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The Impact of Populism on the Republican and Democratic Parties Politics in the United States: A Case Study of the Trump Era

1. Muhammad Aftab Aslam, BA (Hons) Political Science, Forman Christian College Lahore, Pakistan. (aslamaftab477@gmail.com)
2. Muhammad Javed Ashraf, Ph.D. Scholar, Department of Political Science, Government College University Faisalabad, Pakistan. (ranajavedashraf23@gmail.com)
3. Zain Abbas, M.Phil. Scholar, Department of Political Science, Government College University Faisalabad, Pakistan. (zainabbaskhokhar98@gmail.com)
4. Muhammad Asim Khan, M. Phil Scholar, Department of Applied Linguistics, Government College University Faisalabad, Pakistan. (asim1412@gmail.com)
(Corresponding Author)
5. Tanzeela Arshaad, M.Phil Scholar, Department of Pakistan studies, Government College University Faisalabad, Pakistan. (tanzeeliasialtanzeeliasial@gmail.com)

Abstract

This study analyzed how populism can address societal dissatisfaction and polarization. This study aimed to provide a critical assessment of the impact of Trump's populism on political communication and democracy in the U.S. The qualitative approach was adopted. Cas Mudde's (2004) theoretical framework of populism was utilized and, it pertains to the 'thin-centered ideology. Trump's campaign speeches and materials, as well as scholarly works from the Pew Research Center, the Brookings Institution, and formal magazines, were primary and secondary sources used. The description of the Trump phenomena and the related anti-elite and nationalist discourse demonstrates how the Republican Party has modified its agenda. Unlike the traditional conservative and laissez-faire orthodoxy of free trade, the Republican Party has now adopted a posture of economic nationalism. This shift has its primary impact on the rural and working-class, which has historically aligned with the Party, but has also alienated moderate and suburban conservatives. Trump has increased

polarization by undermining the credibility of reporting agencies and accusing the media of a conspiracy of fake news and a rigged system. He has downplayed the truth of media reporting. The strategy employed by the Democratic Party works well in mobilizing urban and progressive electorate, but does not fully satisfy the needs of rural and conservative populations, which points to two major weaknesses in the counter-populist narrative. This research examined the ways in which, during his presidency, Trump, as a populist, changed the American programs and reorganized the structure of the party system. This research illustrates the impacts on the areas of populism, party systems, electoral behavior, and trust in institutions, which is vital for prospective research in these areas.

Keywords: populism, Donald Trump, Republican Party, political polarization, anti-elitism, voter realignment, party dynamics, democratic institutions

1. Introduction

Populism has obviously impacted political systems worldwide and in the United States. Mudde (2004) identified one element of populism as a political style which sets ‘the people’ against ‘the elite’ and creating a division between the elite and the people. Trump and the period of his campaign and presidency from 2016 to 2020 took populism to a whole new level, especially within the Republican Party, witnessed unprecedented levels of populism, especially within the Republican Party. For his nationalist, post-liberal, and populist ‘America First’ rhetoric, Trump reoriented the agenda of the Republican Party and unsettled party cohesion (Norris & Inglehart, 2019). In contrast, the Democratic Party adjusted their rhetoric and policy while the over the Trump presidency which revealed the division and complexity of American society. This period exemplifies how populism has the ability to reshape political party systems.

For the Republican Party, it was a shift away from classical conservatism, which includes a pro-free market economy and fiscal responsibility, to populism (Gidron & Bonikowski, 2013). Simultaneously, it exerted pressure on the Democratic Party to function in a politically polarized environment, employing rhetoric of an open society and resisting the perceived rise of authoritarianism (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018, p. 3). Global processes have led to the erosion of traditional party systems, a shift in voter alignments, and

an increase in polarization through populism. This work is concerned with evaluating the effect of populism during the Trump administration on the Republicans and Democrats. The study aims to investigate how nationalism transformed the Republican Party, how the Democrats responded, and the implications for American party systems. Through analyzing this period, the present study is advancing knowledge about the implications of populism for polarization, an ongoing and frequently occurring procedure of change in party loyalties, or the process by which individuals shift their allegiance from one political party to another, and voters' behavior in the United States.

1.1 Significance of the Study

Scholars should pay attention to this study because this paper offers the first systematic evaluation of how Trump staked his claim to power by remaking Republican Party ideology and voter base and how he tested the strategies and raised questions concerning the weaknesses of the Democratic Party and the nature of American political communication and democracy. In so doing, this research extends the literature on populism, political polarization and institutional demobilization, and provides a critical understanding of the potential future consequence of such ideologues on democratic institutions and, particularly, the parties system. Moreover, this research responds to the call for examining media effects on populism and polarization by offering a critical analysis of the relationship between media and the communication tactics that advance polarizing themes within populist contexts. In this context, this study contributes to addressing theoretical blind spots regarding populism, party responses, and voting behavior, thereby enriching the knowledge of policy makers, political analysts, and academicians especially the one who would like to tackle populism in democratic context. It also provides a background for other works on the effects of populism in other political systems in the international community.

1.2 Problem Statement

America became politically divided, and mainstream parties, along with their voter base and their fundamental belief systems, were transformed by Donald Trump's populist agenda. That is why through Trump, who has moved the party to a populist-nationalist profile, organizing the base around the working population and farmers, the Republicans

strengthened their internal contradictions and threats of demographic isolation. In contrast, the Democratic Party has been largely unable to mount a sustainable counter-response to Trump's populism and nationalism: crutching on progressive tropes and the opposition to authoritarianism that has convinced large swaths of well-educated city-dwellers, but lacking an answer to the economic and cultural concerns of a fading rural and industrial working class. Prior studies only outline broader effects of populism on parties and government, though they look into the relation of Trump and populism with Republicans and the role of the press, no studies specifically focus on the relations between Trump's populism, populist narratives promoted by the media and the Democratic Party reactions. In the following context, this study aims at bridging these gaps by assessing the new configuration of Trump populism and its consequences for the establishment of party and voter and institutions in the United States of America with its propensity for democracy.

1.3 Research Questions

- 1) What strategies did the Democratic Party adopt to counter Trump's populism, and how effective were they in mobilizing diverse voter segments?
- 2) To what extent did Trump's populist agenda and rhetoric exacerbate political polarization, and what implications did this have for bipartisan cooperation and democratic institutions?
- 3) How did Donald Trump's populist rhetoric reshape the Republican Party's ideological foundation and voter base during his presidency?

2. Literature Review

Populism has become an integral part of modern political processes on all scales. This is especially true in political democracies across the globe, where it is seen at both the macro- and micro-levels of party systems and voting behavior. Both the Republican and Democratic parties in the United States have been drastically changed by the rise of populism as embodied by Donald Trump. American political systems, the impact of populism on the Republican Party, and the Democratic Party's response are the main topics of this research study.

2.1 Theoretical Foundations of Populism

Populism is often described as a “thin” or “minimalist” ideology in its organizational structure, for it does not hold any ideological core as it merely posits “the people” against “the enemies of the people,” yet remains ambivalent concerning political ideologies like right-wing nationalism or left-wing socialism (Mudde, 2004; Hawkins et al., 2018). Particularly, it is American populism, anti-establishment in nature that is driven by a people’s history of economic insecurity, culturally conditioned changes, or a combination of the two (Weyland 2001; Bonikowski 2017).

Western populism culturally progressed to a state wherein the economically disenfranchised, as Western nations discounted economic discontent, culturally changed with open immigration policies. Trump politicized these sentiments by mixing nationalism with economic populism and framing immigration as a threat, all the while condemning traditional political institutions. His appeal to the economically discontented, and disenfranchised by globalization and cultural liberalism, was to the populist narrative of a moral-structure split between the elites and the people (Breeze, 2020). This demonstrated the adaptability of populism aimed at the politically inactive anger of certain societies, enabling, and encouraging it to politically engage.

2.2 Theoretical Framework for Current Study

2.2.1 Mudde’s Populism Theory

CasMudde (2004) views populism as a ‘thin-centered ideology’ that splits a society into two opposing factions: ‘the pure people’ and the ‘corrupt elite’. This observation suggests that populism can take the form of right-wing nationalism or left-wing socialism, based on the context. With Mudde, one can understand how Trump discourse and actions fit an archetypal right-wing populist, particularly focusing on nationalism, the economic populism of contempt, and disdain for liberal democratic elites. Trump had already begun his presidency as a populist politician, and long before that, he enacted the role of a rebellious elite who sought to channel the voice of the ‘Pure People’ as Mudde defined it. The framework aids in understanding shifts in Republicans during Trump’s presidency. In fiscal

policy, intermarriage skepticism replaced the old confident conservative faith in balanced budgets and free trade.

Mudde's theory recognizes a second phase in which the party's identity underwent a shift, consolidating its backing from particular demographics, notably manual laborers and the rural populace. Correspondingly, Mudde's work allows for the examination of the Democrats, who, for counter-narrative purposes, integrated diversity, liberal democracy, and the stance of being anti-illiberal. The Democrats, as purported defenders of democracy, were argued in this paper to seek endorsement from the affluent, accomplished, cosmopolitan global citizenry, by, at the same time, sidelining the unvoiced, the marginalized and impoverished, as well as the rural citizenry. Mudde also extending work to cover the role of populism with respect to polarization and distrust of the political order. The polarization Trump incited, by designating his opponents as the "corrupt establishment," made an unmistakable split between Trump's backers and the rest of the populace. This narrative fostered distrust in political institutions, and in Trump's followers, it discouraged respect for balance in reporting, as well as for elections. Thus, utilizing Mudde's ideas on Trump, this work demonstrates how party-centric populism, the electoral behavior of the populace, and the discourse in America coalesced.

2.3 Previous Studies

2.3.1 Populism and the Republican Party

This indicates that under his leadership, Donald Trump reconfigured the Republican Party from the dominant conservative political formation within the United States to a populist nationalist formation that placed emphasis on economic protectionism, immigration control, and suspicion of internationalism (Norris & Inglehart, 2019; Zaslove et al., 2021). Under Trump, the Republican Party moved away from its original liberal free-market, low government, and strong foreign policy traditions, and embraced a more ideological focus of sustaining populism directed at the working-class Americans, especially those affected adversely by globalization (Lowndes, 2020). Using Twitter, Trump designed his primary communication through social media, circumventing all traditional media and winning over those audiences that were hostile to establishment authority, thereby consolidating his party's

focus on populist rhetoric (Ott, 2017). The opposing ‘Trump correctivism’- encapsulated by Frank Fukuyama’s ‘never Trump’ doctrine, mainly involves hostile conservative pivots and focuses on an abandonment of core republican principles (Fukuyama, 2018). In contrast, Trump’s populism strengthens his dominance and attraction to the party’s working base, especially the white underclass (Oliver & Rahn, 2016). This has led to the conflation of populism and conservative orthodox, reframing the Republican Party, under Trump, as a populist cadre directed at the ‘deplorable.’

2.3.2 The Democratic Party’s Response

In their attempt to correct this trend, the Democratic Party focused on the issues of inclusion and diversity and targeted the progressive vote, emphasizing the qualities that are opposed to Trump’s nationalist narrative. While Trump capitalized on economic populism, highlighting the poor performance of trade for working people and fostering cultural resentment through the adoption of nationalist policies on immigration and race, the Democrats, embodying liberalism, established themselves as champions of social justice and engaged in a confrontation with authoritarian politics and populism, particularly during Hillary Clinton’s 2016 campaign. It drew the attention of urban, educated, and particularly minority voters, but it also had the potentially dangerous effect of alienating more moderate, rural voters, thereby exacerbating the trend of political geographic polarization (Berman, 2019; Cramer, 2016). One of the major Democratic strategies was defining Trump as a populist who endangers democratic culture in America, using data on his contentious attitude towards the branches of power and officials, as well as his provocative words (Azari, 2019). However, this strategy, while effective at rallying the base of progressive constituencies, failed to address the economic resentment and modernization anxieties, such as job offshore outsourcing and declining income. This, in turn, revealed the Democrats’ weakness in engaging with the left-behind white working-class constituencies (Judis, 2016).

2.3.3 Populism and Political Polarization

Populism, particularly by Trump, advanced the presidency and further ‘assaulted’ the ‘civil’ nature of U.S. politics and the political discourse. Trump’s framing of political actors ‘enemies of the people’ worsened and entrenched the political animus of the discourse. It

eroded the ‘civil’ expectations of the political order, where actors of different allegiances spoke and cooperated across the aisle (Mudde 2004: 71; Hawkins et al. 2018). In addition to animating ‘disorderly’ political sentiments, the populist ‘us’ versus ‘them’ rhetoric reordered the ‘disorderly’ sentiments along the lines of political affiliation; the ‘other’ was portrayed as an invading ‘other’ in terms of political discourse and ‘obtrusive’ in ‘other’ lives (Pew Research Center, 2018). This fragmentation was further exacerbated by, and ‘enabled’ social media. Social media and mass ‘dis-’ informational networks and mass media created ‘silos’ of discourse that were dedicated to ‘storm’ and inflame of populist discourse. This, at the same ‘time’, the Democratic Party opposition and organization during the Trump presidency, was progressive, ‘mobilized’ and ‘engaged’ the utopian and ‘educated’ urban focus. Notwithstanding, the needs of voters in the rural provinces, and the rural working population, were not in the consideration set, which worsened the regional and ideological divides (Levitsky and Zablatt, 2018; Norris and Inglehart). These phenomena, in the aggregate, entrenched and deepened the silos of political polarization, altered the political culture of the United States, and produced prolonged dysfunction in its democratic institutions.\

2.3.4 Broader Implications of Populism in the U.S.

The period after 2010, particularly during Trump’s presidency, has seen the rise of a particular form of populism that has brought new destabilizing questions to the process of democratization and its relations with political parties. Although populist politicians profess to serve the people, they undermine the very democratic pillars of the democracy they profess to champion, such as the independence of the judiciary, and the integrity of the electoral process (Levitsky&Ziblatt, 2018; Mounk, 2018). Trump’s presidency perfectly illustrated this syndrome, as he sought to quash the media, questioned the legitimacy of elections, and confronted the judiciary, thus, setting an enduring negative example for potential populists (Lowndes, 2020). The Trump era posed new challenges for political parties in modern democratic politics, as they sought to respond and adapt to the electoral ‘needs’ of voters while trying to hold on to a coherent ideological framework. The Republicans deepened their relations with the white working and rural constituents and gained prominence among alt-

right outsiders while further severing ties with the traditional business-conservative coalition, and the younger, moderate, and more progressive elements of the party.

Conversely, the Democratic Party's high-density urban centers and liberal voter base consolidates around counter-populism and authoritarianism. They do not, however, have sufficiently addressing strategies to the growing economic and cultural problems of the rural and working middle-class communities, (Gest, 2016). It is these dynamics that continue to explain the challenges populism is likely to pose on the workings of democracy and the stability of the political order.

While scholarship has provided a robust definition of populism and its impact on political systems, our understanding of how populism influences and reconstructs political parties, voters, and institutions within the dynamics of the Trump presidency remains limited. Most prior works primarily explain populism in more general terms or dissect global instances of populist movements, but rarely do they provide an effective examination of how Trump's populism repolarized as well as exposed and threatened the Democrats' tactics and weaknesses. Not only have there been strong arguments about what causes polarization and the rise in the rate of lost trust in institutions that populism is based on (Levitsky&Ziblatt, 2018; Mudde, 2004), but there have also been few studies that show how these changes have affected the uniquely polarized American party system and the way it is governed. The system dynamics of Trump's populist actions and campaign, the role of media populism, and the Democrats' counter-populist strategies concerning voters' decisions and institutions remain largely unexplored. . Therefore, this study aims to fill these gaps by providing a detailed examination of Trump's populist actions and the associated effects on party politics and democracy in the United States.

3. Methodology

The present research utilizes a qualitative approach in analyzing the effects of populism on both the Republican and the Democratic parties when Trump was in office. Qualitative research is appropriate in this study since it offers the possibility to study themes of political shifts, party systems, or voters, interests and perceptions, and to analyze them within their historical and contextual context.

3.1 Research Design

This case study is the presidency of Trump as the era that demonstrates the influence of populism on the American parties. The analysis is grounded on the case study method since it combines the research concerning the impact of populism on the party identification, programs, and electoral coalitions. This type of design will help in the analysis of various sources of data and hence gives the complete image of the phenomenon under study.

3.2 Data Collection

This research employs a range of qualitative data collection tools, which include political speeches, party manifestos, campaign materials, and media coverage. Populist rhetoric is categorized and examined primarily based on discourses from Donald Trump, specifically throughout the 2016 presidential campaign and during his presidential tenure. IDEAS that were expressed by the competing groups: The differences between the 2016 and 2020 election cycles and the nature of the Republican and Democratic Party platforms are also critically studied for ideological differences as well as shifts in strategic stands. To provide context to the collected primary data, secondary data that include academic articles, books, and reports published on populism and American politics are incorporated. Populist discourses that were furthered, or which media and opinion pieces sought to challenge, are mapped out by focusing on articles and excerpts. The study is strengthened by the fact that data from the various sources is triangulated in order to get a holistic analysis.

3.3 Data Analysis Technique

The analysis of the data is done using thematic analysis due to the largely qualitative data obtained in the study. This method covers factors involving pattern and theme identification and categorization and data interpretation. The first step is the data coding phase in which initial themes on populism, party, and voter categorization emerge. For instance, Trump uses code to amplify populism themes such as anti-populism, nationalism, and appealing to the people. In the same manner, the Democratic responses are searched for the counter-populist discourses, including know-what, democracy against authoritarianism, and institutionalism.

4. Data Analysis

The research instruments used in this study are various qualitative data collection instruments that comprise political speeches, party manifesto, campaign materials, and media coverage. This paper will analyze the interaction between the discourse of nationalism and anti-elitism of Trump, the ideological transformation, and how the Democrats reacted to this populist discourse using the understanding of populism as a weak-centered ideology by CasMudde (2004). In the section, both primary and secondary data including all speeches, social media posts, and party platforms of Trump, to identify thematic and discursive regularities and consequences of political polarization and governance.

The paper first breaks down the populism of Trump and focuses on how certain themes are presented, including economic nationalism, cultural conservatism, and opposition to the conventional political institutions. The analysis of these themes is further placed in the context of the overall shift in ideology and voter trends of the Republican Party. In addition, the relevant measures of the Democratic Party are also evaluated in an attempt to determine the sufficiency of its performance to the task of providing answers to popular stories and voter dissatisfaction. The data also contains an analysis of populist language, its enhancement by the media, polarization, and its impacts on the institutional trust. Having evaluated the various qualitative as well as empirical literature, this paper provides a comprehensive insight into the effects that the populism of Trump had on American politics and democracies.

Table 1

Populist Rhetoric and Themes in Trump's Speeches

| Source | Key Themes | Populist Rhetoric Indicators | Analysis and Context |
|------------------------------|---------------------------|------------------------------|--|
| Campaign Rally Speech (2016) | Anti-Elitism, Nationalism | "Drain the swamp" | Trump drew most of his supporters to his rallies that were marked by his attack on the Washington elites and that he was going to combat corruption, which appealed to the working-class voters who were disappointed in the current politics. |

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| | | | His calls to nationalism were focused on achieving unity among the supporters based on a vision of returning the glory of America. |
| Inaugural Address (2017) | Unity, America First | "America first" | Trump's inaugural speech emphasized national sovereignty and prioritizing American interests over global commitments. This slogan became a cornerstone of his administration's populist agenda, appealing to voters skeptical of globalization. |
| State of the Union (2018) | Economic Nationalism, Border Security | "Build the wall" | One of the main issues that Trump highlighted was border security, and it presented immigration as a challenge to the safety and economic stability of Americans. This was a populist rhetoric where he was championing the people against what he considered to be external threats. |
| Twitter Posts (2016–2020) | Direct Communication, Populist Appeals | Frequent use of "fake news," "rigged system" | Twitter was used by Trump as the unfiltered means of circumventing the traditional media and reaching his base. His anti-establishment position brought about his mistrust of institutions and the media because his accusations of fake news and his allegation that it was a rigged system were anti-establishment. |

The anti-intellectualism and nationalism of Trump became apparent in his political campaign and presidential tenure, which lasted until 2020 when Trump was a political novice who was ready to oppose the system. This narrative was played to the maximum such phrases of the campaign as Drain the swamp, to the delight of those who thought that the system was stacked against them. His nationalist agenda, which he declared in his first speech, advanced the discourse of nationalism by demonizing internationalism, as an act that betrays American people who are being enslaved by the internationalists. The notoriously dreadful slogan, Build the Wall was part and parcel of nationalistic economic policy, which was driven by cultural hatred, workplace apprehension, and worries about the security of a national populace. Social media and especially Twitter addiction by Trump was essential, which radically changed the ways through which politics are communicated, by removing the middlemen, such as journalists and other media practitioners. Accusing traditional media

houses of spreading a fake news and condemning a system that was rigged, Trump added to the contempt of the electorate towards the traditional political and media systems.

Not only did the above-mentioned strategies enrich the vision of the bitter Republican president, but also appeals to prejudice served him well among dissatisfied voters, intensified partisan cleavages, and promoted transformation of the Republican image. Under the leadership, the party continued to move rightward on cultural issues and more generally embraced anti-globalization economics, thus earning further isolation from the mainstream. Simultaneously, Trump's delegitimization of institutions fueled people's mistrust of these institutions, intensified polarization, and transformed media and political systems. These elements of rhetoric, symbolism, and communication approaches marked the degree of Trump's revolution in the direction of American political discourse and the transformation of the Republicans' ideological platform.

Table 2

Populist Rhetoric and Themes in Trump's Twitter Posts

| Populist Theme | Tweets | Rhetorical Strategies | Impact on Audience and Discourse |
|------------------------|---|--|---|
| Anti-Elitism | "The Fake News Media is the enemy of the people." | Delegitimizing traditional media and elites; framing himself as the voice of ordinary Americans. | Fostered distrust in media institutions; rallied supporters by positioning Trump as an outsider combating corruption. |
| Nationalism | "America First! We will no longer surrender this country to the false song of globalism." | Prioritizing national sovereignty and protectionist policies; criticizing globalization. | Strengthened support among working-class voters disillusioned by globalization; reinforced themes of national pride. |
| Economic Protectionism | "The U.S. has been ripped off by other countries for years. That's ending with me!" | Blaming foreign nations and trade agreements for economic challenges; presenting himself | Mobilized disaffected voters in manufacturing sectors; legitimized protectionist policies like tariffs and |

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| | | as a defender of American workers. | renegotiations. |
| Cultural Conservatism | “We must build the wall and stop the flow of illegal immigrants into our country.” | Highlighting immigration as a cultural and economic threat; blending identity politics with security concerns. | Resonated with white, rural voters concerned about job security and cultural identity; solidified a loyal voter base. |
| Anti-Institutionalism | “The system is rigged! The Democrats are trying to steal the election!” | Undermining trust in electoral and governance systems; casting doubt on institutional integrity. | Eroded public trust in democratic processes; intensified partisan divides and polarization. |
| Polarization | “The Radical Left Democrats have gone CRAZY. They want to destroy our country!” | Creating a binary opposition between “patriots” (supporters) and “enemies” (Democrats, liberals). | Deepened ideological divides; framed opposition as existential threats, rallying his base with a sense of urgency. |
| Direct Communication | “Thank you to my supporters. Together, we are making America great again!” | Personalizing communication to foster a sense of inclusion and loyalty. | Strengthened personal connection with his base; bypassed traditional gatekeepers to maintain direct influence. |

The tweets of the former President of the USA, Donald Trump, reveal the use of populism's distinctive feature, language, for discursive antagonism or opposition, the reframing of the political opposition's message, the establishment of a loyal support foundation, and the implicit rewiring of a political party's identity. In this article's analysis, it is seen that Trump dwelled on the subjects that these White voter groups griped over anti-globalization, anti-immigration, protectionism, and anti-cultural Marxism (Gest, 2016; Norris & Inglehart, 2019).

Candidate constant verbal aggression towards traditional media discredited institutional intermediaries, which instilled mistrust among his supporters. He used insults in his tweets, referring to these sources as 'fake news' and 'the enemy of the people'. The nationalist rhetoric he employed during the campaign, such as "America first" or "make

America great again," resonated well with voters who felt marginalized by the ruling establishment's policies. Trump not only legitimized politics and institutions but also set a point of departure on polarizing the politics, creating an image of political enemies as existential threats to the people in the rigged system (Mudde 2004). Trump used his Twitter activities to reach out to his voters by bypassing the usual media and continuing with his populist theme without institutionally stabilizing it. It was not only the rhetorical tool that helped him to put his presidency among the most conservative Republicans in the Republican Party but also created enduring expenses to cross-partisan collaboration and institutionalization of democracy and social media transformational potential in the modern time.

Table 3

Media Framing and its Impact on Public Discourse

| Media Source Type | Key Outlets | Narrative Focus | Impact on Public Discourse |
|-----------------------------------|--------------------------|---|--|
| Mainstream Media | CNN, The New York Times | Critique of populist rhetoric, emphasis on fact-checking and institutional accountability | Intensified polarization and mistrust in institutions; portrayed Trump's populism as a deviation from democratic norms, leading to a fragmented audience perception of credibility. |
| Conservative Media | Fox News, Breitbart | Support for populist themes, promotion of Trump's policies, and critique of "liberal elites" | Reinforced populist narratives among Republican supporters, creating an ideological echo chamber and amplifying anti-establishment sentiments. |
| Independent and Alternative Media | The Intercept, Vice News | Critical analysis of both major parties, including Trump's populism and Democratic counter-narratives | Diversified public discourse, fostering critical debate on systemic issues; challenged both populist and establishment ideologies, appealing to a politically disenchanted audience. |

Mainstream sources such as CNN and The New York Times are liberal sources that acted as active opponents; they were debunking the things Trump has said, pointing out that the president lied, and explaining how this president posed a threat to democracy. However, their attempts to seek to ensure the powerful are kept in check repeatedly angered Trump's

supporters since the President himself labeled mainstream news as fake and promoted polarization.

On the other hand, news sites such as Fox News and Breitbart News supported Trump's presidency and its populist themes of traditional cultural values, economic nationalism, and the war against "liberal globalists." The matching with Trump's discourse generated positive feedback, which helped to strengthen the populism agenda among the Republican electorate, increase distrust in the mainstream media, and increase polarization. Such outlets as The Intercept and Vice News, who belong to the ranks of so called progressive media, did not merely focus on scandals and Trump's eccentricities but examined unequal structures of the society as well as problematized both Trump's populism and Democrats' actions.

Despite broadening perspectives and drawing disillusioned audiences to politics, these outlets remained confined to a specific niche within the fragmented, polarized political echo chamber. Finally, media framing in the Trump era socially constructed as well as reflected the nature of political polarization as one of the significant outcomes, making the media influential and responsible for the dissemination of information as well as the letting loose of social conflict.

Table 4

Contributions of Secondary Sources

| Source | Examples | Key Contributions | Analysis and Context |
|-------------------|---|--|---|
| Academic Articles | Mudde (2004) on populism theory, Norris & Inglehart (2019) on cultural backlash | Provided foundational definitions of populism as a "thin-centered ideology" juxtaposing "the pure people" and "the corrupt elite." Examined global trends and conditions fostering populism, including economic inequality and political polarization. | Mudde's conceptual framework is crucial for understanding the ideological flexibility of populism, which allows it to align with right-wing nationalism or left-wing socialism. Norris and Inglehart's exploration of cultural backlash highlights how societal shifts in values and identity contributed to populist movements, particularly in the U.S. during the Trump era. |

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| Books | Levitsky&Ziblatt (2018) on democratic norms, Judis (2016) on populist movements | Explored the erosion of democratic norms under populist leaders and the rise of populist movements during economic and social crises. | Levitsky and Ziblatt’s work is instrumental in analyzing how populist rhetoric undermines democratic checks and balances, focusing on Trump’s challenges to institutional norms. Judis provides a historical perspective on how populism arises in response to perceived failures of political elites to address widespread grievances. |
| Policy Reports | Pew Research Center (2018) on political polarization, Brookings Institution reports on populism | Offered empirical data on voter behavior, polarization, and the appeal of populist themes, with specific insights into the U.S. electorate. | Pew’s data reveal how polarization has deepened during the Trump era, with increasing ideological alignment along partisan lines. Brookings’ analysis contextualizes these shifts within broader societal changes, providing a nuanced understanding of how populist rhetoric appeals to specific voter demographics. |

Theoretical and empirical sources contribute to describing the effects of populism, hence creating an advanced theoretical and empirical lens to define the effects of populism during the Trump presidency. Another account by Mudde (2004) builds populism as a rather fluid concept in order to qualify Trump’s discourse as right-wing populist, which arises from nationalist and anti-establishment alternatives. As far as the societal changes are concerned, those have been discussed by Norris and Inglehart (2019), who propound the culture backfire theory. These theoretical backgrounds provide a lens through which to observe the general social unrest that gave rise to Trump's populism. Similarly, Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018:10–11) discuss how Trump's attacks on the judiciary, media, and electoral colleges are undermining the fundamental principles of democracy.

From a historical perspective, Judis (2016) emphasizes that we should discuss Trump's ascent against the backdrop of populism, a periodic phenomenon that reacts to system crises and the inefficiency of elites. Pew Research Center (2018) and the Brookings Institution support this analysis with empirical evidence by addressing the increasing

polarization of voters in the United States as well as identifying demographical and cultural key determinants of populism. During the Trump period, choosing policies that aligned with partisan identities brought people together. Now, Pew provides more information on the convergence of Trump fans as working-class people in rural America. However, it cannot explain the ideological transformations of the ruling Republican and Democratic parties due to Trump's campaigns. Taken together, these sources support the same basic view of populism as the reflection of society's malcontent and the force that is currently inciting changes in parties, voters, and polarization. The theoretical with the empirical, this paper shows that Trump was not only conforming to the populist international zeitgeist but engaging with the American cultural, economic, and political landscape in ways that redefined discursive practices and strategic calculations within the parties.

5. Discussion

The Democratic Party's reaction to President Trump promoted populism as a blend of measures targeting Trump supporters and expectations of gaining favor among urban, educated, and minority voters. Presenting Trump's populism as an endless threat to democratic institutions, the party focused on the potential for authoritarianism, which includes the disparaging of the judiciary and the media (Levitsky&Ziblatt, 2018). Again, this story appealed most to progressive/center-left voters, especially suburban and older voters who wanted to have normalcy and togetherness; this can be identified with 2020 themes of restoring normalcy and unity that was used by Biden (Pew Research Center, 2020).

Subsidies such as healthcare and climate change are universal and minority rights were promoted, and during the primaries, both Bernie Sanders and Warren were pushing to enact changes. Nonetheless, the Democrats could not always run on these progressive policies, when the general elections came around, the party moved to a more moderate position and had moderate candidates, and this showed a contradiction between the progressive and moderate wing of the Democratic Party. Nevertheless, the party continued to have a hard time with mobilization working class voters and rural voters, who were most sensitive to the Trump nationalist-populist nationalism, immigration restrictions, and cultural values.

Trump prevented his own party by carrying out a vehement political campaign against Democratic Party and attacking Democratic leaders personally, calling them adversarial. The members of the Republican Party, on their part, embarked on bipartisan collaboration thus making the polarization even more polar.

Embracing an “anti-Trumpism” strategy was detrimental to the party, coalescing an anti-Trump coalition but lacking a positive message appealing to the white working-class populists upset with the cultural and economic status quo. In essence, the emphasis on progressive cultural values as a source of electoral support proved to be highly effective in urban areas, but it also alienated both rural and moderate voters, thereby exacerbating regional cleavages (Cramer, 2016). All in all, the partial successes of the Democratic Party’s strategies in reaching out to particular kinds of voters in particular communities underscored the experiences’ most important legacy praising the enduring difficulty of crafting a unified and effective coalition in a climate of growing political division based on a postmodern media culture.

Trump's populist focus and language have escalated political polarization by diminishing the negotiated nature of politics, which has had disastrous effects on democratic institutions. Seeking to establish a political divide between the people and the corrupt elite, Trump exacerbated an already existing division of partisan analysis, much in the same way that Mudde (2004) described. By questioning the credibility of TV and print media, courts, and elections, he polarized society and created a doctrine for his supporters and a reason for the opponents to reject him (Levitsky&Ziblatt, 2018). Trump additionally leveraged the Trump also used the media, particularly Twitter, to eliminate organized intermediaries, further polarizing society and creating echo chambers (Ott, 2017).

Meaning that dissenting views loomed as existential threats to supporters’ self-organizing principles, thereby eroding the ability of democratic institutions to perform.” Even though Trump made some gesturing the first two years of his administration, Trump made some outreach gestures to the Democrats, but his rhetoric's tangible impacts on increasing bipartisanship in governance were most noticeable in Congress, where bipartisan stalemate on important legislative matters like healthcare and immigration came to characterize governing dynamics (Pew Research Center, 2018).

Besides, as it was reported by Brookings Institution (2021), Trump and his false claims about voter fraud following the 2020 election gave the seeds of doubt to the electoral process and subsequently, reduced the confidence of his supporters. Trump exhibited this attitude towards Trump negativity on judicial rulings to further the negative views about the judiciary, thus making the institutional mistrust even stronger. Fox News and Breitbart supported the populist messaging of Trump by establishing a unique environment which enhanced polarization and limited cross-cutting. Taken together, these mechanisms lead to the reformulation of speech, institutional credibility, and the political landscape as well as leaving issues that have to be institutionalized and regaining the confidence on the other side of the political spectrum.

Trump moved still to the further right in an even more populist-nationalist shade which has reinforced the preexisting economic nationalist, traditionalist-populist, and post-established order movements within it. The Republican Party has developed a new policy grounded on nationalism, protectionism, and isolationism under Trump in continuation of an American tradition of free markets, limited government, and internationalism (Norris and Inglehart, 2019). This change was summed up in his America First agenda, where the angry working people got an attraction in the measures such as tariffs to renegotiate NAFTA into the USMCA which was a reaction to globalization and economic liberalization (Judis, 2016). This change was a blow to the traditionalism in the party since it has seen the party support interventions by the government to save jobs and industries instead of promoting smaller government policies.

The last element that has been included into the Republican Party agenda is the cultural conservatism: the speeches about immigration and identity made by Trump resonated with the mood of White, rural, and working constituents. On the one hand, Trump has made many unwise decisions that just contributed to the replacement of the culture, including the building of border walls and the proliferation of anti-immigration policies, especially against Latino immigrants, which has complicated the political foundations of social conservatism and evangelical Christianity (Gest, 2016). Meanwhile, Trump dismantled the relationship of the Republican elites to other traditions of political leadership, claiming that the allegiance to the programs developed by the President took precedence over the loyalty to the conservative values (Mudde, 2004).

This change contributed to the establishment of a ground of white and rural non-college voters, including providers, and exasperated suburban and college-educated conservative voters (Pew Research Center, 2020). Nevertheless, the same realignment caused a conflict within the party, with the traditional conservatives worrying that the regular modification of the party policies and ideology as a result of the populist motives might destroy centuries-old values and principles. Trump populism energized a loyal base and solidified even more his grip on the republicans, yet created new endless issues to the organization and outreach to the electorates of the republicans.

6. Findings of the Study

This study showed that Donald Trump's populist discourse played a crucial role in changing the identity of the Republican Party and its voter base on the one hand, as well as contributing to the polarization and transformation of the Democratic Party strategy on the other. Significantly, Trump mobilized economic nationalism, cultural traditionalism, and anti-political-establishment sentiment as the Republican Party abandoned the concerns of balanced budgets, lower taxes, and free trade of previous conservative administrations, focusing instead on jobs, barriers, and the frustrated white voter.

This change clearly appealed to the white working class and rural voters, reinforcing their support while turning off some suburban and educated conservative voters (Pew Research Center February 2020). The analysis also found out that polarizing language that Trump used, including calling his opponents the corrupt establishment, and questioning the validity of media and electoral institutions with bogus claims that there is a fake media and rigged elections, added to the polarization and portrayed distrust towards the institutions (Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2018). At the same time, the Democratic Party was more focused on tackling the social inequality and aggravating urban and educated constituencies and was overlooking the economic and cultural challenges of rural and moderate voters (Norris, and Inglehart, 2019). The fact that the Democrats address the voters in one language and their audience in another is symptomatic of the challenges involving the fight against populism considering the polarization context.

These results can be further substantiated empirically by the Brookings Institution that performed the analysis of the 2016 Presidential election data and indicated that Trump was

the most popular among non-college whites, meaning that there was a considerable shift in this group. Even in the event he has been perceived as an opportunity to have less partisan politics, this research study reveals how Trump had re-branded populism, polarization, and took a new direction in imparting the American ethic and polity.

This study's conclusion aligns with CasMudde's definition of populism, a "thin-centered ideology" that creates a conflict between the "pure people" and the "corrupt elite". This framework describes Donald Trump's rhetoric and its influence on the American political landscape. Trump's vilification of political adversaries and some media houses as crooked and untrustworthy enabled him to tap into the anger of the forgotten man; as Mudde said, populists are able to be of both the left and right wing depending on the overarching political narrative of a country. To elaborate on this perspective, Trump modified the populist binary of insiders versus outsiders based on nationalism, cultural conservatism, and economic protectionism to capture the feelings of rural and blue-collar workers who felt left out of the effects of globalization and cultural change (Norris & Inglehart, 2019).

Consequently, the anti-Obama sentiment, despite staging an elitist rhetoric, generated an anti-elitist narrative that reoriented the Republican Party to its earlier cultural populism and also solidified an electorally loyal base, supporting Mudde's proposition that populism is most likely to occur in societies increasingly disillusioned and polarized. But they also show that this 'thin-center' nature of populism, when it was highly charged and effective in rallying supporters, contributed to extreme polarization by marginalizing the moderates and the institutional actors, adversely affecting bipartisanship and democratic values (Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2018). Pew Research Center, 2020, and Brookings Institution data confirm these trends and point to the way in which Trump intensified American polarization and altered institutional confidence to substantiate the dynamism and antagonism in Mudde's populism definition.

7. Conclusion

This paper shows how populism by Trump has transformed the Republican Party values, caused voter realignment, and created division all of which continue to be evident in the modern American politics. On the understanding of populism that was propagated by

CasMudde (2004) as a thin-centered ideology, this study demonstrated how the rhetoric of anti-elite, nationalism, and protectionism by Trump transformed the Republican party to a populist-nationalist party. Trump was able to unite a more unified base by mobilizing dissatisfied rural and working-class voters, but they also provoked the discontent of suburban conservative, college-educated voters, which demonstrates the flexibility of populism to the frustrations of society (Norris and Inglehart, 2019).

Even though the realignment provided the direct benefits on the electoral front, it helped to show the inner structure and ideology of the party, which raised questions about its very ideological uniformity. In the paper, the state of Trump in alleviating divisiveness is highlighted through his categorical labeling of the media and the political institutions as fake news. This is in line with the argument presented by Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018), who believe that Trump undermines the cohesion of both groups and threatens the political stability. The rift became severe during the administration of Trump when individuals became much more politicized in their preferences to other parties and ideologies. In the same fashion, the Brookings results indicate that Trump is quite appealing to non-White high school graduates, thus, changing the social make-up of the Republican vote and continuing with the split of the party.

The response of the Democratic Party, which emphasizes the idea of diversity, progressive beliefs, and anti-Trumpian authoritarianism, partially worked to garner urban and minority support. It was, however, not able to incorporate the economic and cultural dissatisfaction of the rural and mainstream voters, therefore, hobbling the ability of the party to act as a mediator. This mismatch confirms the ineffectiveness of counter-populism efforts even as the divided environment in terms of institutional distrust became more and more polarized.

Finally, found that the theoretical framework proposed by Mudde limited the populism of Trump but, at the same time, contributed to and fueled the dissatisfaction of the society. Trump wants to reinvent the Republican Party and bring a different constituency to it but, on the cost of democratic constitutionalism. These effects are substantial political fragmentation, party uniqueness and significant loss of institutional authority. In order to resolve these problems, we need to strive to build trust with institutions and encourage partisanship, which has been destroyed by populist rhetoric in modern politics.

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