The Decline of Political Trust and the Rise of Populism in the United States

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In his state-of-the-union address of January 12, 2016, U.S. President Barack Obama (Obama-white-house 2016) reminded the American people that

> democracy does require basic bonds of trust between its citizens. It doesn't work if we think the people who disagree with us are all motivated by malice. It doesn't work if we think that our political opponents are unpatriotic or trying to weaken America. Democracy grinds to a halt without a willingness to compromise, or when even basic facts are contested, or when we listen only to those who agree with us. Our public life withers when only the most extreme voices get all the attention. And most of all, democracy breaks down when the average person feels their voice doesn't matter; that the system is rigged in favor of the rich or the powerful or some special interest.

Ten months later, nearly sixty-three million American voters cast their ballots for a presidential candidate who, it seems fair to say, had run his campaign on messages that represent what Obama had warned against. Donald Trump denounced his opponent, former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, as "the ringleader of a criminal enterprise that has corrupted our government at the highest levels" (Trump Pueblo Rally 2016). Presenting himself as the avenger of a wronged people, the Republican contender promised that he would "drain the swamp" and warned that the Democrats were plotting massive electoral fraud to stop him (Trump Grand Junction Rally 2016). When the vote count showed that he had won a majority in the Electoral College but trailed Clinton in the popular vote, the president-elect kept insisting that her three-million vote lead resulted from "the millions of people who voted illegally" (@real-DonaldTrump, November 27, 2016).

Since November 9, 2016, pundits and scholars debate why nearly half of the electorate was willing to entrust America's—and arguably the

world's—most powerful political office to a businessman of dubious reputation who had no experience of public service—a man whose vulgarity, vanity, and mendacity made his candidacy appear so outlandish that observers claimed it was the publicity stunt of a brazen self-promoter (Wolff 2018). Analysts disagree whether racial resentment, sexism, or socio-economic grievances played the largest role in Trump's startling victory. But nobody contests that the basic motivation of Trump voters was a deep-seated distrust of America's political elites and institutions. According to political scientist Thomas E. Patterson, Trump "rode the wave of distrust all the way to the Oval Office" (2019: 68).

Clearly Trump thrived on spreading distrust, but he did not create it. Indeed, trust in government has been declining since the mid-1960s when 75 percent of Americans declared that they trusted government to do what is right just about always or most of time; by comparison, in 2016 fewer than 20 percent agreed with that statement (Pew Research Center 2017: 1). To be sure, trust in government has fallen significantly in all Western democracies (Dalton 2017: 376). Many political scientists have interpreted this trend as evidence of rising expectations among the "critical citizens" of mature democracies (Norris 1999 and 2011). However, with the dramatic upsurge of right-wing populism, including the "Trump Movement," distrust of government appears to have transmuted into a general crisis of liberal representative democracy (Mudde/Kaltwasser 2017; Müller 2017; Mounk 2017).

In this essay, I explore the relationship between the decline of political trust and the rise of right-wing populism in contemporary America. I will begin by introducing the concept of political trust and review some relevant academic debates. I will then probe the historical and structural roots of American populism. Finally, I will look at the role political distrust has played in Donald Trump's ascendency to the presidency of the United States. Political distrust, I argue, is the key to understand both the history of American populism and the "Trump phenomenon."

Political Trust

Although there is no universally accepted definition of political trust, most scholars agree that the term refers to generalized trust in political institutions and elites. It is thus distinct from trust between individuals in face-to-face relationships, as well as from generalized social trust, defined as trust

in local communities and society at large (Uslaner 2018). The delegation of political authority requires that the governed trust that the governing elites will not abuse their power, but rather act in the best interest of the polity. Levels of political trust range from affective belief in the principal benevolence of authorities, to skepticism, deep cynicism, and alienation. Moreover, people may identify with the core principles of a political system but distrust individual officeholders, or be dissatisfied with the performance of particular institutions (Norris 2017).

Political scientists are mostly interested in trust at the systemic level. When they ask American citizens the standard question, "How much of the time do you think you can trust the government in Washington to do what is right—just about always, most of the time, only some of the time, or never?" they seek to measure levels of trust in the system of government and not in the current administration (Hetherington 2005: 11). To be sure, incumbents do affect the levels of trust among their supporters and opponents, although historically the correlation was never strong. This has changed in recent years. During the presidency of Barack Obama (2009–2017), trust in government reached an all-time low among Republicans. After Donald Trump's election, Democrats, who usually express higher levels of political trust compared to Republicans, have professed the lowest trust in government in nearly six decades, whereas trust among Republicans increased significantly (Pew 2015: 9; Pew 2017: 1–2; 7–8; 10). Some researchers see the growing salience of negative partisanship, i.e. voters' dislike for the opposite party exceeds approval for their ideological preference, as an indicator that polarization is undermining trust in institutions (Hetherington/Rudolph 2015; Abramowitz 2018).

Clearly government performance, especially in the area of economic and welfare policies, affects trust (Kumlin/Haugsgjerd 2017). Political scientist Marc Hetherington defines political trust as "the degree to which people perceive that government is producing outcomes consistent with their expectations." As Hetherington points out, however, perceptions and expectations are subjective categories that often lead to distortions and inconsistencies. For example, most Americans grossly overrate the extent of government waste and corruption, which then negatively affects their political trust (Hetherington 2005: 9–10). Moreover, government performance is not confined to the delivery of material benefits. Citizens expect institutions to be fair and accessible, and elites to perform their duties in a competent, impartial, and unselfish way. With respect to these standards, surveys show that Americans

are deeply distrustful of their elected officials. According to a 2015 study by the Pew Research Center (12–13), 74 percent suspect elected officials to put their personal interests ahead of the country's, while 55 percent believe that ordinary Americans would do a better job at solving the country's problems. Nearly 70 percent of Americans hold an unfavorable view of Congress, which is the least trusted government institution in America, although it represents the elected branch of government (58; see also Pew 2019b: 1–10). Virtually all surveys on trust indicate that large parts of the American citizenry have developed a cynical perception of their country's political process and of elites as being inherently corrupt and incompetent. Fifty-seven percent of respondents declared they were "frustrated," and 22 percent expressed outright anger with government; among Republicans the angry group amounted to 32 percent. Nearly 90 percent of GOP voters showed a high level of general distrust of government (Pew 2015: 9). At the same time, most Americans appear to be deeply worried about the decline of both political trust and social trust. A recent study on *Trust and Distrust in America* by the Pew Research Center found that up to 70 percent of respondents wished that trust in government and interpersonal trust could be improved because low trust made it more difficult to solve vital problems. America's political culture, the study notes, is widely perceived as broken (Pew Research Center 2019a: 3–4, 16–29).

This bleak assessment stands in stark contrast to the halcyon picture which Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba, the pioneers of political culture research, painted of political trust in America in their pathbreaking work *The Civic Culture*, first published in 1963 (1995). Probing the cognitive and emotional orientations of citizens toward the political system, the authors identified trust as a key pillar of a democratic civic culture that combines active participation with traditional loyalty to authorities: "General social trust is translated into politically relevant trust" (214). In contrast to the citizens of Italy, Mexico, Germany, and Great Britain—the study's comparative frame of reference—postwar Americans showed high levels of social trust, which induced them to join voluntary associations and participate in politics. Social trust supposedly led to an "open pattern of partisanship in the United States." Voters cared about the outcome of elections, but this did not mean "complete rejection of one's political opponent." Hence, U.S. citizens combined "generalized system affect" and a "satisfaction with specific governmental performance" (313–315).

Although *The Civic Culture* subsequently came under criticism for methodological flaws and a white, middle-class bias, its conceptual linkage between

trust and democratic stability has remained influential among both scholars and the general public. As the editors of the 2017 *Handbook of Political Trust* summarize the conventional wisdom: "Political trust thus functions as the glue that keeps the system together and as the oil that lubricates the political machine." Once trust gives way to distrust and cynicism, the "very survival of representative democracy and its institutions may be at stake" (Zmerli/van der Meer 2017: 1).

The premise that democracy depends on trust appears plausible. People need to have confidence in the integrity of political leaders, while elected leaders need the trust of their constituents to make necessary, albeit unpopular decisions (Patterson 2019: 50). And, yet, as political scientist Mark E. Warren points out, "trust and democracy have an essential but paradoxical relationship to one another" because the institutions of democracy, and especially the American constitutional system of checks and balances, "were founded on *distrust*" (2017: 33; emphasis in the original). The paradox can be solved, Warren argues, if citizens learn to distrust officeholders without losing confidence in political institutions (35–36). Other scholars insist, however, that Americans must cherish the Madisonian tradition that sees government as a necessary evil (Rossiter 1961: 322; see also Wills 1999). In an essay entitled "Government without Trust," the late Russell Hardin, a leading scholar of trust and a proponent of rational choice and libertarian economic theory, disputed that citizens could or should trust institutions or elites (2013). According to Hardin, distrust is the only rational attitude because government will always be much more powerful than individual citizens and thus be a threat to their liberty: "Liberal distrust of government is historically distrust of its use of power," he stated (38). Therefore, in Hardin's view, the decline of trust in recent decades, far from giving us occasion for concern, simply indicates the transition to a new political era when "big government" is no longer needed because markets will function smoothly by themselves (49).

If distrust of government is indeed a wholesome civic virtue, the citizens of Western democracies have learned their lesson according to those social scientists who have studied value change in the "postmaterialist societies" of North America and Western Europe. As Western societies have become more affluent, better educated, and more individualistic over the past half century, their political cultures have undergone a silent, but fundamental revolution. Hence, for Ronald Inglehart, Pippa Norris, Russell Dalton, and others, the decline of political trust does not signal a crisis of democracy but, on the contrary, mirrors increased expectations about how democratic government

should perform. The "critical citizens" of democracies, Dalton argues, are "dissatisfied democrats," who "distrust government and political institutions but are supportive of democratic principles" (2017: 282; Norris 1999 and 2011). The age of deferential citizenship, when trust of elites could be more or less taken for granted, has given way to a "new civic culture." "We have entered a new period when governments must confront a public skeptical of their motivations, doubtful about the institutions of representative democracy, and willing to challenge political elites," writes Russell Dalton (391).

But how long does it take until dissatisfied democrats will lose patience with democratic rule—or at least with representative democracy? Yascha Mounk contends that persistent dissatisfaction with government performance will sooner or later undermine loyalty to democracy itself. Mounk points to surveys that indicate growing support for authoritarian rule across North America and Western Europe, especially among younger age cohorts. According to findings of the World Values Survey, roughly one in three Americans today endorses government by a strong leader who does not have to bother with Congress or elections (Mounk 2017: 103–112). Ten years ago, we might not have seen such numbers as alarming. With Donald Trump in the White House, we can no longer be so sure.

The Historical and Structural Roots of American Populism

The "critical citizens" approach has much plausibility in explaining what we could call the "left wing of political distrust," represented by the new social movements and an activist civil society. But how do we account for the rise of right-wing populism, illiberalism, and authoritarianism in Western societies? After all, the leaders and followers of right-wing populism also claim to be "critical citizens" who challenge the "undemocratic" rule of a self-serving "establishment." Populists, scholars agree, define politics as a moral conflict between the "pure people" and "corrupt elites," and they reduce democracy to executing the alleged "will of the people" (Mudde/Kaltwasser 2017: 5–6; see also Eichengreen 2018; Müller 2017; Judis 2016). Left-wing and right-wing populists agree in their distrust of representative democracy, but differ in their conception of who is included in the "people." Right-wing populism defines the people as an ethnocultural community, whereas left-wing populists emphasize the common socio-economic interests of the "Ninety-Nine Per-

cent," as the catchy, but misleading slogan of the so-called Occupy Wall Street Movement during the Great Recession had it.

Unlike fascism or communism, populism is not a fixed ideology but a political idiom. Historian Michael Kazin defines it as "a language whose speakers conceive of ordinary people as a noble assemblage not bounded narrowly by class, view their elite opponents as self-serving and undemocratic, and seek to mobilize the former against the latter" (1995: 1). Distrust of government has always formed the core of populist thought and rhetoric. In American popular memory, this tradition goes back to the Revolutionary Era when virtuous Patriots rebelled against the corrupt British monarchy. Subsequently, it shaped Anti-Federalist opposition to a powerful federal government. During the Jacksonian Era, which Alexis de Tocqueville famously described in his treatise on *Democracy in America* (1990), the populist mood became dominant as the United States developed into a mass democracy. The "people," conceived as the egalitarian community of white men who earned their livelihoods as independent farmers and mechanics, needed to be constantly on guard against greedy capitalists and crooked politicians (Kazin 1995: 19–22; Formisano 2008; Wills 1999). Indeed, the populist idiom and style have shaped American political history to an extent that makes it difficult to distinguish between populist insurgents and folksy mainstream politicians.

According to historian Ronald Formisano, American populist movements have been driven by "fear of centralized power" and by resistance of local communities against "external forces that are perceived to threaten their autonomy, political rights, or economic security" (2008: 10). Formisano distinguishes between a progressive variety of American populism, which fights for social reforms and equal opportunity for ordinary people, and a reactionary branch, which touts illiberal messages and scapegoats vulnerable minorities instead of confronting the privileged and powerful (2008: 10–14). From the agrarian protest movement of the late 19th century (Postel 2007) to Huey Long's "Share Our Wealth" campaign during the Great Depression (Brinkley 1983), American populists primarily focused on defending the interests of small producers and workers against plutocratic capitalists. With the onset of the Cold War and postwar affluence, however, populism began to take a conservative turn. Americans no longer distrusted business leaders but began to focus on liberal intellectual elites, whom they suspected of secretly sympathizing with communism and the Soviet Union. Senator Joseph McCarthy (R–WI), the most prominent protagonist of the anticommunist hysteria of the early Cold War, alleged that America's liberal foreign policy estab-

lishment was engaged in a "conspiracy on a scale so immense as to dwarf any previous such venture in the history of man" (Kazin 1995: 165–193; Oshinsky 2005: 191). At its core, McCarthyism represented a populist culture war of patriotic, god-fearing Americans against supposedly cosmopolitan and secularist elites.

When the liberal consensus, which Almond and Verba had celebrated in *The Civic Culture*, fell apart during the upheavals of the Vietnam-Watergate Era, the white working and middle classes, which had previously formed the backbone of the Democratic New Deal Coalition, staged what the Republican strategist Kevin Philipps diagnosed as "a populist revolt of the American masses … against the Mandarin caste of the liberal establishment" (quoted in Boyd 1970: 25). The immediate beneficiary was George Wallace, a former governor of Alabama, who posed as an uncompromising defender of white supremacy and raged against unelected judges and hypocritical liberal elites trying to impose racial integration on ordinary white folks, while sending their own children to expensive private schools (Kazin 1995: 228–242; Carter 1995). In the 1968 presidential election, Wallace ran as an independent and garnered an impressive 13.5 percent of the nationwide popular vote. More important in the long run, however, was the transformation of the Republican Party. The Grand Old Party began to shed its liberal wing and to appeal to the "silent majority" of (white) Americans who saw themselves as the losers of the civil rights reforms and the cultural revolution of the Sixties. Republicans promised they would restore traditional moral and religious values, and protect hard-working Americans against the encroachments of arrogant and inefficient government bureaucrats. In his first inauguration of January 1981, President Ronald Reagan famously summed up the anti-government message: "Government is not the solution to our problem, government is the problem" (Schaller 2002: 83; Lütjen 2016). The conservative turn of populism was followed by a populist turn of conservatism.

The GOP's espousal of "traditional family values" and its alliance with the emerging Religious Right could easily obscure the fact that the party's anti-government rhetoric was at odds with traditional conservatism, which had favored strong institutions (Patterson 2019: 55–56). In fact, the relentless assault on government interference with the economy represented a radical libertarianism, which had made its first, forceful national appearance with Barry Goldwater's capture of the Republican presidential nomination in 1964 (Perlstein 2001). In her controversial book *Democracy in Chains*, historian Nancy MacLean (2016) claims that the political advance of neoliberal economics fol-

lowed a "stealth plan" connived by a small group of libertarian ideologues and right-wing billionaires to undermine American popular democracy. But neoliberalism was no conspiracy, and libertarians never concealed their conviction that individual economic freedom must enjoy precedence over state intervention. On the contrary, Thomas Patterson credits the success of Republican leaders in undermining trust in government to their ability to tell a simple popular message: "Big government is the problem, cutting taxes and regulation the solution; a rising tide will then lift all the boats and those who work hard will live the American Dream" (2019: 57).

But why did this message resonate so strongly among the working and middle classes, which had supposedly supported the regulatory and welfare regime of the New Deal Era? Why have many ordinary Americans, whose wages and incomes have stagnated for decades, consistently voted for policies, including tax breaks for the rich and deep cuts of the welfare state, which have contributed to a massive redistribution of wealth in favor of the top ten percent and, mostly, the top one percent (Bartels 2008; Stiglitz 2012; Saez/Zucman 2019)? Is it because average voters fail to grasp the redistributive effects of tax cuts and merely focus on their personal tax burden (Bartels 2008: 23–24)? Or is it the "false consciousness," to resurrect a venerable Marxist concept, of people "getting their fundamental interests wrong," as Thomas Frank lamented in his much-debated book *What's the Matter with Kansas*? (2004: 1)? Frank summed up liberal frustration in blunt words. The new conservative populism represented "a working-class movement that has done incalculable, historic harm to working-class people…. Like a French Revolution in reverse—one in which the Sansculottes pour down the streets demanding more power for the aristocracy." Employing the anti-elitist rhetoric of populism, the strategists of plutocracy had hoodwinked Middle Americans into culture wars over abortion, gay rights, school prayer, etc. "Cultural anger is marshaled to achieve economic ends," Frank complains. "The trick never ages; the illusion never wears off. Vote to stop abortion; receive a rollback in capital gains taxes. Vote to make our country strong again; receive deindustrialization. Vote to screw those politically correct college professors; receive electricity deregulation" (5–9). Like other liberals of the New Deal tradition, Frank scolds the Democratic Party for abandoning its traditional blue-collar constituencies and for embracing neoliberalism, cultural elitism, and identity politics for racial and sexual minorities (Frank 2016; see also Lilla 2017).

American culture wars epitomize a larger sociocultural conflict in postindustrial Western societies, which many researchers see as the basic struc-

tural cause of the populist insurgency. According to Andreas Reckwitz (2019) and others, the traditional antagonism between capital and labor of the industrial era has been replaced by a new cleavage between the winners and losers of globalization and modernization—a conflict that pits liberal, educated, "cosmopolitan" elites, and the so-called creative classes against the "old" working and middle classes, who have experienced continuous economic decline and feel alienated from and despised by the liberal mainstream culture—"strangers in their own land," as sociologist Arlie Hochschild entitled her acclaimed exploration of the mentalities of poor whites in rural Louisiana (2016). Right-wing populism offers them an outlet to assert their identities and articulate their protest against a federal government they see as unfairly favoring clamorous minorities.

Obviously, no analysis of political distrust and the rise of populism in the United States can ignore race. Even historians who emphasize the emancipatory and egalitarian impetus of American populism acknowledge the destructive impact of racism (Postel 2007: 173–203). Southern populists, such as George Wallace, waged their struggle for white supremacy, first and foremost, against Northern liberal elites and an intrusive federal government trying to force the "social equality" of blacks upon ordinary white people. When, in 1970, Kevin Philipps advised the Republican Party to build a new electoral majority on the support of the "negrophobe whites of the South" (Boyd 1970: 105), he correctly anticipated that combining racial resentment with social conservatism and anti-government rhetoric would be a winning strategy. In subsequent decades, a vast majority of Southern whites shifted their party allegiance from the Democrats to the Republicans, making the GOP the dominant party in the South. By and large, white voters rallied along racial and religious lines, regardless of economic status (Black/Black 2002: esp. 370–373).

The so-called white backlash and the process of partisan realignment were not confined to the South. Nationwide, the Republicans have become the party of conservative whites, while the Democrats depend heavily on the support of African Americans, Hispanics, and Asians. Many political scientists see race as the prime driver of partisan polarization (Abramowitz 2018: XII). African American critics contend that, despite the civil rights reforms of the 1960s, American society has remained structurally racist, and that white Americans resent whatever advancements blacks have made over the past half century (Anderson 2016). Racial prejudice is also often cited as a cause for the decline of political trust. Polls show that many working and middle-class whites

view themselves as victims of "reverse discrimination" because of government-mandated affirmative action programs (Patterson 2019: 58).

Moreover, race has played a key role in undermining support for welfare programs. Ironically, the expansion of the welfare state during the Sixties' "War on Poverty" was part of a liberal effort to pacify racial unrest and bring poor blacks into the mainstream of what President Lyndon Johnson dubbed the Great Society (Andrew 1998). Conservatives denounced the War on Poverty as a misguided liberal crusade at taxpayers' expense, which had resulted in discouraging personal responsibility and in creating a permanent underclass of dependents who knew how to exploit the system (Murray 1984). Prominent Republican politicians such as Ronald Reagan touted anecdotes about "welfare queens" who allegedly drove Cadillac cars and bought T-Bone steaks with food stamps. Apart from their racialized content, such stories sent the message that government was inherently wasteful and incapable of solving social problems (Hetherington 2005: 78–79).

In his study on declining political trust, Marc Hetherington found that Americans continue to favor government programs that benefit most citizens, but oppose redistributive policies which smack of preferential treatment for racial minorities. Paradoxically, support for the principle of racial equality has increased strongly since mid-20th century. Hetherington explains this gap by citing lack of political trust, rather than racism, as the key reason: "Many whites simply do not trust the government enough to implement and administer the programs designed to make racial equality a reality" (Hetherington 2005: 99–119, 119). But maybe distrust of government has simply become a proxy for racism in the same vein as "states' rights" was a code for white supremacy in the age of Jim Crow. As Theda Skocpol and Vanessa Williamson have observed with regard to the Tea Party movement, anti-government rhetoric often serves as a cover for defending one's privileges. People like the programs from which they benefit, but refuse to pay for those that benefit others (2012: 203).

Recently, scholars have raised the question of whether social solidarity and political trust have declined as a consequence of mass immigration and the ensuing demographic transformation of Western societies (McLaren 2017). In American history, the argument holds, the New Deal consensus on the welfare state during the mid-twentieth century coincided with a restrictive immigration regime that kept levels of immigration at a historic low in the decades between the 1920s and the 1960s. Since the Immigration Reform Act of 1965, tens of millions of newcomers from Latin America and Asia have pro-

foundly altered the country's demographic landscape. In 1960, close to 90 percent of the U.S. population were classified as white; today their share is down to 60 percent (Bureau of the Census 2019). In a few decades, persons of European descent will no longer constitute a majority of the population. Not surprisingly, mass immigration has triggered economic competition and cultural anxieties as well as a nativist backlash, which many analysts see as the major mobilizing factor for right-wing populism. Critics of the liberal, pro-immigration consensus chide cosmopolitan elites and the multicultural left for ignoring the legitimate fears of ordinary people who have seen their jobs being taken away by immigrants (Eatwell/Goodwin 2018; Kaufmann 2018). Before the 2016 election, Francis Fukuyama credited the populist campaigns of Bernie Sanders and Donald Trump with bringing back economic inequality and social class on the American agenda. In order to restore a social equilibrium and a political consensus, he argued, some retreat from globalization was necessary, including "reasonable restrictions on immigration" (Fukuyama 2016). Arguably, no other of Donald Trump's slogans was more popular among his supporters than his promise to build a wall at the Mexican border.

In Fukuyama's view, the surge of populism mirrors an understandable protest against an increasingly dysfunctional political system that has become unresponsive to the interests and concerns of ordinary people. Roger Eatwell and Matthew Goodwin also dispute the notion "that the people are giving up on democracy" simply because they distrust "highly educated and liberal elites whose backgrounds and outlooks differ fundamentally from those of average citizens" (Eatwell/Goodwin 2018: 85). While the political institutions of Western democracies have become more inclusive for women and minorities, the authors observe, representatives of the working classes and people with less formal education have almost been shut out. Half of U.S. senators and congressmen are millionaires in the top one percent of income distribution (108). The view that the political process in America is dominated by lobbyists and powerful interest groups, while being "utterly unresponsive to the policy preferences of millions of low-income citizens," is no populist conspiracy theory, but has often been confirmed by solid social science research (Bartels 2008: 2; Gilens 2012; Hacker/Pierson 2011).

The widespread dissatisfaction with a political system that favors the interests of corporate America and the rich reached new heights in the wake of the financial crisis of 2008. Although the massive bailout of banks was arguably inevitable and successful, it created tremendous outrage, as Washington seemingly saved Wall Street but let Main Street go to the dogs

(Tooze 2018). However, the protest played out differently on the left and the right. The Occupy Wall Street Movement, which emerged in the summer of 2011, claimed to speak for the "Ninety-Nine Percent." But these anti-capitalist protesters were predominantly young and educated members of the white middle classes. Their strict grass-roots egalitarianism won them praise among liberals and the left, but also contributed to the movement's organizational weakness and its fast decline (Kruse/Zelizer 2019: 308–9).

In contrast, the so-called Tea Party Movement on the right, which formed almost immediately after President Barack Obama's inauguration, proved to be much more consequential. The mostly white, conservative, and relatively affluent Tea Partiers fiercely rejected Obama's Wall Street bailout, his plans for universal health care, and his stimulus package to fight the Great Recession as proof of his alleged design to make America a socialist country. Observers debated if the Tea Party was a bona fide populist grass-roots movement or the creature of right-wing media and reactionary billionaires. But the movement clearly had a strong base of committed activists and resonated widely among the electorate. Most importantly, it pushed the Republican Party further to the right by challenging moderates in the party's primaries and committing the GOP to hardline opposition against taxes, immigration, and "socialist medicine." Although the Tea Party was short-lived as an organizational framework, analysts argue that it paved the way for Donald Trump's takeover of the Republican Party (Skocpol/Williamson 2012; Formisano 2012; Kivisto 2018).

Donald Trump and the Politics of Distrust

In the early 2000s, political scientists were debating if the polarization of American politics was perhaps a myth trumped up by the media and a small crust of partisan activists (Fiorina 2005). Today, few people dispute that polarization is real and extends to the very foundations of society and culture (Abramowitz 2018; Campbell 2016). As terms such as "alternative facts," "fake news," and "post-truth" have entered our vocabulary, Americans have come to live in different realities, often referred to as "echo chambers," where people find their own preconceived views and values amplified. In their deeply pessimistic work, *Dueling Facts in American Democracy*, Morgan Marietta and David Barker argue that the inability to agree on facts is rooted in a polarization of values (2019). Whenever there is a conflict over facts, they found, people in-

variably believe those facts that match their values, regardless of whether they are exposed to fact-checking and regardless of their educational backgrounds. Polarized values lead to a polarization of perceptions and to a "downward spiral of distrust, cynicism, and further political polarization." This process, according to the authors, is driven by "an extreme moralization of politics, a radically altered information environment, and the demise of trust in authority" (12–13). Trust and truth are inextricably linked. Because most of what we believe to be true and factual is far beyond our personal experience, we must trust in sources we consider authoritative and reliable. If there is no longer any basic consensus on which sources are trustworthy, the consequence is "a world of dueling facts, with two separate camps entrenched in their own positions and backed by their own authorities" (XIV).

Since the 1960s, when CBS anchorman Walter Cronkite was known as "the most trusted man in America," Americans have dramatically lost confidence in the mainstream media. In 2015, 65 percent said that the news media affected the country negatively; the worst rating of all non-governmental institutions. Sixty percent believe that the media intentionally withhold information from the public. Distrust of the media is even higher among Republicans, who have long since suspected that the media hold a liberal bias (Pew 2015: 124; Pew 2019a: 11; Patterson 2019: 59–61). The driver of this development has been the fragmentation of the public sphere brought about by the rise of cable tv, talk radio, the internet, and social media in particular (Sunstein 2917: 59–97). While cyber enthusiasts celebrate the advent of a golden age of participatory democracy facilitated by digital technology, critics see the internet as "a polarization machine, fast, efficient, and cheap, and all but automated" with a boundless potential for spreading distrust and conspiracy theories (Lepore 2018: 648; 729–740).

The world of social media was tailor-made for Donald Trump, who employed his Twitter account as a highly effective medium of direct political communication, boasting 11 million followers in 2016. The former reality tv character also knew how to play the mainstream media. Although he relentlessly pounded them as "enemies of the people," fake media," "lying media," and so on, the liberal media were glad to give him all the attention he sought because he drove up ratings. Les Moonves, the chairman of CBS, wryly observed that Trump may not be good for America, but he was "damn good for CBS." Supposedly he received free media coverage worth three billion dollars during the Republican primaries alone. Prior to the general election, the mainstream media tried to demonstrate their objectivity by primarily focus-

ing on Hillary Clinton's alleged scandals (Sunstein 2017: 83; Patterson 2019: 59; Kruse/Zelizer 2019: 337, 340–42).

Donald Trump excelled at sowing distrust, division, and confusion. Volumes could be filled with his blatant lies, vulgar abuses, and wild conspiracy theories. Starting in 2012, he had prepared his presidential bid by posing as a leading spokesman for the so-called "birther" movement that alleged Barack Obama had not been born in the United States and was therefore ineligible for the presidency. Although Obama had released two authenticated versions of his birth certificate, Trump insinuated the documents were forged by an official who had later died under suspicious circumstances (Kruse/Zelizer 2019: 333; @realDonaldTrump, December 12, 2013). During the 2016 campaign, he promised to lock up his opponent, whipped up fear and hate against Mexicans and Muslims, and openly espoused racist and sexist rhetoric. His message "Make America Great Again!" boiled down to a crude nationalism which blamed all of America's problems on treacherous globalist elites, unfair foreign competitors, and illegal immigrants. Moreover, Trump made little effort to conceal that the slogan should also be understood as a promise to restore white hegemony (Simms/Laderman 2017; Blow 2016). In light of America's globalized economy and demographic make-up, Trump's reactionary brand of populism looked hopelessly anachronistic. In the summer of 2016 strategists of both parties expected him to go down in crushing defeat.

It is now clear that most pollsters and pundits had completely misread Trump's appeal. They judged him by conventional standards of politics and found him all bluster with no substance. Surely, Americans, including most Republicans, wanted workable solutions to real problems and would not vote for a political snake oil salesman. But Trump refused to play by conventional rules. Instead he offered his audiences an alternative reality where their gut feelings reigned supreme (Seeßlen 2017: 52–67). Trump, as Arlie Hochschild (2016: 225) put it succinctly, was an "emotions candidate." After attending a Trump rally, she described the atmosphere as one of "whipped-up anger and nationalism." Trump himself gladly admitted that anger was at the root of his appeal: "I am angry, and a lot of other people are angry too, at how incompetently our country is being run. As far as I am concerned anger is o.k. Anger and energy is what this country needs" (quoted in Duhigg 2019: 65). Thus, the warnings by liberals and conservatives alike that Trump was inexperienced, incompetent, and unstable, that he was "a chaos candidate, and he'd be a chaos president," in the words of establishment Republican Jeb Bush, all missed the point. His supporters wanted chaos, and disruption; they wanted an outsider

who, at long last, would blow up politics as usual (Rauch 2016). The iconoclastic, left-wing filmmaker Michael Moore predicted that Trump would win because voting for him offered white working and middle-class Americans the opportunity to play "a good practical joke on a sick political system" (Moore 2016).

In his acceptance speech of July 21, 2016, Donald Trump claimed: "Nobody knows the system better than me, which is why I alone can fix it" (Trump Acceptance Speech 2016). In essence, he promised the American people political salvation if only they trust in his extraordinary abilities as a leader and dealmaker. Political scientists point out that his supporters, and the followers of right-wing populism in general, display strong authoritarian tendencies (Kivisto 2017: 51–67; Norris/Inglehart 2019: 9–12; 362–363; Hetherington/Weiler 2009). But authoritarianism is only one side of the coin; arguably it is the one that shows up when it comes to repressing "the other." In pursuit of their own rights and interests, however, American twenty-first-century populists are fiercely antiauthoritarian. In a lucid analysis of the mentality of the Tea Partiers, Mark Lilla (2010) characterizes them as "petulant individuals," who distrust institutions and expertise but are "convinced they can do everything themselves if they are only left alone." According to Lilla, the fusion of the anarchism of the Sixties with the neoliberal selfishness of the Eighties has spawned "a nation of cocksure individualists…. They don't want the rule of the people, though that's what they say. They want to be people without rules." It should come as no surprise then that they came to admire Donald Trump, the man who brags about getting away with breaking every rule.

After November 8, 2016, admirers celebrated Trump's stunning victory as the triumph of the common man in the true spirit of American populism (Rosenfielde 2017). In contrast, liberals warned that the United States had entered the slippery slope to authoritarianism (Levitsky/Ziblatt 2017). Political scientists of the value change school offer us at least some consolation. Trump's election, they claim, marks the apex of a decade-long authoritarian backlash against the inexorable liberalization of Western societies. Right-wing populism has peaked in recent years because the "tipping point" has been reached when the once dominant cultural and social groups were becoming minorities and, thus, facing the loss of their hegemony (Norris/Inglehart 2019: esp. 87–91). In other words, Donald Trump may lead the angry white man in his last stand, but the future belongs to an open, liberal, multiethnic society wrought by generational, demographic, economic, and educational change. In order to alleviate the transitional crisis, liberals demand that government

must restore trust by addressing the economic grievances and status fears of the losers (see also Reckwitz 2019: 285–304).

Alas, while optimists hope for a gradual transformation, pessimists point to American history for a much gloomier scenario. The American Civil War, which claimed more than 700,000 lives between 1861 and 1865, was preceded by decades of mounting distrust and polarization until the North and the South viewed each other as irreconcilable foes in an irrepressible conflict. When Abraham Lincoln was elected president of the United States in November 1860, the slaveholding South concluded that its economic foundation, political power, and way of life were at stake and, as a result, decided to secede from the Union. Historian David Blight, an authority on the Civil War Era, observes that a polarized country faces an imminent risk of civil war if the outcome of an election becomes unacceptable for the losing side (Wright 2017). In 2016, Donald Trump told his supporters that the system was rigged and he left open whether he would concede defeat. Will he do so should he lose in 2020? Will the Democrats accept defeat if Trump again fails to win the popular vote? Will Americans trust in the integrity of the election? After nearly four years of Trump in the White House, during which polarization and political distrust have reached new heights, these are frightening questions. At the time of this writing (March to May of 2020), they have taken on a truly dramatic dimension, as the Corona pandemic, rather than eliciting a coordinated and unifying national response, appears to be deepening the crisis of political trust and radicalizing the rifts and cleavages in American politics and society (Brownstein 2020). How the situation will look like when this essay comes to print, I do not dare to predict.

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