

# The Perils Of Populism

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Populism, a political philosophy that appeals to and claims to represent the interests and notions of the average person, has enjoyed a long history in the United States. It can be argued that populist fears fueled the American Revolution, making populism part of the nation's political DNA. It swept Andrew Jackson into the White House in the election of 1828. Between the 1890s and the 1930s, populist parties, played a noteworthy though unsuccessful role, engaging political heavyweights such as Theodore Roosevelt and Huey Long. Four-term Alabama Governor George Wallace, founder of the populist American Independent Party, won five states in the 1968 presidential election.

More recently, both the Tea Party (2009) and the Occupy Wall Street (2011) movements were grassroots demonstrations of the political right and left, respectively. Both portrayed themselves as uprisings of the people, attacking the excesses of the political, and in the case of the Occupy movement, corporate establishments from each side of the political spectrum. Several Tea Party supporters have since held elective office, while the Occupy movement has not experienced similar tangible success.

The angry, grassroots undercurrents initiated by these movements have unleashed two viable presidential candidates, Donald Trump, a nominal Republican, and Bernie Sanders, a nominal Democrat, onto the American political scene. Though these two candidates are said to hail from opposite ends of the political spectrum, both tap into the growing anger of Joe and Jane American, who feel that their concerns and needs have been ignored by the powers that be for far too long. Both have succeeded far beyond most pundits' expectations.

Trump is a nationalist, whether he would call himself that or not. His slogan, "Make America Great Again," is clearly nationalistic and nostalgic in nature. He follows in the footsteps of other nationalists from around the world who trumpet their nations' virtues and aim to restore their countries to the greatness they believe they deserve. He is also a nativist, bellowing against allowing foreigners into the country, whether illegal immigrants from south of the border or refugees from various Muslim nations. In addition, he seems to know the hot-button issues that make his audiences of working-class Americans either cheer or howl. His rhetoric has made him the straight-talking, get-things-done champion of the long-ignored American worker.

Sanders' shtick is pandering to leftists who feel cheated and exploited economically by big business and the "elites." He shouts almost non-stop about how the nation's billionaires have rigged the system to syphon all the money to themselves, leaving little or nothing for the "poor." These tycoons and moneyed interests, he says, have to be pulled down and their ill-gotten gains redistributed—by the government—to the common people. His ultimate aims are socialist, modeling his new America on Scandinavian social democracies. As for foreign policy, he seems to care little about it except that the U.S. should stop sending its youth off to fight foreign wars.

These ideas have found traction across the nation because everyday Americans, having faced extended negative economic circumstances and seen little or no help coming from Washington, have ceased to trust their government and their political representatives. They are looking for leaders who believe and think as they do, and in so doing, they have set themselves up for demagogues who

pander to their desires for change. A populist politician need not have an ideology to steer his policies—all he must do is keep a finger in the air to see which way the political wind is blowing. If such a leader is elected, his constituents will find to their chagrin that they have elevated a pragmatist—or worse—into office.

Populism is not just an American phenomenon. Political observers have noted that populist authoritarian parties have sprung up and even thrived in many Western nations over the past thirty years. As in America, these movements, and later parties, come from both left and right. For example, the parties headed by Marine Le Pen in France and Geert Wilders in The Netherlands are rightist parties of this sort, while the parties of Hugo Chavez in Venezuela and Evo Morales in Bolivia fall on the far left.

Scholars argue about the cause of populism, and the conventional reasons—economic downturns and social immobility—have been found not to be conclusive, since populist parties have risen in both impoverished and affluent nations, as well as in both egalitarian and repressive ones. Some have suggested that the driver of today's populism is long-term, ongoing social change, including drastic liberalization of sex roles, gender identity, homosexual rights, social diversity, and religious values, among others. Due to this kind of social upset, traditionalists, feeling marginalized, seek a strong leader to return the ship of state to their idea of the nation's halcyon days.

But as old saw goes, “Be careful what you wish for.” The Bible warns us not to trust in men or in princes because they cannot truly help us (Psalm 118:8-9; 146:3; Jeremiah 17:5). As much as the rhetoric may strike a chord, populism is not the answer, as it has often birthed oppressive regimes like Nazi Germany and *Chavista* Venezuela. In fact, our hope is not in this world at all, for only the return of Jesus Christ as King of kings will solve the mess humanity has made on earth.