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Trump's Populism

The Mobilization of Nationalist Cleavages and the Future of US Democracy

Bart Bonikowski

Donald Trump's 2016 electoral success has been widely interpreted as an unexpected victory for populism in the United States and a harbinger of a populist era across Western democracies. In one sense, this view is correct: the Trump campaign succeeded by employing discursive strategies comparable to those of populist radical-right parties in Europe (Mudde 2007), and it did so against an initial headwind of elite resistance within the Republican Party. Trump's effective capture of the party's base caught many experts off-guard and suggested that no country is immune from populist politics. At the same time, however, the centrality of ethno-nationalism in Trump's populist rhetoric calls into question the novelty of his approach and the degree to which the United States is a surprising site for a nativist revival. As I will argue in this chapter, multiple traditions of nationalism – understood here as distinct understandings of nationhood held by subsets of the population – have competed over the course of US history, with their relative dominance shifting with socio-historical context. Indeed, this feature of political culture is not unique to the United States: similar nationalist cleavages are commonplace throughout Western democracies, and they have been fueling the successes of right-wing populist parties in a growing number of countries.

In light of these insights, the main analytical tasks of this chapter are to understand the circumstances under which nationalist cleavages become politically mobilized and what the long-term consequences are of the normalization of nativist discourse, particularly when championed by a major national party. In answering these questions, I will emphasize the importance of a confluence of large-scale social, economic, and cultural changes, which gave ethno-nationalist populism renewed resonance, and

argue that the embrace of this form of politics by the Republican Party poses considerable, though not inescapable, dangers to the future of US democracy. Whether or not the erosion of democratic institutions comes to pass, the radicalism mobilized by Trump, but also by his Republican predecessors, has upended longstanding political norms, and in so doing has generated favorable conditions for the future success of radical candidates. As a result, ethno-nationalist populism is likely to remain a central feature of US politics for years to come.

The Populist Radical Right: Anti-Elitism, Ethno-Nationalism, and Authoritarianism

The field of populism research is rife with definitional debates. Given the plethora of conceptual work published in recent years (Aslanidis 2016; Gidron and Bonikowski 2013; Hawkins 2009; Mudde 2007; Müller 2016), I will set aside the issues of populism's ontology and operationalization and, instead, focus on the relationship between populism and two phenomena with which it is closely aligned on the radical right: nationalism and authoritarianism.

If we understand populism to represent a form of politics predicated on a moral opposition between the virtuous people and a fundamentally corrupt elite (Mudde 2007), it becomes apparent that populism must be combined with other ideas in order to serve as a mobilizing force in politics. The definition of the people is typically vague in populist claims-making, and the choice of vilified elites is flexible (Rooduijn and Pauwels 2011). To give shape to "the people," right-wing populist discourse often draws on widely shared, but contested, conceptions of nationhood. By distinguishing between legitimate members of the nation and those whose claims to nationhood are questionable, radical-right actors are able to tap into viscerally experienced collective identities and activate powerful in-group and out-group dynamics (Tajfel and Turner 1979; Mason 2018). The choice of elites follows from this as well: those who have ostensibly abandoned the "true" members of the nation in favor of minorities, immigrants, and other putative outsiders must be removed from political power and replaced with the people's legitimate representatives.

But the moral decay of the elites, according to the standard radical-right populist narrative, is not limited to individuals; it is systemic: it infuses the institutions used by elites to pursue their self-interest and to advance the pluralist project that gives unfair advantage to minority groups. This is where the third element of radical-right ideology becomes

relevant: in order to reform the institutions and rout their occupants, anti-elite populism and ascriptive nationalism are combined with authoritarian measures that allow the people to take back control of the state, typically in as direct a manner as possible (Mudde 2007; Müller 2016). Hurdles presented by an autonomous judiciary, a free press, and grassroots protest must be sidestepped or, when necessary, eradicated. During campaigns, such tendencies are typically expressed through discursive norm violations, such as threatening one's opponents, encouraging vigilante violence, or delegitimizing existing institutions. When in power, more authoritarian radical-right parties take active steps to secure extensive and lasting power for themselves and "the people" to whom they owe allegiance.

In connecting anti-elite claims with exclusionary nationalism and authoritarianism, I want to be clear in avoiding two misunderstandings. First, even though these three phenomena are often interconnected, they need not necessarily be so. Indeed, radical-left populism is less prone to ethno-nationalist tendencies than is radical-right populism, at least in contemporary Europe and the United States (Judis 2016). Moreover, within the radical-left and radical-right party families, there is considerable variation in the degree to which authoritarianism is an expressed strategy or tacit objective of radical candidates. Therefore, there is value in analytically separating anti-elitism, nationalism, and authoritarianism and not conflating them under a single rubric of radical politics.

Second, while these three elements function somewhat similarly (each is manifested in discourse and mobilizes corresponding popular attitudes), not all three are equally potent in mobilizing deeply rooted identities. Anti-elite claims may resonate with those who have lost confidence in the state, while authoritarian promises may mobilize those who have little regard for democracy, but institutional distrust is a dynamic and therefore thin sentiment, whereas disregard for democracy is likely to be salient only to a minority of voters. Conceptions of nationhood, on the other hand, are pervasive, deeply held, emotionally charged, and lasting (Bonikowski and DiMaggio 2016). As a result, they provide a powerful basis for political mobilization that can be profitably combined with anti-elite and authoritarian claims.

In his presidential campaign, Donald Trump made frequent use of all three elements of radical-right discourse (Oliver and Rahn 2016). In attacking Washington elites for being out of touch with the interests of the people, he appealed to longstanding anti-statist tendencies in the American electorate (Lipset 1997), which had been further aggravated by

popular discontent with legislative deadlock and failed political promises by the Republican Party, as well as by the persistent delegitimization of President Obama and his policies by conservative media and politicians. Trump also repeatedly violated norms of political decorum and responsible democratic discourse by threatening to jail Hillary Clinton, encouraging violence at his rallies, and criticizing the autonomy of the media and the judiciary. This mobilized voters who perceived the Democratic Party as fundamentally un-American (itself a consequence of rapidly rising partisan polarization [Baldassarri and Gelman 2008]) and who had no qualms about violating the niceties of democratic conduct to punish their perceived enemies.

Finally, and – as I will argue – most importantly, Trump appealed to ethnically, racially, and culturally exclusionary understandings of American identity widespread in US society, by representing Mexican immigrants as criminals, publicly battling the parents of a fallen American soldier of Muslim faith, questioning the impartiality of a Mexican-American judge, and, for years prior to the election, fanning the flames of Islamophobic and racist conspiracy theories concerning President Obama's place of birth. In short, the Trump campaign regularly intermixed, and eventually fused, populist, authoritarian, and nationalist political frames, which resonated deeply with supporters' anti-elite, illiberal, and exclusionary sentiments (on the roots of such resonance, see Bonikowski 2017a).

While all three dimensions of radicalism were prominent in the Trump campaign, nationalism is of central relevance for understanding the campaign's appeal and the future of radical politics in the United States. This is the case for three reasons. First, nationalism is the one feature of Trump's politics that has been consistent over time, from his early engagement with the "birther" movement, through his vitriolic campaign, to his presidency. This is true both of his discourse and of his favored policy proposals. The anti-elitist promises to "drain the swamp" of corrupt elites and to champion those left behind by neoliberalism and economic globalization were cast aside shortly after the election, as the Trump administration became a haven for Wall Street veterans and its economic policy came to be outsourced to conservative Republicans (Waldman 2016). Trump's trenchant critiques of political elites have also had few effects: with the exception of appointing an inexperienced Cabinet and circle of close advisors, the administration has taken no steps to limit lobbying or usurp power from elected representatives. In contrast, the anti-immigrant, Islamophobic, and

racist elements of Trump's bleak nationalism have remained prominent, as exemplified by the Muslim travel ban, the scaling back of anti-discrimination law enforcement by the Department of Justice, the tacit endorsement of white supremacist groups after the Charlottesville attack, the renewed critical attention to affirmative action in elite higher education, and the separation of families at the US–Mexico border (Bier 2017; Huseman and Waldman 2017; Keith 2017; Savage 2017; Zapotosky 2018).

Second, unlike authoritarianism, and to some degree anti-elitism, nationalism represents a deep and longstanding fissure in American political culture that has been perennially exploited by opportunistic politicians during times of social and economic uncertainty (Lieven 2012). This is why the administration's displays of ongoing commitment to social exclusion, reinforced by widespread negative partisanship, have been sufficient to maintain a seemingly unshakeable base of support for the president, consisting of more than 30 percent of the electorate (Manchester 2017). Because the sentiments awakened by Donald Trump's campaign and presidency are visceral and rooted in a long ideological tradition, their renewed salience is unlikely to subside even after Trump ceases to be president.

Third, because ethnic, racial, religious, and cultural exclusion has historically vacillated in and out of prominence in US political culture and policy-making, it carries more legitimacy for a sizeable subset of Americans than overtly authoritarian abuses of executive power. As such, it is more likely to galvanize an existing base of support and result in less effective counter-pressure than a sudden scaling back of democratic practices. While the same could be said of anti-elitism, the omnipresence of less radical varieties of populism in US political culture (Bonikowski and Gidron 2016; Lipset 1990) makes it a less potent mobilizing force, at least when employed in the absence of powerful nationalist frames.

In light of the centrality of nationalism in Trump's discourse and governing agenda, it bears asking just why this form of politics resonates so deeply with the American public. To begin answering that question, it is important to understand that, contrary to common conceptions of American national identity, historically, liberalism and civic republicanism have not been the sole defining characteristics of the country's political culture. Just as important has been a persistent and often dominant view of American nationhood as defined by race, ethnicity, religion, and other largely immutable traits (Smith 1999). In fact, the coexistence of multiple conflicting understandings of the nation is not limited to the

United States. Similar cleavages exist in all modern democracies, even if their specific content and the timing of their temporal fluctuations varies (Bonikowski 2013). While exclusionary forms of nationalism routinely affect social interaction, equal access to resources and opportunities, and political preferences – and even cause eruptions of violence – it is only occasionally that they emerge as the primary determinants of political outcomes. Recent years have witnessed just such a moment.

Nationalist Cleavages in the United States

For decades nationalism was peripheral to, if not altogether missing, from scholarly discussions of contemporary American politics. Its use was relegated to discussions of early nation-building efforts in the nascent republic and to research on extremist groups, such as the Ku Klux Klan or the neo-Nazis, which had been excluded from mainstream politics in the post-Jim-Crow era (and well before then outside the South) (see, e.g., Blee 2008; and Waldstreicher 1997). Nationalism was therefore seen largely as a problem of the past – or, alternatively, of other countries, where separatism or incomplete modernization generated ongoing tensions concerning the nation's self-understanding and future direction (e.g., Hechter 2001). The seemingly settled nature of American nationhood was reinforced by perceptions of continued progress with respect to social inequality. Whatever mistakes America had made in the past, such injustices were often perceived as short-term deviations from a foundational commitment to equality, and it is the latter that made the United States an exceptional nation (Smith 1993).

Against this liberal narrative stood a less dominant, more radical tradition of critical race scholars (Bell 1989; Feagin 2010; Omi and Winant 1994) and revisionist historians (Billington 1964; Higham 2002 [1955]), for whom the United States' lengthy record of social exclusion and injustice was not merely a deviation from the nation's core egalitarian ideals but a constitutive feature of America's national character (for more recent accounts, see Anderson 2016; and Coates 2015). The insights of this critical perspective were subsequently brought into research on American nationalism, in the form of the "multiple traditions" approach. It is this approach that is of particular value for understanding contemporary radical-right politics. For scholars such as Smith (1999) and Lieven (2012), neither liberalism nor racial domination is the sole foundation of America's national character. In fact, the very notion of a single homogeneous value system at the heart of a country's political culture is

misguided. Instead, what has defined the United States from its inception is protracted competition between alternative views of American nationhood. These views diverge on who deserves to legitimately belong to the nation, whether America should be a progressive champion of social equality, both at home and abroad, and what aspects of the nation or the state are worthy of pride and admiration.

In certain historical periods this competition has erupted into violence, most notably during the Civil War, but also in waves of public lynchings during the Jim Crow era or less coordinated terrorist attacks, such as that in Charlottesville in August 2017. More routinely, however, these tensions manifest themselves in everyday social interactions, public discourse, and policy. As Smith (1999) demonstrates, entire domains of policy-making (in the case of his research, immigration law) were shaped by the struggle between incompatible nationalist visions, whose traces can still be observed in the complex web of legislative decisions produced over the past two centuries.

Whereas historical research has traced multiple traditions of nationhood in institutional practices and elite discourse, a distinct survey-based approach in political science and sociology has sought to identify them in the attitudes of ordinary Americans. The evidence is largely consistent with the historical record: Americans disagree sharply about the meaning of their nation, and these distinct beliefs are associated with out-group attitudes, opinions on immigration and welfare policy, and other political preferences (Citrin et al. 1994; Schildkraut 2003; Theiss-Morse 2009).

For some scholars these differences are a matter of degree, but more recent research suggests that they constitute distinct cultural camps, each of which is characterized by a particular attitudinal profile. Inductively clustering multiple attitudinal measures of national attachment, beliefs about appropriate criteria of national belonging, domain-specific national pride, and comparisons of the United States with other nations, Bonikowski and DiMaggio (2016) identify four such camps. Two are distinguished by extreme attitudes on all the variables (those with low values are termed "the disengaged"; those with high values, "ardent nationalists"), and two by cross-cutting combinations of attitudes ("restrictive nationalists" hold exclusionary definitions of national membership, have low pride in institutions, and are moderately chauvinistic, and "creedal nationalists" are inclusive, reasonably proud of the nation, and moderately chauvinistic).

These patterns are summarized in Table 4.1. Because the four cultural models are highly correlated with political preferences but cut

TABLE 4.1. *Four popular conceptions of American nationalism*

		Distribution of attitudinal variables			
		Strength of attachment to nation	Criteria of national belonging	Pride in the nation and state	Sense of national superiority
Type of nationalism	Creedal	High	Elective	High	Moderate
	Disengaged	Moderate	Elective	Low (esp. state)	Low
	Restrictive	Moderate	Ascriptive	Low (esp. state)	Moderate
	Ardent	High	Ascriptive	High	High

Note: The categories in the columns are shorthand for 24 distinct attitudinal variables. The four types of nationalism in the rows were inductively generated by a latent class analysis of data from the 1996 and 2003 General Social Survey (GSS) and a 2012 online panel collected by GfK Custom Research.

Source: Bonikowski and DiMaggio (2016). Reprinted with permission of SAGE Publications, Inc.

across partisan identity, they represent deep cultural cleavages that divide Americans from one another on issues of fundamental political importance: what the nation means, how its past should be understood, and what its future ought to be. Strikingly, no fewer than one half of Americans espouse views of the nation that restrict legitimate membership on the basis of native birth, Christian faith, and linguistic fluency (Bonikowski and DiMaggio 2016). For a more detailed breakdown of the sociodemographic correlates of the four nationalist cleavages, see Table 4.2.

Of course, it is one thing for multiple conceptions of nationhood to coexist and compete for dominance, as suggested by both the historical and survey-based research, but another for them to become the central determinants of electoral outcomes. In most US federal elections of the last four decades, both parties engaged in routinized evocations of patriotic symbols and narratives, downplaying the heterogeneity in nationalist beliefs that characterizes the US population. Attempts to mobilize racial resentment were certainly prevalent, but they were typically coded and implicit. The 2016 election was different. Instead of evoking a broadly shared common identity, Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton offered two sharply contrasting views of American nationhood (Lieven 2016). Trump's vision was one of ethnic and religious exclusion, nostalgic longing for a day when white Americans were the unquestionably dominant group,

TABLE 4.2. *Proportion of respondents with selected attributes by type of nationalism*

	Creedal	Disengaged	Restrictive	Ardent	P-value
Class prevalence	0.22	0.17	0.38	0.24	
Male	0.25	0.17	0.31	0.27	0.061
Female	0.19	0.17	0.43	0.21	
White	0.24	0.16	0.33	0.27	0.016
Black	0.02	0.19	0.68	0.11	
Hispanic	0.11	0.17	0.55	0.17	
Other	0.48	0.32	0.11	0.09	
Born in United States	0.19	0.16	0.40	0.25	0.000
Born outside United States	0.47	0.24	0.15	0.13	
Less than high school	0.10	0.14	0.50	0.26	0.000
High school or some college	0.17	0.12	0.43	0.28	
BA	0.33	0.24	0.27	0.16	
Advanced degree	0.32	0.29	0.23	0.16	
Strong Democrat	0.09	0.35	0.45	0.11	0.000
Democrat[a]	0.15	0.27	0.40	0.18	
Independent	0.16	0.17	0.46	0.20	
Republican[a]	0.32	0.04	0.38	0.26	
Strong Republican	0.36	0.00	0.17	0.47	
Lives in Midwest	0.21	0.16	0.41	0.22	0.15
Lives in mountain states	0.25	0.17	0.38	0.21	
Lives in Northeast	0.19	0.25	0.29	0.26	
Lives in Pacific states	0.31	0.19	0.36	0.14	
Lives in South	0.18	0.12	0.41	0.29	
Catholic	0.23	0.12	0.38	0.27	0.000
Evangelical Protestant	0.17	0.07	0.43	0.34	
Mainline Protestant	0.23	0.13	0.32	0.32	
Black Protestant	0.02	0.17	0.71	0.08	
Jewish	0.56	0.19	0.17	0.08	
Other	0.34	0.23	0.26	0.27	
None	0.20	0.41	0.32	0.08	
Strongly religious	0.22	0.12	0.37	0.30	0.63
Not strongly religious	0.22	0.20	0.38	0.20	
Mean age	44.44	38.36	41.21	51.31	0.000
Mean income (2004 dollars)	$78,582	$39,724	$42,048	$48,185	0.003

[a] Includes independents who report leaning Democrat or Republican, respectively.

Notes: Data are from 2004 GSS. P-values for differences in model parameters across classes are based on Wald tests with robust standard errors.

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and a withdrawal from the world across multiple domains, from military alliances and wars to trade and the environment. Of the four nationalist cleavages identified by Bonikowski and DiMaggio (2016), Trump's rhetoric most closely resembled "restrictive nationalism," which combines ethno-cultural exclusion with distinctively low levels of pride in the nation and its institutions, perceiving the latter as having failed "true" Americans.

Clinton's nationalist imagery was strikingly different: it celebrated ethnic, racial, and religious diversity, emphasized egalitarianism and social justice, and advocated active engagement in international affairs. This was a creedal nationalism par excellence (Bonikowski and DiMaggio 2016): an exultant but inclusive narrative that sought to harness love of country in the service of continued social progress. These divergent campaign messages, on full display during the Democratic and Republican National Conventions, mobilized latent cultural cleavages marked by sharp disagreements over the nation's meaning. In the process, popular understandings of America and Americanness came to define the primary cultural battle lines in the election and the subsequent struggle between Trump supporters and detractors during the president's term in office.

Despite the unusual prominence of explicit nationalist cleavages in the presidential election, it would be a mistake to see this type of political discourse as unprecedented. Clinton continued in the tradition of inclusive civic nationalism, which had long been a hallmark of the Democratic Party's political discourse, and combined it with an ostentatious celebration of national symbols and American exceptionalism that previously had been more common among mainstream Republican candidates. Trump, on the other hand, drew on forms of white nationalist politics that had been front and center in George Wallace's and Richard Nixon's 1968 presidential campaigns, and the latter's subsequent "Southern strategy," and that had reappeared periodically since then among Republican candidates (as in the Willie Horton attack ads against Michael Dukakis in 1988 and Patrick Buchanan's 1992 and 1996 presidential campaigns) (Carter 1999).

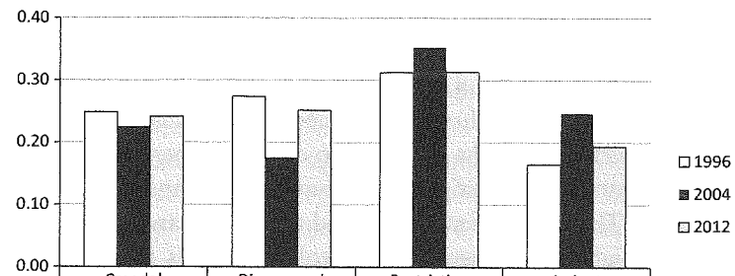
For all the pronouncements of an era of "post-racial politics" in the late 2000s (or perhaps because of them) (Wise 2010), appeals to exclusionary nationalism further intensified in recent years among radical Republican politicians, the right-wing media, and conservative social movements, such as the Tea Party (Parker and Barreto 2013). Particularly notable was the persistent vilification of President Obama as fundamentally un-American, fueled by conspiratorial myths about his putative Muslim

faith and birth outside the United States (Pham 2015). The "birther" narrative epitomized a potent mix of racism, xenophobia, Islamophobia, and populism (Bail 2016; Chavez 2013; Gilens 2000) that would come to define Trump's campaign and presidency. The political impact of these ideas was amplified by ongoing political developments, especially the sharp rise in partisan polarization – and, with it, negative partisanship – since the early 2000s (McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal 2008) and the Republican Party's persistent obstructionism and delegitimization of its Democratic opponents (Dionne, Ornstein, and Mann 2017a).

For a variety of reasons, to which I will return, Trump's brazen ethno-nationalism fell on fertile ground. Survey-based analyses demonstrate that voters who held strong ethno-nationalist attitudes were more likely to support Trump's candidacy in the primary and general elections (though in the latter, of course, the best predictor remains Republican Party membership) (Jones and Kiley 2016; McElwee and McDaniel 2017; Tesler 2016). Many of those voters have maintained their support during Trump's presidency (Saletan 2017).

Despite these patterns, it does not appear that ethno-nationalist attitudes have become more widespread in the American population in the two decades leading up to the 2016 election (Bonikowski 2017a). As Figure 4.1 illustrates, the distribution of the four nationalist cleavages identified by Bonikowski and DiMaggio (2016) was relatively constant from 1996 through 2003 to 2012. Instead, the Trump campaign appears to have successfully mobilized previously latent nationalist cleavages in an opportune socio-political context, making identity concerns central to voters' decision-making.

Even though the Trump phenomenon is particularly American in some respects, the broad contours of nationalist politics have much in common across Western democracies. Competing definitions of nationhood exist within all countries, in the form of latent cultural cleavages that can be effectively mobilized by political entrepreneurs when the structural conditions are ripe (Bonikowski 2013). Indeed, the structure of these cleavages is strikingly similar across cases: the same patterns of attitudes that constitute liberal, restrictive, ardent, and disengaged forms of nationalism in the United States are found in France and Germany (Bonikowski 2017b), as well as other Western and Eastern European democracies (Bonikowski 2013), even if the specific manifestations of such nationalist beliefs vary. Thus much of the contemporary rise of radical-right politics can be understood as a result of an active struggle between segments of the electorate over the nation's meaning.



	Creedal	Disengaged	Restrictive	Ardent
1996	0.25	0.27	0.31	0.17
2004	0.23	0.18	0.35	0.25
2012	0.24	0.25	0.31	0.19

FIGURE 4.1. Distribution of four types of American nationalism, 1996–2012
Note: The data come from the 1996 and 2003 General Social Survey and a 2012 online panel collected by GfK Custom Research.
Source: Bonikowski and DiMaggio (2016). Reprinted with permission of SAGE Publications, Inc.

The Rising Salience of Nationalism in the Twenty-First Century

Why has nationalism become particularly salient in the United States over the past few years? Some of the likely causal factors are consistent with those observed in other advanced democracies, while others are US-specific. In general, the rise of radicalism across the West appears to be a result of acute perceptions of collective status threat on the part of national majority-group members (i.e., typically native-born whites), fueled by a confluence of rapid social changes (Bonikowski 2017a; Gidron and Hall 2017). Some of these changes are economic (e.g., unemployment and wage decline due to trade shocks and capital flight [Autor et al. 2016; Rodrik 2017]), while others are demographic (e.g., the rise in immigration), cultural (e.g., restrictive linguistic norms, the expansion of LGBT rights and multiculturalism, and the displacement of white working-class culture from the mainstream [Inglehart and Norris 2016]), spatial (e.g., the concentration of economic gains and cultural changes in urban centers [Cramer 2016; Sassen 2001]), or related to national security (e.g., terrorism).

This diverse mix of structural transformations affects people's outlook in a variety of ways. Changing conditions on the ground shape people's life chances (both real and subjective), their perception of their group's relative status affects their evaluations of self-worth, and decoupling

between local and national culture creates a sense of cultural alienation. Moreover, the notion that a group (in this case, an ethno-racial one) is under threat is both a result of direct experience and of exposure to narratives transmitted through the media and social networks. It is these narratives that have the potential to channel generalized grievances into resentments toward stigmatized out-groups (and their elite co-conspirators). That such resentments tend to activate and mobilize latent nationalist beliefs makes them prime ideological tools for opportunistic elite actors, both in the media and in electoral politics.

To be sure, this general multi-causal account glosses over considerable heterogeneity between specific countries. The relative weight of the proposed causal factors is likely to vary and specific cases may also feature other unique causes of nationalist backlash. In the United States, trade liberalization, rapidly rising inequality, partisan polarization, the cosmopolitanization of popular culture, the ideological fragmentation of the media market, and, more recently, the election of an African-American Democratic president were among the probable exacerbating factors that contributed to the increased salience of nationalist cleavages in politics.

The fact that these long-term trends preceded Donald Trump's political success suggests that his candidacy was as much a symptom as a cause of a nationalist resurgence (Dionne, Ornstein, and Mann 2017a). Not only did Trump's embrace of the "birther movement" and his leveraging of ethno-nationalist populist discourse build on a long history of racism and xenophobia in the United States, but it also amplified tendencies that were already present in the Republican Party in the years leading up to the 2016 presidential election. The party's problematic relationship with race (Carter 1999) came to the fore during Barack Obama's candidacy and presidency, as his American and Christian bona fides were repeatedly questioned (Pham 2015), he was exposed to racist slurs by Republican media personalities such as Ted Nugent and Ann Coulter (Ornstein 2014), his measured responses to police brutality and terrorist attacks against African Americans were criticized in racial terms and resulted in decreases in approval ratings among white Republicans (Reid 2017), and his policy initiatives were persistently obstructed and undermined by Republicans in Congress (Dionne, Ornstein, and Mann 2017a). Some of this was a matter of ever-intensifying negative partisanship, but many of these episodes also involved dog-whistle appeals that had been perfected over decades of white nationalist politics, dating back to Nixon's "silent majority" (Carter 1999).

It appears, then, that Trump's embrace of explicitly racist and misogynist discourse, his tacit alliance with white nationalist movements, and his vilification of the media and his political opponents were a more explicit rearticulation of subtler Republican talking points. That he initially advanced his campaign against the opposition of Republican elites served to enhance both the legitimacy of his anti-establishment claims and the veracity of his nationalist policy promises. By the time the Republicans embraced him for having delivered them the presidency and a majority in both houses of Congress he had succeeded in bringing the white nationalist agenda from the fringes of the Republican Party into its very core. Donald Trump's subsequent eruptions of nationalist vitriol during his presidency would meet with either overt approval or passive resignation from establishment Republicans, a pattern that served to further legitimize ethno-nationalism in American politics (Fallows 2017).

The Implications of Republicans' Ethno-Nationalism

The possible consequences of Trump's specific brand of anti-elitism, nationalism, and authoritarianism are manifold, ranging from the erosion of basic norms of decency in politics and the undermining of objective truth as a valued feature of public discourse to the delegitimization of democratic institutions at home and the decline of the United States' influence abroad. Given that democracy is the backbone of the American social and political order, and the primary mechanism through which the excesses of the Trump administration can be reversed in the future, it is understandable that scholars have dedicated particular attention to the credible risk of democratic backsliding in the post-2016 era.

Müller (2016), for instance, warns of four possible channels through which anti-pluralist radicals, such as Trump and his European counterparts, can co-opt democratic institutions for their own self-serving ends. These include the "colonization" of state bureaucracy with regime loyalists willing to do the autocratic leader's bidding; mass clientelism, which secures support for the ruling party through the granting of various favors and privileges to its constituents; "discriminatory legalism," which maintains legal protections for some segments of the population but withholds them from others (typically minorities vilified by the state) (Weyland 2013); and the delegitimization of civil society organizations to suppress dissent.

Although these quasi-authoritarian governance practices serve to bolster the authority of the ruling elites while they are in power, radical

politicians are also likely to undermine the democratic processes that would eventually lead to a successful transition of power. Building on their prior research on Latin America in the 1990s and 2000s and Western Europe prior to World War II, respectively, Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018) identify two democratic norms that are at greatest risk from radical politics: mutual toleration and procedural forbearance.

Central to the former norm is the assumption that one's political opposition, however ideologically different it may be, operates in good faith in the best interests of the country. This ensures that electoral losses are accepted, that the ruling party is seen as legitimate, and that legislative compromise is possible. When mutual toleration erodes, as in cases of extreme partisan polarization, the opposition may instead be portrayed as fundamentally morally corrupt and even treasonous, which justifies various forms of retribution and may ultimately threaten the peaceful turnover of power. The second norm, of procedural forbearance, ensures that political actors do not use the full extent of the law against those with whom they disagree, by, for instance, engaging in frivolous investigations and prosecutions of opponents, obstructing basic legislative procedures, ruling by decree rather than legislative process, or routinely blocking presidential nominees. While such actions may be within the strict bounds of the constitutional order, they are not consistent with its spirit, because they undermine the basis for good-faith debate and cooperation and inhibit the ability of the state to govern.

Based on the first two years of President Trump's term (and his discourse during the election), there is cause for concern on many of the fronts identified by Müller (2016) and Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018). Among the more egregious of Trump's norm violations have been threats to prosecute Hillary Clinton, personal insults targeting his opponents (such as referring to Clinton as "Crooked Hillary"), the firing of FBI director James Comey, and hints at the possible dismissal of the special counsel investigating the Trump campaign, Robert Mueller (Goldsmith 2017). These instances signal fundamental disregard for both mutual toleration and procedural forbearance, which pose serious threats to the stability of American democracy.

Equally dangerous have been verbal attacks on journalists, persistent disinformation concerning the allegedly widespread problem of electoral fraud, threats to disregard the results of the 2016 election if Clinton were to win, portrayals of the media as a liberal conspiracy spreading "fake news," the framing of social protest as illegitimate and un-American, and attempts to undermine the autonomy of the judiciary and federal law

enforcement (Goldsmith 2017). Not only do such claims directly threaten democratic practices but they also affect public confidence in institutions and the very basis on which truth claims can be evaluated in public discourse. That Trump's norm violations have not been censured, and in many cases have been wholeheartedly embraced, by the Republican Party makes their risks all the more acute. The added danger of such developments is that they encourage a cycle of recrimination not limited to any single party. Once norms are shattered and the opposition assumes power, it too is likely to take advantage of newly legitimized political tactics against the former incumbents, thus further eroding the quality of democratic institutions.

The examples cited thus far are troubling, but they are primarily associated with the authoritarian and anti-elite aspects of Donald Trump's and the Republican Party's radicalism rather than with the mobilization of nationalist cleavages by the Trump campaign and administration. Indeed, because political scientists have been primarily interested in institutional stability, they have not fully attended to the possible implications that ethno-nationalism itself may have for social inequalities, both at the hands of the state and in more diffuse inter-group relations. Chief among these are variants of "discriminatory legalism" – that is, various attempts by the government to target minority groups whose legitimate membership in the nation is called into question (Weyland 2013; Müller 2016). Given that ethno-nationalism in the United States places emphasis on whiteness, native birth, Christian faith, and English language fluency (Bonikowski and DiMaggio 2016; Schildkraut 2003), groups that are particularly vulnerable to discriminatory treatment include African Americans, Latinos, Muslims, and non-European immigrants.

It is no surprise, then, that in its first year the Trump administration has sought to build a border wall with Mexico, impose a travel ban on people from Muslim-majority countries, investigate affirmative-action admission practices at elite universities, defund the Civil Rights Division and curtail oversight of discriminatory police departments at the Department of Justice, repeal the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program for undocumented migrants brought to the United States as children, and pursue draconian law enforcement measures against undocumented migrants. All these initiatives have signaled to Trump's ethno-nationalist supporters that the administration is delivering on its promises to champion the interests of white Americans, which have been portrayed as mutually exclusive with the interests of non-whites.

The Trump administration's exclusionary governance practices are likely to persist and intensify in the coming years, given the centrality of ethno-nationalism among the president's electoral support base. Their consequences may well be far-reaching and include increased social inequality, continued racial discrimination, and a general climate of insecurity for members of minority groups. Policy is not the only channel through which ethno-nationalism affects social outcomes, however; the content of political discourse has its own distinct consequences. The president's frequent reliance on racist, xenophobic, and Islamophobic language has reconfigured the boundaries of mainstream public debate, and, with it, of what is permissible in everyday interactions. Whether calling Mexicans rapists, smearing National Football League players protesting police brutality, vilifying Muslims after terrorist attacks, or embracing neo-Nazis after the Charlottesville attack, President Trump, with the passive approval of the Republican Party, has portrayed minority groups as fundamentally un-American.

The legitimization of ethno-nationalist forms of thought, speech, and practice is likely to further embolden white supremacist movements and exacerbate patterns of hate speech and violence in quotidian social interactions. There is some evidence that this has already been the case, with increases in reported hate crimes and far right activity following the 2016 election (Cohen 2017). While mainstream Republicans may eventually disavow such behavior, there is a risk that a self-perpetuating cycle of outbidding (Rabushka and Shepsle 1972; Horowitz 1985) may give rise to increasingly radical, and potentially violent, forms of white nationalism. Thus far, however, there has been no equivalent ratcheting tendency on the left (with the possible exception of the "Antifa" movement [Beinart 2017]) or among ethnic minority groups that could fuel the mutual recrimination typical of the ethnic outbidding model.

Whether or not the ethno-nationalist populism of the Trump administration erodes democratic institutions and exacerbates existing patterns of inequality and discrimination, the political activation of nationalist cleavages is likely to have its own consequences for the future of electoral politics in the United States. First, once ethno-nationalist beliefs are made salient, they do not easily revert to a latent state. These beliefs are rooted in visceral moral reactions to stigmatized out-groups that are continually reinforced by sensationalist media and political discourse. Moreover, the structural changes that increased the resonance of these dispositions in the first place will continue to serve as sources of grievance and resentment. Had ethno-nationalism been vocally repudiated by Republican

Party elites, perhaps the tide could have been stemmed, but instead the party has unconditionally stood by President Trump, effectively embracing white nationalism as its own central ideology. Given that the distribution of the competing varieties of nationalism in the US population has been relatively stable (Bonikowski and DiMaggio 2016), this suggests a continued base of support for Republican ethno-nationalist politics for years to come.

Second, nationalist cleavages are likely to become increasingly congruent with partisanship. In the past, pluralist and exclusionary forms of American nationalism partly cut across partisan identities (Bonikowski and DiMaggio 2016). This is beginning to change, however, with growing numbers of people switching their party affiliation in line with their views of American nationhood (Griffin 2017). This partisan sorting may exacerbate the already historically high levels of political polarization in the United States (Baldassarri and Gelman 2008) and cement the identity of the GOP as an ethno-nationalist party. Moreover, not only are partisan identity and conceptions of nationhood functioning as mutually reinforcing cultural cleavages but their confluence is further reinforced by alignment with structural *social* cleavages. Core support for the Republican Party is concentrated not only among ethno-nationalists but also, increasingly, among white working-class voters with low levels of education who live outside major urban centers (Cramer 2016). When multiple social and cultural cleavages become mutually reinforcing rather than cross-cutting, the likelihood of compromise across party lines declines and the probability of severe and protracted conflict increases (Lipset and Rokkan 1967). This, in turn, can cause further erosion of the norms of mutual toleration on which the stability of democratic institutions depends.

Third, the negative implications of Donald Trump's – and, increasingly, the Republican Party's – ethno-nationalist authoritarianism for the welfare of minority groups and for democratic stability are likely to deepen in the event of a major national security crisis, such as a mass-casualty terrorist attack or a large-scale war. Past research has shown that such events often trigger "rally-round-the-flag" effects, whereby exclusionary nationalist attitudes intensify and the legitimacy of the state and its leaders is enhanced (Feinstein 2016). In such instances, civil liberties and constitutional rights can be weakened in the ostensible interest of national security under state-of-emergency measures (Scheppele 2003). Groups seen as particularly threatening to the nation are at the greatest risk of being targeted by such policies, which makes Donald Trump's

vilification of immigrants, refugees, Muslims, and African Americans all the more foreboding. It appears unlikely that President Trump would exercise the same level of caution and restraint as did George W. Bush after the September 11 attacks in order to prevent the undue targeting of minorities in the aftermath of an acute crisis.

There are countervailing factors, of course, that may mitigate some or all of the potential risks associated with the rising dominance of populism, authoritarianism, and nationalism in mainstream US politics. Chief among these are the institutional checks and balances designed to constrain excesses of executive, legislative, and judicial power. As Weyland and Madrid have argued in the Introduction to this volume, the existence of three robust branches of government in the United States would make it difficult for the president to pursue policies that fundamentally threaten the democratic system. Moreover, unlike Latin American populist leaders, President Trump must contend with the preferences of his party that only partly align with his agenda, and he has only limited capacity to rely on patronage networks that would enable him to "colonize" the state and engage in mass clientelism (Müller 2016; Weyland 2017a). Whether the Republican Party's timidity in confronting the more dangerous of Trump's ethno-nationalist and authoritarian tendencies serves to undermine these countervailing institutional factors – many of which are dependent on norms as much as on laws – remains to be seen.

Institutional constraints are not, however, the only potential counterforces against the persistence of ethno-nationalism and the risk of democratic backsliding in the United States. The other mechanism is the power of the public, both as an electorate and as a source of social movement mobilization. Under the right circumstances, shifts in the behavior of American voters in 2018 and 2020 could generate the necessary incentives for the Republican Party to abandon its ethno-nationalist agenda. One such scenario is that electoral enthusiasm among 2016 Trump voters will diminish in the coming elections, not only due to the president's historically low approval ratings but also because many of these voters had previously been politically unengaged and, having made their statement in 2016, may opt out of voting once again. The partisan turnout differences in the 2017 Virginia and Alabama special elections, both of which swung dramatically toward Democratic candidates, may serve as early evidence of this pattern.

This raises a larger question about the potentially self-limiting aspects of President Trump's populist and ethno-nationalist politics. While the fervency of his core support base is undeniable, the explicitly exclusionary

content of Trump's rhetoric and policy will make it difficult for his coalition to expand in future elections. He is unlikely to win over new voters, given the difficulty of bridging deep nationalist cleavages, and may in fact lose some 2016 supporters due to his failure to deliver on campaign promises, if not due to the underlying content of his ideas (the president's mediocre polling numbers appear to be consistent with this scenario). It appears, then, that ethno-nationalism may be a powerful, but ultimately constrained, political strategy that will make future congressional and presidential elections precarious for the Republican Party. If so, the lack of large-scale majoritarian support – alongside other mechanisms, such as independent judicial oversight – may serve as a brake on the Trump administration's authoritarian proclivities. This stands in sharp contrast to key Latin American cases, where the ability of populist politics to transform political institutions was fueled by large electoral majorities (Levitsky and Loxton 2012; Roberts 2012).

The discussion thus far has assumed relative stability in the size of the nationalist cleavages in the US population over the short term, which can serve as reliable reserves of support for candidates who mobilize the right kind of political rhetoric. In the long term, however, demographic shifts may reconfigure public opinion trends in favor of more inclusive forms of nationalism. The question is whether the political effects of the country's increasingly diverse population will continue to be muted by the geographic concentration of non-white voters in Democratic-majority states and in urban areas throughout the country. Because of these compositional factors, the political preferences of minority groups have thus far constituted largely redundant signals in the electoral arena, despite pronouncements by pundits of a new demographic reality with which both parties must reckon. Against this demographic backdrop, partisan redistricting and the erection of new barriers to voting in Republican-controlled states has given the GOP an additional advantage in congressional elections, raising the electoral threshold for an anti-Trump backlash by Democratic voters.

Although the over-representation of liberal voters in densely populated areas may hinder the repudiation of ethno-nationalism through electoral channels, these same segments of the population may become mobilized by grassroots social movements and pursue extra-institutional means of political change. The wave of protests during the early months of President Trump's term in office exerted pressure on the administration and policy-makers to scale back potentially discriminatory travel bans and to abandon multiple attempts to repeal the Affordable Care

Act. Should the Trump administration continue pursuing policies that target minority groups and endanger democratic institutions, large-scale protests are likely to continue. The challenge for those resisting the incursion of ethno-nationalism into American political life is how to harness the impact of isolated protests into a lasting social movement that can apply continued pressure on elected officials. In the absence of organizational infrastructure, such episodes may have a fleeting impact on policy, and their frequency and size are likely to decrease as the public grows weary of active mobilization.

Conclusion

Setting aside the specific dangers posed by President Trump's populism and the possible countervailing forces that may avert them, the larger question is whether the present historical moment represents a short-term backlash against neo-liberalism, globalization, and cultural change that will dissipate with due time or whether we are witnessing a more profound crisis of liberal democracy stemming from internal contradictions that cannot be resolved without large-scale political and economic transformation. The widespread diffusion of radical politics throughout the world suggests the latter.

Whatever the specific features and causes of radicalism are in any given country, there exists a common pattern of widespread dissatisfaction with political institutions, the globalized elites who control them, and the various minority groups that ostensibly benefit from the elite's patronage and threaten the status of native-born white majorities. The response to this crisis from entrepreneurial political and media actors, particularly in wealthy democracies, has been to mobilize preexisting nationalist cleavages in the service of anti-establishment politics (Rodrik 2017). While the fortunes of individual radical politicians may rise and fall, and some radical parties may prove to be more effective when in power than others, the underlying grievances that fuel this form of politics are likely to remain relevant for the foreseeable future.

Ultimately, the onus for addressing the situation rests less on the new radical parties and leaders than on established political elites. Center-right parties face a stark choice of whether to take up the grievances of frustrated voters, while rejecting the radical right's ethno-nationalism and anti-democratic authoritarianism, or to embrace the radical right's exclusionary strategies. The latter solution presents a serious danger to

the stability of democratic institutions, because the center-right is often the last bulwark against authoritarian rule (Ziblatt 2017).

The center-left, on the other hand, faces its own challenges. It can continue pursuing neoliberal policies typical of "third way" politics, which may have contributed to the present democratic crisis in the first place, or it can reorient itself toward the pursuit of economic justice, an issue once central to the left's agenda. In the latter case, the further choice is whether to pursue these policies primarily on behalf of resentful native-born white voters or to combine an economic agenda with a robust articulation of an inclusive, multicultural, and proud vision of nationhood that actively resists ethno-nationalism (Gidron 2018). These are difficult strategic decisions, but it does appear that an economic justice agenda that turns a blind eye to the importance of nationalist cleavages, as did Bernie Sanders' primary campaign, may be insufficiently compelling in an era of identity-driven politics.

Whatever strategies established parties might pursue, it is imperative that they remain committed to the defense of constitutional rights, the rule of law, and the integrity of democratic institutions. As these fundamental principles come under powerful attack from radical anti-system actors, placing the interests of the country above partisan concerns is the necessary starting point for the maintenance of political stability. To do otherwise is to engage in a Faustian bargain, the costs of which are likely to be borne by future generations.