

Trump's Populist Appeal and Its Dire Potential Consequences

2021

Thomas A. Burns Ph.D.

Klamath Falls, Oregon

Following the 2020 Presidential Election, many Americans and citizens of other countries have asked: "How could 72 million Americans vote for Trump when he is so obviously an unstable, incompetent, want-to-be dictator?"

The Short Answer

Over the four years of his presidency, Trump has been a successful populist leader due both to his own "talents" and the highly problematic state of the current digital communication platforms. Fortunately for the survival of American democracy, Trump has been a reactive and not a strategic populist.

The Expanded Answer in Three Parts

Part One – Background – Where Do Important Elements in Trump's Populist Approach Come From?

By the time Trump was an adult, he had adopted the overall approach in dealing with people from his sociopathic father, his narcissistic mother, and his family's long time association with Roy Cohen [not Michael Cohen], the infamous attorney in the McCarthy hearings. The lessons: a) focus exclusively on securing your own self-interests while claiming to serve the "needs" of the public, b) challenge all vulnerable opponents with law suits, c) repetitively assign pejorative labels to all opponents and critics [carried in the media if possible], d) never recognize/admit your own faults, weaknesses, or failures, e) never concede defeat, f) attribute all failures and criticism to others – especially to your opponents whenever possible, and g) require unconditional loyalty to you as the boss/leader from all associates. Importantly, this set of conditions and requirements in the context of the privately held Trump family enterprises corresponds closely to those conditions that guide successful organized crime syndicates. Different components in this list are focal at different points in Trump's populist evolution before and during his presidency.

Part Two – Placating the Conservative Establishment

1) Trump, together with Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, catered to the interests of Standard Conservatives [the wealthy and businesses/corporations – especially the military industrial complex, the financial industry, and the fossil fuel consortium]. These interests received reduced taxes and diminished regulation; and so they were willing to overlook the many Trump negatives.

2) Again, Trump and McConnell gave Religious Conservatives support for their anti-abortion and anti-LGBTQ rights agenda by nominating and confirming very conservative judges to the federal courts at all levels. These religious conservatives proved willing to tolerate Trump's gross unethical behavior resorting instead to "pray for his well-being."

Part Three – Trump's Populist Appeal to the Party Base

The Initial Period Through the 2016 Election

Since the advent in the 1980's of the Tea Party within the Republican Party and the consequent take over by this mostly libertarian perspective, Congress has become more and more dysfunctional with greater and greater polarization of the major parties at all political levels from cities to counties to states to the nation. In this context, Trump entered the presidential scene in 2015 as an outsider claiming that neither of the major parties as currently constituted had done or were doing anything significant for "You." By contrast, as an independent, successful, billionaire, reality show celebrity, Trump asserts, "I Alone Can Fix It," "Drain the Swamp," and "Make America Great Again." Invoking his "Make America Great Again" slogan, Trump successfully drew a golden age association of economic prosperity to his candidacy. And after all, he had demonstrated his decisive decision making power - "You're Fired" - on "The Apprentice." So, Trump's promise to fundamentally change Washington for the better was attractive to many frustrated and stressed out Americans who were uncertain about the viability of their future and the future for their children.

Like standard conservatives, this very large contingent of the public proved willing to ignore the evidence for Trump's adultery, misogyny, mendacity, and several bankruptcies. Trump's many large scale rallies during his candidacy and their reports in the media proved to be successful in both bringing out politically engaged conservatives and enlisting many previously withdrawn independents and conservatives and encouraging them to support his candidacy locally, regionally and nationally. Pushing his reformer image and attacking without restraint all of his Republican opponents, Trump won the Republican primaries and to the surprise of most the general 2016 election [with a little outside assist from the Russians] to become the 45th President. Trump's successful candidacy laid the groundwork for his populist approach as the nation's leader.

The Maturation of Trump's Populism During His Presidency

There are several components that have contributed to Trump's success in promoting his populist appeal during his four year term as President.

1) Trump has proven to be successful in marketing/promoting himself through his Trump brand which he has applied to all kinds of businesses and products:

hotels, casinos, airlines, universities, golf courses, wine, clothing, etc. No surprise then that Trump encouraged his followers to buy his MAGA hats, Trump flags, t shirts, etc. Such physical accouterments constitute large scale identity declarations by Trump's supporters – not just lapel badges; and when his supporters share these declaration signs en masse, they not only emphatically announce their political orientation to outsiders but also promote their mutual commitment and sense of belonging as members of the Trump “club.” The role of these external identity markers in generating and sustaining “true” believer status should not be underestimated.

2) Trump rather quickly managed to co-opt the Republican Party and convert it into the Party of Trump by roundly and repeatedly attacking all of his party critics and opponents. Trump's withering and mostly publicly broadcast attacks threatened his party opponents with election losses if they did not remain loyal to him. The result: the tighter Trump's control becomes over the party conservative base, the more complete the individual and party submission/accommodation – even converting one time strong critics into sycophants [Lindsey Graham, Ted Cruz, Marco Rubio, etc.]. Trump's attacks enforce his Loyalty requirement within the party, within his staff, among his appointees, and across federal departments. Stray and “You're Fired,” or excluded. The overall result: Trump achieves complicity from the vast majority of elected Republicans at all levels, and he displays strength to his supporters. Complicity is approval; Republican failure to gather and confront Trump is socio-political cowardice. Trump rides this complicity/cowardice wave through his presidency.

3) Trump's MAGA Rallies all across the country magnify the party base's emotional commitment to Trump and their “hatred” of his “enemies” – bypassing rational thought. In this process, Trump's followers become ever more committed to him as the “great leader” who is fighting for them while holding that he is being irresponsibly attacked by outsiders, Antifa, socialists, Deep State “traitors,” the fake news media, etc. As the Trump base solidifies over time, what begins as generalized support by the party base becomes a Movement with the Trump cult of personality at its center.

4) Trump's daily, early morning Twitter feeds incessantly repeat his claims of success while targeting and rejecting his opponents/critics. Unregulated conservative social media, talk shows, blogs, and Fox News repeatedly cycle Trump's claims and accusations back and forth, back and forth, converting these claims over time into truths while all criticism is attributed to fake news.

5) It is difficult to overstate the importance that social media has played in the success over time of Trump's populist movement. Unrestrained, four years is a

lot of time! Social media platforms have become the main source of information/news in the last decade for most Americans. And, very importantly, these organizations are structured to identify the interests and views of individual users and to then feed them what they want to hear – all in behalf of accommodating the goals of commercial interests to sell their advertised products and services. The result is increasingly surrounding individual users with information that supports their existing values and views and avoiding exposing them to information that might challenge their established perspective. In short, social media supports the isolation of individuals and groups into self-perpetuating information bubbles with the result that the internal views/beliefs of these participants are constantly amplified. From generalized support to intense radicalization of Trump's supporters is the role that social media has played in promoting the Trump disinformation campaign and the emergence of "true believers" among the Trump base. In this context, propaganda masquerades as reliable information and is excused by appealing to the right of free speech.

6) When the unregulated and ultimately irresponsible social media system is sustained and becomes more dominant over time – as it has been over Trump's four year term in office, what begins as an emergent state of belief among supporters becomes a committed state of belief becomes an absolute state of belief. And as the intensity of belief rises, the categories of recognized Trump insiders and outsiders also become more and more exclusive. Early on, Trump accommodates 2nd Amendment gun rights advocates, organized militias and the NRA. And by adopting his "America First" slogan, he colors his movement with patriotism and wraps himself and his followers in the American flag. His "good people" characterization of the Charlottesville white supremacists and his description of southern border immigrants as rapists and thieves make his racial and ethnic biases clear. Whites are invited in while Hispanics, Blacks, Native Americans, and other people of "color" or of non-Christian ethnicity [Muslims, Jews, etc.] are viewed with suspicion. Once these divisions are made along with the commitment to more and more extreme belief, it is relatively easy to convert absolute belief in Trump into confrontational action – even violent action. The Black Lives Matter movement becomes such a target with Trump encouraging law enforcement to confront these mostly peaceful protesters in multiple locations across the country. Trump's cult solidifies under a wealthy, white, corporate, Christian, gun rights, anti-immigrant, anti-ethnic, "American" flag.

7) Once the Us verses Them mentality is solidly in place and once Trump anticipates a possible/probable election loss in 2020 – which he can attribute to fraud, he can play the victim role with his followers. Just as the Deep State system abuses him, so it abuses them by taking away their jobs and leaving them in a depleted economic condition. This call for "sympathy" in shared

identity adds to the emotional commitment of Trump's followers to his "cause." Trump is in essence saying, "I am a victim – just like You." "I share your Pain." "A Fight for Me is a Fight for Yourself." This is the ultimate identity commitment. It announces, "We are Family." This is the extreme tie that all populists seek to evoke in their followers; and Trump succeeded in eliciting it in his cult followers.

The Trump Populist Finale

1) As Trump anticipated his 2020 election loss, he claimed repeatedly and in advance that if he were to lose, it could only be the result of election fraud perpetrated by his opponents and the "Deep State." Having encouraged his base to be absolutely loyal to him, Trump signaled early on that in the event that the election is "stolen," his followers might need to "correct" this false eventuality.

2) As the election results confirmed a Biden-Harris win, Trump, together with Rudy Giuliani, escalated his fraud claims into full blown election conspiracies and sought a series of unsuccessful legal efforts all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court to reject the election results. Using social media and direct phone calls, Trump pressured state legislators and various state officials to alter their election results in favor of him. In this process, Trump told his allied militia groups to "Stand By," and he pulled his believer cult members along with him down the road to the edge of insurrection. And Trump's "troops" obeyed.

3) Of course the final Trump move with Giuliani is to call for the January 6th rally participants to march to the Capitol building and "fight"/"battle" to stop the members of Congress from accepting the certified votes for president and vice president officially reported by all 50 states. The resulting violence and threat to the lives of Congressional representatives in the mob take over and trashing of the Capitol was halted just in time with legislators threatened but protected. This insurrection event then leads rapidly to Trump's second impeachment.

Conclusion

While the violent culmination of the extreme Trump cult was ultimately not successful, the evidence is emerging that there were members of the Jan. 6th rally group as well as complicit police and congressional lawmakers whose goal was to see the Capitol stormed and targeted representatives arrested, tried, and even executed. Had this occurred – as may have been the ultimate intention of Trump and Giuliani, it would have resulted in a blood bath which in turn would have justified Trump declaring martial law and calling out the military. While these moves by Trump would have been characterized by him at the time as temporary, they correspond to the final moves made by most authoritarian dictators who take over in a coup and then never release military power once they gain control of it. Was Jan. 6th one step on a path to a completed coup?

In an alternative scenario, had Trump worked strategically over time to consolidate the many militia groups that supported him, he might have accumulated a force akin to Hitler's "Brown Shirts," who were instrumental in Hitler's eventual rise to the position of Fuhrer in Germany.

If Trump had been a less reactive and more strategic populist politician, he might have been successful in fully realizing the authoritarian goals that were clearly evident throughout his presidency. Trump sought to control the main stream media, the federal courts, and the military, but he did not succeed. If he had been successful – especially with the media and the courts – to the same extent that he came to control the Republican Party, Congress and the Justice Department, he might well have had an alternative path to authoritarian rule. In this regard, if Trump had been a wartime president, he would have controlled the military, and he might well have enjoyed a great deal of power over the media and federal courts. In this context, Trump might have found it relatively easy to implement full authoritarian rule as the country returned to peace time. War was the one move Trump did not pursue to further consolidate his power. Surely he and his minions considered it, but the military seems to have made it clear that it was not on board for such a move unless it was required by a substantial outside threat – not if it was promoted from within.

Americans came close to a coup being the ultimate consequence of permitting the Trump populist process to emerge and mature. Trump and company's four years of constant, unrestrained propaganda via social media was permitted to radicalize a great many citizens. Are Americans going to continue to allow unregulated social media to facilitate populism and promote such disasters? Four years is long enough to brainwash virtually anyone! What are the limits of free speech in the globally instantaneous, interactive, digital information world?

Post Script

Trump never understood, identified with, or had any experience in performing a public service role. Should Americans require that any candidate for national level office have demonstrated competence in some kind of responsible public service job, including evidence of policy and administrative experience? In such a system, Trump would not even qualify to apply for the job of U.S. President.

A dictator is in essence a scaled up crime syndicate boss. For a very long time Trump and his family's suspect shell corporations and financial dealings have displayed many of the characteristics of such an organized crime enterprise. Is this the proper pedigree for an American President, populist or not?