



Drivers of Authoritarian Populism in the United States

A Primer

By Dalibor Rohac, Liz Kennedy, and Vikram Singh May 2018

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Introduction and summary

The term “populism” is often used broadly to encompass political messages and styles that may be viewed as far beyond the mainstream political consensus or transgressive. However, populism also has a narrower, more precise meaning. It denotes political parties and leaders that are anti-establishment and that divide society into two groups: self-serving elites and good, ordinary people.

Not all populism is intrinsically bad. At times, populist ideas and energies have contributed to the advancement and preservation of liberal democracy. But there are rising tides of exclusionary and authoritarian populism that claim to speak on behalf of the people in contrast to various so-called out-groups: immigrants, racial and ethnic minorities, and all those who disagree with the populists’ prescriptions. Furthermore, by labeling themselves as the true voice of the people, these populists stake a claim to a perceived legitimacy in dispensing with constraints imposed on majoritarian decision-making in functioning liberal democracies.

Understood in this way, authoritarian populism is a significant challenge to democratic politics on both sides of the Atlantic. An increasing number of extreme populist politicians are making headway across the world’s established democracies. While their success largely stems from their promises to address various social and economic ills by disrupting traditional forms of political bargaining and compromise, in many cases, it also involves jettisoning hard-won commitments to human dignity and freedoms.

In the United States, the appeal of authoritarian populism has gone hand in hand with a decline of trust in government and a rise in partisan polarization. Increasingly in the United States, the government is seen as unresponsive to citizens’ concerns and captured by well-organized special interests. Voters are also acutely aware of Washington’s growing political dysfunction and the federal government’s inability to “get things done” and respond to the public’s policy preferences. At the ballot box, however, voters often re-enforce the extreme partisanship that contributes to this dysfunction.

Although the U.S. economy has recovered from the 2008 financial crisis, it is still characterized by sluggish productivity growth and looming structural change that threatens jobs at the lower end of the education and skills ladder. The recovery was also highly unequal, with certain sectors, demographics, and regions doing extremely well and others never getting back on track. Rightly or wrongly, voters see many of the emergency measures adopted in the aftermath of the crisis as benefiting the well-connected few at the expense of everybody else, while none of those responsible for the crisis were held accountable.¹

Economic considerations also shape attitudes toward race, immigration, and globalization. Western societies, including the United States, are becoming more diverse, especially in urban centers. Cosmopolitan urban centers, such as the metropolitan areas on the East and West Coasts, are seeing concentrations of economic dynamism, growth, and new opportunities. Combining diversity, openness, and economic dynamism, cities have grown into an economic and cultural antithesis of the less diverse and economically stagnant exurban and rural areas.

This report looks at the political, economic, cultural, and racial factors driving authoritarian populism in the United States. It also provides recommendations to face this challenge moving forward. The report draws on conversations which were held at an October 2017 workshop convened by the Center for American Progress (CAP) and the American Enterprise Institute (AEI) under the auspices of our joint project, “Defending Democracy and Underwriting the Transatlantic Partnership.”

Defending Democracy and Underwriting the Transatlantic Partnership

Scholars at the Center for American Progress and at the American Enterprise Institute have often found themselves on opposing sides of important policy discussions. Yet, at a time when the fundamental character of Western societies is at stake, what unites us is much stronger than the disagreements that we have.

The threat of authoritarian populism will not recede unless a new generation of political leaders offers a credible agenda for improving people’s lives that is more appealing to the public than the populist alternatives. The defense and rebuilding of democratic politics and discourse, however, requires sustained intellectual engagement. It demands a reinvigorated case for how liberal democracy, openness, pluralism, and a rules-based international order can deliver on the promise of shared prosperity and common security. (see Appendix for the full statement of aims)

The ambition of our project, which brings together scholars and practitioners of different ideological stripes, is not to seek a tepid middle-of-the-road agreement. We continue to disagree vigorously on many important policy issues. However, we are also united in our belief that the core institutions of democracy, a market economy with shared prosperity, and U.S.-led alliances are sound. Although the tenets, institutions, and practices of liberal democracy need to be reformed and strengthened when and where appropriate, they should not be taken for granted. At a time when the utility of democracy as the best system of government to support human dignity, prosperity, and freedom is under direct challenge, it must be defended vigorously in the public square.

Political factors in U.S. authoritarian populism

In the U.S. context, the rise of authoritarian populism has gone hand in hand with the decline of trust in government and political institutions; the decline in lawmakers' responsiveness to the public's expressed policy preferences; and the rise of ideological polarization. Taken together, these should be seen as warning signs of the declining strength of America's democracy.

The decline of trust in the U.S. government dates back to the mid-1960s.² Fifty years ago, close to three-quarters of the U.S. population trusted the federal government; that number has dropped to below 25 percent. During the first year of the Trump administration, this decline has continued.³ A similar erosion of trust can be seen in other areas of U.S. society—such as media, churches, corporations, and universities. This makes it difficult to see the decline of political trust as an isolated phenomenon. Furthermore, in some situations, low levels of trust in government could be benign. Citizens who are distrustful and scrutinizing, for example, might be in a better position to hold elected representatives accountable than citizens who hold a more romantic view of politics and politicians.

Arguably, the decline in trust also reflects the perception that democratic politics are not working in the people's interest—or at least not responding to their preferences. Political scientists Benjamin Page and Martin Gilens have found that average Americans have little or no influence over U.S. public policy and that “when large majorities of Americans favor policy changes—when 70 to 80 percent want change—they get it less than half the time.”⁴

Different factors are at play: Special interests and powerful campaign donors influence policy; technocratic agencies without direct political accountability are able to formulate policy decisions without taking citizens' desires into account; and executive orders can enact policy absent legislative action. Distorted election districts have limited electoral competition and accountability, and voters skew older, wealthier, and whiter than the population as a whole. While approximately 70 percent of the Silent and Baby Boomer generations and a little over 60 percent

of Generation X voted in the 2016 U.S. presidential election, just under 50 percent of Millennials voted.⁵ Low voter participation rates among low-income Americans also contribute to a lack of fair representation. In 2016, there was a 20-point gap between the voter registration rates of low-income and high-income Americans.⁶ These gaps persist in voting. In 2012, only about 47 percent of those making less than \$10,000 voted, while more than 80 percent of those making more than \$150,000 cast their ballots.⁷

Political spending in elections is growing more concentrated among the wealthiest few. In 2012, almost half of all the money spent in federal elections came from just one-tenth of one-tenth of 1 percent of Americans.⁸ The share of contributions from the top 0.01 percent of the voting population grew to 40 percent in 2016—up from just 16 percent in the 1980s.⁹

Furthermore, the dominance of corporations and business interests exists not only in election spending but also in lobbying of elected officials and decision-makers. In their 2012 book, *The Unheavenly Chorus: Unequal Political Voice and the Broken Promise of American Democracy*, Kay Lehman Schlozman, Sidney Verba, and Henry E. Brady found that organizations representing business, taken together, accounted for 72 percent of all lobbying expenditures, while labor organizations made up just 1 percent.¹⁰ For example, according to the Center for Responsive Politics, from 1998 to 2018, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce and the Business Roundtable—just two of the many business organizations active in Washington, D.C.—spent \$1.66 billion on lobbying the federal government; defense contractors Boeing Co., Northrop Grumman, and Lockheed Martin spent \$771 million; and the Pharmaceutical Research and Manufacturers of America spent \$346 million.¹¹ In comparison, all labor unions combined spent a total of \$778 million during that time. Perhaps in response to the concentrated power of wealth in the political sphere, political mechanisms have the propensity to concentrate benefits among the wealthy but disperse the costs of policies onto the population as a whole—particularly marginalized communities—contributing to the decline of trust in government.¹²

The decline of trust in government may also be a side effect of unrealistic assumptions about the ability of politics to solve social and economic problems. Research by political scientists John R. Hibbing and Elizabeth Theiss-Morse, for example, shows that in popular imagination, the inability of politicians to “get things done” can be explained simply by partisan bickering.¹³ Implicit in that idea is the notion that solutions to public policy problems are obvious and that a lack of goodwill is

the main obstacle to progress. A natural corollary to such a view is the need to elect a nonpartisan outsider, often an authoritarian populist focused on getting things done regardless of democratic norms such as forbearance and mutual toleration.¹⁴

Simultaneously, politics in the United States have become more polarized. In the past, a common complaint about America's democracy was that the policy positions of major candidates were almost indistinguishable, suggesting that political parties lacked any firm principles. That view was in line with the canonical result of public choice theory, which predicts that political parties focus their efforts on competing for the median voter, moving their platforms toward the center.¹⁵ Even if that model may have done a reasonably good job describing U.S. politics of the past, the situation started to change two decades ago. In 2006, researchers observed that “[a] growing body of empirical research shows that the parties in government, particularly those in Congress, are each growing more homogeneous in their policy positions, while the differences between the two parties’ stands on major policy issues are expanding.”¹⁶

There are several intuitively plausible explanations that may account for the polarization of America's two major political parties and, by extension, its elected representatives. Gerrymandering of electoral districts into ideologically cohesive entities offers one explanation, but the evidence behind it is thin. A well-known study by Nolan McCarty, Keith T. Poole, and Howard Rosenthal replicated the current level of ideological polarization even when drawing representatives from randomly generated districts.¹⁷ Neither can political polarization be blamed simply on campaign spending by special interests in pursuit of extreme policy objectives. Existing research suggests that “there is a weak connection between campaign spending and election outcomes ... or between sources of campaign funding and roll-call-voting behavior.”¹⁸ If the primary process has a polarizing effect, its magnitude is modest at best.¹⁹ Extreme gerrymandering and unlimited campaign spending from wealthy special interests contribute but do not sufficiently explain the current hyperpartisan political divide; yet they are major factors in distorting the political process so it is unresponsive and unaccountable to average Americans, who do not see themselves being fairly represented at the federal level.

Strategic disagreement in Congress, driven by electoral considerations, appears to be another factor behind polarization, as are changes to the media environment.²⁰ The former refers to the growing preoccupation over the loyalty of the electoral base, which incentivizes politicians to forego opportunities to strike compromises

on important pieces of legislation. Relatedly, the diversity of news sources available to Americans has increased dramatically over recent decades, together with a proliferation of ideologically distinctive outlets that might be shifting views of the public in ever more extreme directions. The two parties have also undergone substantial changes, beginning with the Republican Party's Southern realignment—which started in the 1970s and has led the GOP to become anchored in more conservative white voting blocs in the South—as well as the gradual migration of African Americans and Latinos to the Democratic Party.

Those shifts, combined with the other dynamics identified, have resulted in today's hyperpartisan political divide and unresponsive government, creating a fertile ground for authoritarian populism.

Economic factors in U.S. authoritarian populism

At first sight, economic hardship appears to be only weakly related to support for authoritarian populists in polling data. According to exit polls from the 2016 U.S. presidential election, Hillary Clinton defeated Donald Trump by 13 points among those earning less than \$30,000 a year, and Trump's lead was strongest among those earning between \$50,000 and \$99,999.²¹ That is in line with findings from a growing stream of literature investigating support for right-wing populists in European countries, where cultural and political concerns drive populist voters more strongly than economic ones.²²

To what extent does economic inequality, then—as opposed to poor economic performance on the whole—explain the rise of populist politics? It is true that income inequality in the United States is high by standards of advanced industrialized economies, and it has increased since the late 1960s.²³ While incomes for American families in the bottom two-thirds of the income distribution more than doubled between 1947 and 1979, in terms of real dollars, they have remained flat since then—even while average productivity has nearly doubled.²⁴

At the same time, a study of CEO compensation at the top 350 U.S. firms found that such compensation had grown 997 percent since 1978; the average CEO compensation of \$16.3 million was 303 times the annual compensation of the typical worker, which had risen from a 20-to-1 ratio in 1965 and an 87-to-1 ratio in the mid-1990s.²⁵ The share of pretax income going to the richest Americans surpasses the income inequality of post-Gilded Age 1910 and matches the previous peak of inequality at the end of the 1920s.²⁶ Raw state-level data show a positive association between the basic measure of income inequality, the Gini coefficient, and Donald Trump's lead in the 2016 election, but the relationship is weak and cannot be taken as evidence of a causal relationship.²⁷ Furthermore, authoritarian populism remains an extremely acute problem in countries that have recorded much lower levels of income inequality—such as Austria—and in countries where income inequality rates have fallen over the past decade, such as the United Kingdom.²⁸

Given the importance of beliefs and perceptions in literature that relies on individual-level data, the support for authoritarian populism might be better explained by the extent to which voters see the economic system as unfair or rigged against them, rather than studying broader aggregate measures of economic health or income dispersion, such as the Gini coefficient. A study by Dalibor Rohac, Sahana Kumar, and Andreas Johansson Heinö found a strong link between support for right-wing authoritarian populists in Europe and “control of corruption,” a measure of corruption—and of corruption perceptions—from the World Bank’s database of Worldwide Governance Indicators.²⁹ Popular accounts, such as Luigi Zingales’ celebrated 2012 book, *A Capitalism for the People*, suggest that the meritocracy and economic mobility associated with America’s social and economic model have weakened in recent decades, with policies and institutions increasingly favoring cronyism and rent-seeking, resulting in a sense that the system is being rigged by and for a corrupt elite.³⁰

In the United States, emergency measures aimed at propping up the collapsing banking industry in 2008 and 2009 provided a boost to the emerging tea party movement on the right and the widespread Occupy movement, mainly on the left. Likewise, in the European Union, the loans extended to countries such as Greece—which also indirectly helped economic actors who held Greek debt—provided some of the rationale for the growth of Germany’s leading right-wing populist party, the Alternative for Germany. For many citizens of both Germany and America, the ad hoc measures taken to stabilize the economy that benefit a select few, while ordinary people bear the costs, prove that the system is stacked against them.

Yet economic grievances run deeper. In the American context, structural changes are transforming labor markets. An increasing number of jobs are vulnerable to outsourcing and automation, particularly those that require lower qualifications. As Jed Kolko, the chief economist at Indeed.com, noted, economic anxiety might well have been forward-looking: “Trump beat Clinton in counties where more jobs are at risk of technology or globalization.”³¹ There are other underlying sources of economic grievance and barriers to upward mobility in the United States. For example, the large variation in the quality of schooling available to residents of different school districts dramatically disadvantages communities of color and those born into lower-income backgrounds.³² And at the postsecondary level, it can be argued that universities’ admission policies are only partly meritocratic. In addition to affirmative action, universities also give large weight to legacy preferences, particularly at leading elite schools.³³ In a recent book, Brink Lindsey

and Steven Teles list a number of other factors that have contributed to increased inequality and a tilted economic playing field, including those linked to intellectual property, financial regulation, occupational licensing, and other policies.³⁴

The threat of economic uncertainty is concentrated in the middle levels of income and skills distribution, not at the bottom. Top-paying jobs in engineering and science, for example, require nonroutine cognitive skills, which are complemented by computers and other capital goods. On the bottom end of the wage distribution, jobs requiring nonroutine manual skills—such as those needed to wait tables, clean, or cook—cannot be made much more productive through the addition of computers and other capital goods. It is the jobs in the middle, which require either routine manual or cognitive skills, that are falling prey to globalization and technological progress. This is consistent with the voting patterns observed in the 2016 U.S. presidential election, as Donald Trump received a large share of votes from the middle segments of the income ladders and from areas where jobs were under threat from automation.

Not all of the ongoing structural changes are easily captured in unemployment statistics. As AEI's Nicholas Eberstadt has shown, America's male population is leaving the labor force in record numbers.³⁵ Today, the work rate of prime-age men—those ages 25 to 54—is only slightly lower than it was in 1940, at a time when the United States was recovering from the Great Depression. The phenomenon of declining male labor participation sets the United States apart from other advanced industrialized economies.

And the labor market crisis of American men has not merely been economic; it has gone hand in hand with other worrying developments. Anne Case and Nobel Prize-winning economist Angus Deaton found that since the 1990s, “middle-aged non-Hispanic whites in the U.S. with a high school diploma or less have experienced increasing midlife mortality.”³⁶ The factors include a rise in “deaths of despair”—deaths by drugs, alcohol, and suicide—as well as a stalling of decline in mortality from heart disease and cancer.³⁷ Case and Deaton suggest that the increases in these deaths are accompanied by a measurable deterioration in economic and social well-being for these populations.

Furthermore, current trends in educational achievement in the United States hint at the possibility that, in coming decades, the poor labor market performance of men might perpetuate itself. While men have historically dominated high-paid professions, resulting in a gender pay gap noticeable across all advanced economies,

according to researchers David Autor and Melanie Wasserman, “Over the last three decades, the labor market trajectory of males in the U.S. has turned downward along four dimensions: skills acquisition; employment rates; occupational stature; and real wage levels.”³⁸ The resulting loss of relative status might be leading some to turn to divisive populist politics to vent their anger and frustration.

The absolute and relative gains made by historically marginalized groups—including women and people of color—should be celebrated and accelerated. There is still a long way to go. In 2016, women working full time in the United States typically were paid just 80 percent of what men were paid; the wage gap for women of color is even more pronounced.³⁹ However, America will continue to face a significant challenge if the gradual closing of the existing gaps goes hand in hand with an absolute decline of educational and labor market outcomes for white men, who are then drawn to politicians who stoke their sense of resentment. The labor market crisis also has a psychological impact that is contributing to populism. In American culture, work remains a critical means of maintaining social relationships and a sense of dignity, while the absence of work generates despair. AEI President Arthur Brooks coined this as a “dignity deficit”—a potent resource ripe for unscrupulous political candidates to translate into popularized anger.⁴⁰

Cultural and racial factors in U.S. authoritarian populism

To be sure, economic factors alone do not account for the rise of authoritarian populism in the United States. A recent study from Diana C. Mutz at the University of Pennsylvania found that the fear of losing status was a more significant factor than economic anxiety for white Trump voters in their decision to vote for Donald Trump in 2016.⁴¹ The loss of status among groups experiencing economic decline can furthermore exacerbate cultural and racial resentment.

At the heart of exclusionist authoritarian populist narratives is a distinction between a corrupt elite and those who belong to the relevant group of supposedly good, ordinary people. The distinction between the two is not necessarily based on ethnic or racial grounds, but it frequently is. John Judis, author of *The Populist Explosion*, contrasts populists whose politics convey “the bottom and middle, arrayed against the top” with populists who champion “the people against an elite that they accuse of favouring a third group,” for example, immigrants, Muslims, or African Americans.⁴²

The relevant dividing lines run differently on both sides of the Atlantic. The United States features a population of descendants of slaves who were brought to the continent by force. Advanced European countries, meanwhile, have sizable immigrant populations—often from Muslim-majority countries—that have often been poorly integrated. By contrast, immigrant populations in the United States—including Muslims—tend to integrate well.⁴³ The question of immigration and fears of Islam have been actively exploited by Europe’s right-wing populists, especially following the 2015 refugee crisis and in the aftermath of acts of terrorism conducted or inspired by terrorist groups such as the Islamic State or al-Qaida.

More than 12 percent of the U.S. population is African American, and this population is overwhelmingly descended from enslaved people.⁴⁴ Until the 1960s, African Americans faced explicit and legal discrimination in numerous states, and structural and systematic inequality remains. African Americans continue to record systematically worse economic,⁴⁵ social,⁴⁶ and health outcomes⁴⁷ and are incarcerated at vastly disproportionate rates.⁴⁸ This dramatically restricts the educational achievement of their children, reducing intergenerational mobility.⁴⁹

Still, racial disparities driven by the legacies of slavery and segregation are not new to America; neither is the size of its foreign-born population unusually large. Furthermore, immigration rates remain much smaller than those sustained during the heyday of America's open-border policy in the late 19th century.⁵⁰ So what has caused the current political tensions surrounding race relations? The United States—like other Western societies—is becoming more ethnically diverse due to a combination of immigration and aging. If current trends continue, by mid-century, whites will become a minority in the United States.⁵¹

Both Donald Trump's campaign and right-wing authoritarian populists in Europe have tended to exploit anxieties related to such demographic change. Trump's electoral base—as well as the base of the Republican Party—is overwhelming white.⁵² The Trump campaign took advantage of anxieties around immigration, race, and Islam, leaning into white identity politics with explicitly racist appeals.⁵³ A Public Religion Research Institute survey for *The Atlantic* found:

*68 percent of white working-class voters said the American way of life needed to be protected against foreign influence, and nearly half agreed with the statement 'Things have changed so much that I often feel like a stranger in my own country.' Among white working-class voters who had these anxieties, 79 percent voted for Trump. He received the votes of only 43 percent of those who did not.*⁵⁴

Defenders of liberal democracy must not cede ground on fundamental values of racial equality, tolerance, and opportunity for all. They must vigorously contest forces that seek to marginalize and punish racial and ethnic minorities and other vulnerable communities.

To be sure, reasonable people of good faith might disagree over desirable immigration policy and the right approach toward tackling the problem of terrorism. However, both topics deserve thoughtful and intelligent treatment, not the provocation of xenophobic frenzy, which was the hallmark of the Trump campaign and captured the imagination of his electoral base. Furthermore, many white Americans who are currently seduced by nativist appeals, primed by their anxieties over economic and cultural dislocation, could be reached by inclusive political platforms on the center-left and center-right. This would allow policymakers to address the underlying challenges—most importantly, the erosion of economic security and opportunity and the failures of fair representation in government—while providing a credible alternative to the troubling policies of populists.

Approaching the challenge

The authoritarian populist challenge to American democracy is real. It does not help to dismiss it simply as “a majoritarian view of democracy” reasserting itself against “post-democratic” efforts to tie the hands of elected representatives—as some on the political right have argued.⁵⁵ Neither is it particularly helpful to look at U.S. democracy as at risk of imminent collapse under the hands of an authoritarian government.

Instead, the challenge should be approached on its own terms: as a shift of some important parameters of political competition. There are several complex driving forces behind the authoritarian populist surge. Some are structural in nature, which suggests that a quest for easy and quick solutions will not succeed. Taming authoritarian populism and reconciling the instincts behind it with liberal democracy, economic openness and opportunity, and international cooperation will require a significant amount of political and institutional work.

There is no one-size-fits-all prescription for politicians seeking to fight back against extreme populist challenges. However, a few early lessons and possible principles emerge from the joint research undertaken in the CAP-AEI workshops. As Sheri Berman, a participant in two of the workshops, has noted, “populism is more a consequence than cause of democratic dysfunction: it is a sign that democratic institutions are not working well.”⁵⁶

First, the Democratic and Republican parties need to recognize that they are in a moment of crisis—a moment that could portend a long-term realignment—and develop a strategy for managing change. For example, according to the Pew Research Center, views on trade within the parties have flipped, with just 36 percent of Republicans and right-leaning independents supporting trade deals compared with 67 percent of Democrats and left-leaning independents.⁵⁷ When such shifts occur in Europe, new parties led by political entrepreneurs can and do rise to power, and established centrist parties can find themselves confined to political fringes. By contrast, the two major parties in the United States face a challenge of reinventing themselves in the face of deep popular anger and mistrust.

Second, in a narrow sense, mainstream forces must also become more populist. According to CAP President and CEO Neera Tanden, “Donald Trump has widened the aperture for policy discussions in the United States.”⁵⁸ The parties got into the current crisis by seeming indifferent to the concerns that drive constituencies drawn to extreme populists. According to Robert Mickey, a political scientist at the University of Michigan, “populists are most likely to emerge, and succeed politically, when they can legitimately claim an outsider status, when there is a widely shared perception of political corruption, and when established political parties studiously avoid to discuss the issues raised by populists.”⁵⁹ The two major U.S. political parties need to think through party positions when the rank and file have serious doubts about the establishment consensus.

Third, the major parties need to encourage new entrants that can be viewed as a change from the so-called colluding elite. They also need to support structural changes to the political system that will increase the responsiveness and accountability of elected representatives—including anti-corruption reforms to help rebuild trust in government. Extreme populists who pose a threat to democracy focus on the system being irredeemable. Their “burn it down” sentiments tap into popular frustration and can drive their opponents into a race to the bottom that usually fails. Yet credible reformers with an affirmative agenda can tap into populist sentiments effectively without being anti-democratic or illiberal. This form of so-called good populism embraces and responds to popular concerns in a way that French political strategist and diplomat Adrien Abecassis described as an answer to popular demands for radicalism, but without extremism.⁶⁰

Finally, CAP and AEI’s joint research suggests that a new affirmative patriotism is needed to neutralize more extreme populist sentiments. In the United States, populism on the left and populism on the right have some striking commonalities: deep suspicion of America’s overseas military actions; alarm about the rise of a surveillance state; mistrust of major institutions; and suspicion of global elites. Much of this cynicism is borne from the endless wars since the beginning of the 21st century as well as the experience of the Great Recession—asccribed by many to the misdeeds of an elite that avoided accountability.

The ugly nationalism and white supremacy on display during and after the 2016 election can best be countered by rebuilding patriotic sentiments around America’s time-tested democratic values and institutions. This must be built on an honest understanding of America’s history and an embrace of the nation’s founding principles of government of, by, and for the people, with equal, inalienable rights for all.

Conclusion

The task for America's political establishment is nothing short of revolutionary change—change that realigns the establishment with the demands of alienated political bases but eschews anti-democratic populism. In the United States, extreme partisanship and unresponsive government is a driver of the gridlock, frustration, and extreme populism that has developed over the past quarter century. It has been supercharged by new technologies and social media. But the ascendance of extreme populism need not be permanent. A return to constructive partisanship combined with bipartisan cooperation on fundamental issues—such as the opioid epidemic, criminal justice reform, economic inequality, and the protection of American democracy from foreign interference—could restore the fortunes of politicians who hold true to democratic values, including equality before the law, an independent judiciary and freedom of the press.

About the authors

Dalibor Rohac is a research fellow at the American Enterprise Institute (AEI), where he studies political economy of the European Union. He is also a visiting fellow at the University of Buckingham in the United Kingdom and a fellow at the Institute of Economic Affairs in London. Before joining AEI, Rohac was affiliated with the Cato Institute's Center for Global Liberty and Prosperity and served as deputy director at the London-based Legatum Institute. In 2009, he interned at the office of the president of the Czech Republic in Prague. In addition to dozens of academic articles in peer-reviewed journals, Rohac has written about European affairs for *The Washington Post*, *The New York Times*, *Financial Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *Foreign Affairs*, and many other outlets. His book, *Towards an Imperfect Union: A Conservative Case for the EU*, was included on *Foreign Affairs* magazine's list of best books of 2016. Rohac holds a Ph.D. in political economy from King's College London, an M.Phil. in economics from the University of Oxford, an M.A. in economics from George Mason University, and a B.A. in economics from Charles University in Prague.

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Appendix

CAP-AEI Project on Defending Democracy and Underwriting the Transatlantic Partnership

Statement of aims

On both sides of the Atlantic, free, open, and democratic societies are facing a challenge. An intellectual vacuum is forming in the political center, where traditional political platforms and leaders are experiencing a decline in their popular appeal. Meanwhile, authoritarian populists of various stripes, many with covert or open ties to the Kremlin, are stepping in to fill the emerging void.

Scholars at the Center for American Progress and at the American Enterprise Institute have often found themselves on opposing sides of important policy discussions. Yet, at a time when the fundamental character of Western societies is at stake, what unites us is much stronger than the disagreements that we have.

The threat of authoritarian populism will not recede unless a new generation of political leaders offers a credible agenda for improving people's lives that is more appealing to the public than the populist alternatives. The defense and rebuilding of democratic politics and discourse, however, requires sustained intellectual engagement. It demands a reinvigorated case for how liberal democracy, openness, pluralism, and a rules-based international order can deliver on the promise of shared prosperity and common security. Through this project, we aim to provide such a case, built around five ideas:

- As a system of government, *liberal democracy has no appealing alternatives*. People deserve to live under governments that are responsive and accountable to them and subject to binding constitutional and legal constraints.

- As a general rule, ***openness—both to trade and migration—makes societies more prosperous and resilient.*** Policymakers need to make sure that the benefits of openness are shared fairly, but going back to a world of autarchic, closed societies is not an option.
- ***International cooperation is valuable.*** While international organizations and alliances may require updating, an international system based on rules and cooperation between liberal democracies is vastly preferable to the zero-sum world of warfare and protectionism that was the norm throughout human history.
- ***Authoritarian regimes are not benign.*** In fact, they are actively undermining liberal democracies. Liberal democracies should not seek confrontation, but—especially after the experience provided by years of Russia’s disinformation efforts in Europe and in the United States—they need to appreciate that, within the international realm, authoritarian regimes pursue different objectives than societies with governments that are accountable to the people and respect the rule of law.
- ***Ideas matter.*** The critical debates about the future of our societies are never settled once and for all. They take place in every generation. Fearless, fair, and honest debate is a crucial mechanism to advance human dignity and freedom and to achieve human potential. It is time that our generation mount a solid intellectual defense of the cornerstones of democratic social order.

Endnotes

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