encouraged establishment figures to hold him at arm’s length at least until Trump’s sweep of primaries made his nomination inevitable. Yet ironically, Trump won the nomination in large part because he thrived in the right-wing political ecosystem the party establishment had constructed over the previous two decades.

The nation’s peculiar political institutions, which fracture political authority and blur accountability, allowed the Republican Party to develop an unusual strategy over the past quarter-century (Mann and Ornstein 2012; Hacker and Pierson 2016). That strategy combined the party’s substantial political power within the national government (which could be used to generate gridlock and dysfunction) with many of the trappings traditionally associated with ‘anti-system’ parties. Employing strategies developed by House Speaker Newt Gingrich in the 1990s and Senate GOP Leader Mitch McConnell a decade later, the GOP increasingly resorted to brutal attacks on national institutions and mainstream politics, conspiracy-mongering and extreme vilification of opponents, and apocalyptic rhetoric suggesting that politics as usual represented some kind of existential threat.

This anti-system shift in Republican rhetoric was echoed and reinforced by a large and growing partisan media presence in cable television and talk radio. The incentives created by the fragmentation of news media have fuelled the growth of an ‘outrage industry’ that can harness partisan intensity for profit (Berry and Sobieraj 2013). Although not unique to the right, these forces have been much larger and more influential on the conservative end of the spectrum, and especially so among the demographics (older white men) that proved most receptive to conservative populism. Republican voters have become increasingly drawn to this brand of confrontational politics (Skocpol and Williamson 2011; Grossman and Hopkins 2016). This bolstered Trump’s support among groups (such as evangelical Christians, a huge demographic in Republican politics) for whom he might have seemed an unlikely standard-bearer.

The heightened partisan polarization of American politics, and the particularly intense form it has taken on the conservative side, played a crucial role in Trump’s improbable rise to the presidency. Given the incentives built into its institutional design, the United States has long had a two-party system. Until a generation ago, however, the parties typically had a moderating effect on national politics. Each party was a highly diverse coalition, with both parties’ elites and mass electorates overlapping in critical respects. Over the past four decades, this has changed dramatically. Increasingly, elites and voters have sorted into two more cohesive camps (McCarty, Poole and Rosenthal 2006; Abramowitz 2010).
Sorting, however, was only the beginning of the process. A variety of forces, including the rise of partisan media and the massively expanded and nationalized role of highly partisan interest groups, have widened the divide between ‘red’ and ‘blue’ America. Survey results suggest not only that party identification is an increasingly powerful determinant of political behaviour, but that it seems driven as much or more by emotional or tribal motivations as by the programmatic ambitions of the parties (Achen and Bartels 2016). Closely associated with this development has been the rise of ‘negative partisanship’ – political behaviour characterized less by support for one’s own party than by intensifying antipathy to one’s perceived opponents (Abramowitz and Webster 2016).

This antipathy-driven politics, splitting ‘red’ from ‘blue’ America, has become central to the nation’s politics. It helps to explain why Trump was able to corral votes extending well beyond the ranks of his convinced supporters – even among those who found him personally unappealing. Trump’s brand of aggressive anti-elite and ethno-nationalist politics, along with some of his policy distinctiveness, helped him dominate an open candidate selection process against a divided field within his party. Once his core supporters had delivered the nomination, other Republicans felt the strong tug of negative partisanship. A considerable share of the Republican electorate – about a quarter in the months prior to the election – considered him unqualified to be president, yet 90 per cent of Republican identifiers voted for Trump. At the end of the day, they cast their votes against Hillary Clinton and the Democrats.

There is real value in parsing the particular locations where Trump’s candidacy won or lost votes (see especially McQuarrie’s analysis in this issue). Building on gains that the GOP had been making over the past 20 years, Trump somewhat improved the GOP’s already strong support among white working-class voters, especially older men, especially in rural America, and especially in the electorally decisive Midwest. Yet emphasizing the lessons of this exercise runs the risk of exaggerating the dimensions of the populist wave in American society. Trump’s vote total was around the range of expectations for a ‘generic’ Republican in standard political forecasting models. Given the state of the economy, President Obama’s approval rating, and the fact that Democrats had held the presidency for eight years (which would tend to favour Republicans) Trump received very close to the vote totals his party would typically be expected to get. Once nominated, Trump’s triumph was probably not driven primarily by ‘populist’ stances and his ability to attract a modest number of new voters. He received a crucial boost from the unbreakable loyalty of more conventional Republicans, including more moderate suburban voters, in a context of sustained and intense negative partisanship.

When one shifts from ordinary voters to conservative political elites the story is in crucial respects similar. Trump was not the choice of the Republican ‘establishment’ – the loose network of professional politicians, organized groups, and big money donors. Even its most reactionary elements typically
preferred the more conventional extremism of Texas Senator Ted Cruz. Yet after Trump became the party’s standard-bearer almost all these elements came on board. Republican politicians feared, quite reasonably, that a split within the party would enrage the party’s core supporters and drag them all down. Notably, the most prominent ‘never Trumpers’ were retired politicians rather than those expecting to face conservative voters in the future.

For the party’s organized supporters, however – many large corporations and wealthy individuals, conservative Christian organizations, the National Rifle Association – positioning themselves with respect to the populist wave revolved most of all around calculations about governance. Examining these groups is crucial to understanding the impact of populist forces, because the organized typically play an outsized role in influencing governance (Hacker and Pierson 2010, 2016). They have the knowledge, long time horizons, and financial resources to monitor and apply pressure on policymakers.

The role of these groups of ‘intense policy demanders’ (Cohen et al. 2008) has been especially evident over the past generation. A sharp shift in economic and political resources towards corporations and the very wealthy has taken place in the United States. The scale of this shift towards ‘top-end inequality’ is without parallel in affluent democracies (Alvaredo, Atkinson, Piketty and Saez 2013). And it has carried over into politics. The top 0.01 per cent of campaign contributors accounted for 10–15 per cent of donations to federal campaigns in the early 1980s; by 2012 that figure was 40 per cent, and it would likely be much higher if indirect ‘dark money’ contributions were included (Bonica, McCarty, Poole and Rosenthal 2013).

Although the network of powerful conservative interests aligned with the Republican Party includes those focused on restricting abortion and limiting the regulation of firearms, economics remains central. The ‘Koch network’ of multi-millionaires and billionaires has devoted unprecedented resources to building a virtual shadow party. That network is dedicated, above all, to extremely conservative economic policies (Hertel-Fernandez and Skocpol 2016). The powerful US Chamber of Commerce has undergone a massive expansion, moved far to the right, and become an increasingly integrated part of the Republican Party network (Hacker and Pierson 2016). This shift in the balance of organized power has encouraged a high priority on cutting economic regulations and consumer and worker protections, and a fixation on reducing taxes on the very top income groups.

For many of these groups, Trump’s rhetoric – support for social welfare programmes and infrastructure spending, hostility to trade agreements – was problematic. Moreover, given the rapidity with which his positions could change it was hard to consider him reliable. Yet these groups gradually gained confidence that the policies they cared about would fare well under a President Trump.

To understand this strategic assessment it is once again necessary to situate the American presidency within the nation’s broader institutional order. The
presidency is the focus of media attention. In matters related to national security, of course, a president has formidable powers. Yet in most areas of domestic policy Congress strongly constrains presidents. With a loyal (and filibuster-proof) legislative majority presidents can do a lot. Without that super-majority their options are much more limited. Appointed personnel can shape the details and implementation of regulations, but even in this sphere fundamental change usually requires legislation. Congress remains central to the American constitutional order.

‘Intense policy demanders’ who make up the organized, ‘establishment’ core of the GOP understand these institutional realities well. In 2012, long before the rise of Trump, Grover Norquist, the head of Americans for Tax Reform and a long-time movement conservative, addressed the issue:

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 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. This is a change for Republicans: the House and Senate doing the work with the president signing bills. His job is to be captain of the team, to sign the legislation that has already been prepared. (Norquist 2012)

At the time, Norquist probably could not have imagined a President Trump. Remarks were aimed at those expressing dismay about the conservative bona fides of then-leading GOP presidential candidates like Mitt Romney. His point was that so long as Republicans controlled Congress, it didn’t matter very much which candidate got the nomination. The legislature would set the agenda, which was already clearly defined: big cuts in social programmes, especially health care, aggressive deregulation in finance, environmental and consumer protection, and, most of all, large tax cuts for the wealthy. A Republican Congress would pass these laws, and any plausible Republican president – anyone with ‘enough working digits to handle a pen’ – would sign them. The analysis still carried weight four years later, and even with a far more unsettling and unpredictable nominee. Despite Trump’s tendencies to sing from a populist hymnal, the Republican establishment reasonably anticipated that the basic partisan and institutional logic Norquist described in 2012 remained in place.

**More plutocrat than populist: Trump in office**

Trump’s presidency has been extraordinarily volatile. He rapidly broke records for unpopularity of a first-term president – the polling itself an indication that
his base of support was far narrower than for any prior administration. He continues to present himself as a populist fixated on disrupting an established elite. Indeed, as his administration struggled continuously to find solid footing and faced a tightening circle of investigations, he doubled down on this framing, seeking to rally support within his base. He waged high-profile battles with a growing list of perceived enemies – the media, the ‘swamp’ of those who worked in Washington, liberal cities and universities, and the so-called ‘deep state’ of law enforcement, courts and the national security apparatus.

Yet while presenting himself as a populist, Trump has rarely governed as one. Early on, there was abundant evidence that Trump had little intention of challenging Norquist’s prediction that established Republican priorities were safe. With respect to economic issues that have long been at the core of the organized Republican Party’s agenda – tax cuts for the wealthy, restrictions on social welfare programmes in particular and government spending in general, and a scaling back of regulations unwanted by major industries – Trump’s only distinctiveness has been his embrace of quite radical versions of these priorities.

Trump’s top-level appointments offered an immediate and crystal-clear indicator: his economic agenda would largely comport with that of the Republican establishment. For all the talk of Mr Trump’s ‘populism’, he assembled less a Team of Rivals than a Team of Billionaires. This exclusive club includes Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin (net worth actually only a few hundred million), Small Business Administration head Linda McMahon, and Education Secretary Betsy DeVos. The Department of Commerce got two billionaires, Wilbur Ross and Todd Ricketts (although Ricketts later withdrew rather than see his wealth and potential conflicts of interest subjected to close scrutiny). Gary Cohn, head of Trump’s National Economic Council, left his prior job as president of Goldman Sachs. This was the same firm that employed Mnuchin, and had previously employed Trump’s edgiest advisor, Steve Bannon. Trump also tapped billionaire financier Stephen Schwarzman to head his ‘strategic policy forum’.

Top policy positions in the administration drew as well from the ranks of Congressional Republicans. Here again, the selections tell a story of commitment to a starkly inequalitarian agenda, distinguished from that of the establishment GOP only by the ratcheting up of intensity. Political scientists have developed tools for analysing congressional roll-votes that can be used to compare the conservatism of particular politicians, both relative to their contemporaries and to prior cohorts of legislators (McCarty, Poole and Rosenthal 2006). These scores have shown a steady, dramatic shift to the right within the Republican Party over the past generation. And yet, even in the context of this long march to the right, the Trump administration filled key positions from the party’s furthest right wing. Virtually every member of the Trump team with prior congressional experience – from Vice President Mike Pence, to Office of Management and Budget Director Mick Mulvaney, to Health and Human
Services Secretary Tom Price, to Attorney General Jeff Sessions – comes from the most conservative decile of the House or Senate (Project Voteview, n.d.).

In addition, the candidate, whose pledge to ‘drain the swamp’ was probably second in appeal only to his promise to ‘build a wall’, moved swiftly to relax ethics rules for his appointees. At the same time, he filled the top levels of agencies that played a central role in domestic policy with former industry lobbyists or those known to be hostile to the agency’s mission. Consider a prominent example, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA).

The EPA is a crucial regulatory agency, operating with considerable discretion under the ambit of the country’s extensive environmental statutes. It has also become a leading target on the right, especially for the fossil fuel industry, which is a highly organized part of the modern Republican coalition. It is heavily represented among top donors and in key Republican-affiliated organizations like the Chamber of Commerce and the Koch brothers network (Hacker and Pierson 2016).

Judging from its early personnel choices, these interests would be extremely well represented in the supposedly populist administration. As head of the EPA transition team, Trump selected Myron Ebell, a vocal opponent of action on climate-change. Ebell had directed the energy and environment programme at the libertarian Competitive Enterprise Institute, a group funded in part by the Koch brothers and a number of fossil fuel companies. Ebell would call for a cut of half the EPA’s budget and two-thirds of its staff to limit ‘regulatory overreach’ (Davidson 2017). As head of the EPA, Trump selected former Oklahoma Attorney General Scott Pruitt, known for his extremely close ties to the traditional energy sector, his antipathy to the EPA, and his scepticism about climate change (Lipton 2014; Davenport 2017). Pruitt quickly implemented an organizational culture marked by open hostility to those administering the nation’s environmental laws, demanding his own armed security within the EPA building, and strictly limiting employee access to the agency’s top floor where policy decisions were made.

An old adage in public administration is that ‘personnel is policy’. A leader’s priorities emerge starkly from appointments. In Trump’s case, these appointments drew heavily from those who shared the policy commitments of the most conservative wing of the Republican coalition, along with those closely connected to large corporate interests closely aligned with the Party. Not surprisingly, these views would quickly show up in the new administration’s policy activity.

**Governance under Trump**

It is early days to begin evaluating Trump’s policy record. Almost no legislation has been passed, and there is much reason for scepticism about many of the
promises that continue to pour out of the White House. Even loyal Republicans dismissed Trump’s proposed budget, for instance, as too extreme for serious consideration. The fate of crucial legislative initiatives remains uncertain. Yet one can focus on what the administration has signalled as policy priorities and where the administration has positioned itself on these matters. This examination reinforces the conclusion that populist voices have had limited impact on the substance of governance, at least with respect to key economic issues that might affect the distribution of income.

Trump has been most proactive in pursuing a flurry of executive orders, many of them focused on rolling back initiatives from the Obama administration. These actions require cautious evaluation. Many of them are primarily rhetorical exercises. Others have actual policy content but are unlikely to have more than a marginal impact. Still others, such as Scott Pruitt’s efforts to dismantle the Obama administration’s signature climate change initiative, the Clean Power Plan, face a long road to implementation, with the real prospect that court scrutiny will significantly limit their scope.

In the United States, legislation remains central to domestic policy change. It is here that the ‘hybrid’ quality of the American system is most clearly evident: Congress, rather than the administration, must produce new laws. And here, the record suggests that Trump’s victory has not meant populism. For all the ways in which he radically departs from conventional politics, he is pursuing an economic policy agenda that is little different from what could be expected from an extremely conservative Republican, devoted to the priorities laid out by the party establishment over the past two decades.

First, signs of ‘economic populism’ remain limited. There have been no major initiatives on trade. Trump withdrew from the proposed Trans-Pacific Partnership, but it was already a dead letter in the US. A promised infrastructure initiative – which might have delivered real economic benefits to Trump’s white working-class supporters and provided a wedge issue that would have disrupted the two party coalitions – remains only a rhetorical flourish. The sketches available point to only a modest set of additional corporate subsidies, which would do little to address the country’s chronic shortfall in infrastructure spending (and might actually worsen it over time).

Immigration is a striking exception. Trump’s promised border wall has become a bipartisan punchline, but the administration has publicized and pursued more aggressive enforcement against undocumented migrants. This seems to be significantly reducing border crossings, although these had already been declining for years. In September 2016, Trump rescinded Obama’s DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals) executive order, removing protections from deportation for millions who came to the United States as children. This reversal will be contested in court, and here again the fate of immigration policy primarily rests in the hands of Congress, which hardly seems poised to legislate on the matter.
Overall, while Trump’s pugilistic style lends the administration a populist air, he has not backed that up with many serious policy initiatives. This broad picture of inactivity is, of course, inconsistent with Trump’s promises to his base. It is, however, fully consistent with the well-developed views of Republican Party elites. Powerful interests within the party generally favour free trade, resist public spending on infrastructure (or just about anything else other than defence), and are mostly sceptical of the party base’s ferocity on immigration.

Yet the case for the strong alignment of the Trump presidency and the GOP establishment on policy is not based only on patterns of inaction. Even more revealing is the pattern of action. At the top of the Congressional agenda were three major items: health care, taxes and regulatory reform. In all three cases, Congress sought changes that would bestow massive benefits on large corporations and high-income individuals. And in every case, Trump has adopted these priorities as his own.

Health care will be used to illustrate the broader dynamics. Not only is it the initiative where the contours of legislation (and political contestation) have been clearest; it is also of tremendous substantive significance. Moreover, it occupied ‘flagship’ status during the new governing coalition’s first year. Republicans had long railed against ‘Obamacare’, arguably the most momentous domestic policy achievement of Trump’s Democratic predecessor. Repealing ‘Obamacare’ had been a staple of conservative politics since the day it had been enacted. Republicans between 2011 and 2016 repeatedly voted in favour of repeal – a symbolic effort against the certainty of an Obama veto. In 2017, with the veto threat removed, they faced the challenge of fashioning real policy.

Obamacare was broadly loathed in Republican circles. For much of the party base, it stood as a symbol of unwanted government intrusion. For the powerful organized forces of economic conservatism within the Republican coalition, however, the material stakes were very concrete. Observers on the left often failed to appreciate just how redistributive the Affordable Care Act was. Without question, it represented the most downwardly redistributive federal initiative in 50 years. The ACA extended health insurance to roughly 20 million low and moderate-income Americans, while lowering out-of-pocket expenses for millions more. These benefits were financed overwhelmingly through increased taxes on the healthcare industry and, especially, on those in the top 2 per cent of the income distribution (Blumberg et al. 2017). Many millions of those who voted for Trump were (perhaps unwitting) beneficiaries of the ACA.4

Republicans were determined to reverse this redistribution. Following Trump’s election, advancing that agenda became part of the GOP majority’s first and most prominent legislative push. The American Health Care Act (AHCA), which after much turmoil passed the House in May of 2017 before being (at least temporarily) derailed in the Senate two months later, would have dramatically scaled back and restructured the ACA.
Revealingly, perhaps the biggest proposed changes involved revisions to the joint state-federal Medicaid programme that went well beyond the contours of the Affordable Care Act. The means-tested Medicaid programme is now the largest public health care programme in the United States, the source of health insurance for 65 million Americans. AHCA would have transformed Medicaid from an individual entitlement into something more like a block grant. As Republican Speaker of the House Paul Ryan colourfully if undiplomatically put it, this was something he had ‘been dreaming of since we were drinking out of kegs’. In other words, AHCA would not just undo the expansion of Medicaid that occurred under Obamacare; it would have introduced a structural reform that could produce profound long-term retrenchment in the pre-existing Medicaid programme. All told, Medicaid reductions were projected to save the federal government over $800 billion over ten years (with the savings increasing every year) (CBPP 2017b).

These cuts would have financed the huge tax cuts for high-income households also contained in AHCA. Indeed, many observers noted that the overall structure of the health-care reforms seemed driven by the desire to make these tax cuts possible. Moreover, as commentators were quick to point out, the legislation was likely to be especially devastating to core groups of Trump supporters (CBPP 2017a). The proposed law called for new, much less generous funding formulas for individually purchased health insurance. Losses would be especially large in rural areas, and among those over the age of 50 on moderate incomes. Many of these same groups would be disproportionately affected by the cuts in Medicaid. Gains, of course, would be highly concentrated among the very well-to-do.

The same distributional story applies to the other major policy initiatives working through Congress. As with health care, tax and budgetary changes faced uncertain fates. In each case, however, both the Trump administration and Republican leaders in Congress were pushing plans that would shift government policy away from those on average incomes towards those at the top of the income distribution. Significant cuts in taxes on corporations emerged as the top policy priority of both Congressional Republicans and the Trump administration. As with healthcare, details of the developing tax reform proposals remained hidden from public view, reflecting concerns that such upwardly redistributive policies were unlikely to gain support from extensive public scrutiny. Astonishingly, polls showed the healthcare bill that passed the House of Representatives mustering only around 20 per cent approval. This abysmal showing, unprecedented for a new administration’s flagship economic legislation, offered perhaps the clearest testament to its plutocratic rather than populist underpinnings.

Conclusion

Chaotic from the outset and wracked by major scandals, the Trump presidency is surely a source of growing frustration and anxiety for those within the GOP
establishment. One thing that has not occurred on Trump’s watch, however, is a populist rejection of the long-standing Republican commitment to a radically inequalitarian brand of market fundamentalism. Trump’s governing team has embraced, with gusto, these very same commitments. Much of the frustration among conservative power-brokers likely stems from a different fear – namely, that the administration’s disarray will lead it to squander a rare opportunity to achieve radical cuts in the American welfare state, sharp reductions in taxes on the wealthy, and extensive deregulation.

Making sense of this state of affairs requires a reassessment of the scale and nature of populist pressures in the United States. It is not that these pressures are a mirage. Trump’s stunning electoral victory, however, could easily yield an exaggerated sense of both the extent of these sentiments and the capacity of populist forces to translate them into policy. Clearly, there is an international wave of discontent that reveals important commonalities across countries. Yet both Trump’s victory and its aftermath reflected peculiar features of the American political environment. In a two-party system with an open process of candidate selection, it was possible for a populist demagogue with a sizable and motivated base of support to capture one party. Given the intensely polarized character of contemporary American two-party politics, and especially the strength of ‘negative partisanship’, that candidate could then draw on votes from party loyalists who found Trump unappealing but stayed with their ‘team’. In this manner, and given a confluence of unlikely events, this most improbable candidate could assemble a coalition just big enough (thanks to the electoral college) to eke out his stunning victory.

Yet if the peculiar American political system arguably amplified right-wing populism’s electoral heft, it has also placed notable limits on its reach into governance. That this is already clear after only a few months drives home the fact that the national settings within which populist pressures play out remain likely to yield highly distinctive outcomes. Trump occupies just one part of the federal government. The balance of power within the legislature favours the forces that were ascendant within the GOP long before Trump became a plausible candidate. The priorities of these forces are, in most respects, the opposite of populism. Equally important, these establishment voices are organized (Hacker and Pierson 2010, 2016).

A distinctive feature of Trump’s populist base, by contrast, is its disorganization. In this sense, the ‘movement’ mirrors its ostensible leader. This absence of organization is highly consequential. Rather than organizing in the fashion of the anti-Obama ‘Tea Party’, they envisioned Trump as their champion. Without any enduring organizational capacity, this has quickly proven to be a bad bet, resulting in a flow of policy activity that is responsive largely to forces quite different from those who provided mass support for Trump’s campaign.

The American hybrid is unstable: a president who relies on populist devices to mobilize support, and an organized political coalition within his party with
radically different priorities. That instability seems likely to worsen as the mix of incompetence and corruption in the Trump White House becomes ever more evident. Trump’s weakness encourages him to accentuate the issues that excite his most dedicated supporters, even as it diminishes his leverage within the broader political system. Predicting the outcome of these growing tensions would be foolhardy. Yet understanding the tensions themselves, and the plausible trajectories going forward, requires that we move beyond broad generalizations about rising populist pressures. The challenge is to situate those pressures within the broader social configurations that dictate the extent and manner in which populism may influence major social, economic and political outcomes.

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Notes

1. For discussions that have informed this essay I am grateful to members of the Successful Societies Program of the Canadian Institute for Advanced Research, as well as many conversations with Jacob Hacker.

2. Of course, it is important to remember that Trump triumphed only because of the country’s unique and antiquated Electoral College system. He received almost three million fewer votes (2.1 per cent) than his opponent.

3. For instance, recent research by Brian Schaffner (Stein 2017) suggests that the rate of defection of disappointed Bernie Sanders voters to Trump was far lower than the rate at which disappointed Hilary Clinton voters in 2008 defected from Democratic nominee Barak Obama to Republican John McCain.

4. Many millions more would have access to these benefits if the 19 states – all of them Republican led – who (as of January 2017) chose not to accept the Medicaid expansion option contained in the ACA had done so.

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