Left, right, and the populist structuring of political competition

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Although populism does not always find expression through a political party, it generally enters the electoral arena and challenges mainstream party organizations. In so doing, populism invariably claims to offer more authentic political representation for previously excluded or neglected popular constituencies. Populist movements and the leaders they follow are, then, properly located in the domain of political representation, as they purport to offer a corrective to failed or flawed forms of representation – in particular, those forms that are institutionalized in party organizations and the political elites who control them. Such corrective efforts redraw conventional lines of social and political cleavage and restructure partisan and electoral competition. Populism is, therefore, highly disruptive of conventional political alignments, at least where it is capable of generating mass support. Populism reshuffles the deck, and redraws the political map.

To date, however, little systematic attention has been paid to the diverse ways in which populist movements restructure political competition. This is especially problematic when scholars attribute populist characteristics to both left- and right-wing political expressions, as well as to movements that have no coherent or definable ideological expression. Beyond a shared anti-elite or anti-establishment bent, such diverse forms of populism respond to different types of representational deficiencies, and they restructure political competition in radically different ways.

Understanding the populist (re)structuring of political competition requires that scholars integrate the study of populism more explicitly with the study of partisan and electoral competition. Spatial models of competition, in particular, provide analytical leverage to assess how different types of populist leaders and movements reconfigure the competitive alignments of a given democratic order. This chapter draws from the literature on parties and party systems to differentiate left- and right-wing forms of programmatic or “positional” populist competition, and identifies the specific types of representational deficiencies to which they respond. In so doing, it distinguishes between orthogonal and “outflanking” variants of positional competition that occur along distinct issue dimensions. It then suggests that some types of populism eschew positional (or ideological) definition altogether by engaging in “valence” types of competition that do not stake out distinct issue stands, but rather contest the ability of a political establishment to achieve widely-shared social and political goals. These
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different ways of structuring political competition will be illustrated through references to paradigmatic examples like the nationalist right in Europe and the United States under Donald Trump, leftist movements like Spain’s Podemos and Bolivia’s Movement Towards Socialism (MAS), and Italy’s Five Star Movement as a form of valence competition.

**Populism’s political logic**

Scholars disagree as to whether populism is best conceived as a mode of political discourse, an ideology, a set of economic policies, or a particular type of political mobilization and leadership style. Virtually all conceptualizations of the term, however – at least those that eschew economic reductionism and insist on the phenomenon’s intrinsic “political logic” (Laclau 2005: 117) – rest upon an antagonistic division of political space between “the people,” however defined, and some type of elite or establishment “other” (Canovan 1999; Laclau 2005: 67–124; Panizza 2005: 3; De la Torre 2010; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2012: 8). For Laclau, such an antagonistic division of political space has both structural and institutional preconditions. Structurally, populism presumes sufficient levels of social heterogeneity such that there is no natural or hegemonic social subject (such as the industrial proletariat) whose particular claims can subordinate or subsume those of all others in a mass democratic project. Populism, therefore, entails the “symbolic unification” of a plurality of unmet demands or grievances; it constitutes a “broader social subjectivity” and constructs a new “popular identity” – i.e., “the people” – that is “qualitatively more than the simple summation of the equivalential links” (Laclau 2005: 73–77). Institutionally, then, populism becomes possible when there is “an accumulation of unfilled demands and an increasing inability of the institutional system to absorb” or respond to them separately (Laclau 2005: 73). As such, a “crisis of representation” is “at the root of any populist, anti-institutional outburst” (Laclau 2005: 137).

So conceived, there is little mystery as to why populism has been on the ascendance in contemporary global political affairs, from Europe and Latin America to the United States and parts of Asia (De la Torre 2015). Indeed, long-term processes of structural and institutional change that opened political space for populist alternatives have been compounded by more short-term, conjunctural disturbances, creating a highly favorable “opportunity structure” (Bornschier 2010: 7) for populist mobilization. Over the long-term, the pluralization of subjectivities has been fostered by increasing social heterogeneity, the weakening of organized labor’s central role in interest representation, the growing political salience of cultural and identity-based cleavages, and the socioeconomic and cultural differentiation of social groups that stand to benefit or lose out in the process of globalization (Kriesi et al. 2008). This pluralization, in turn, has loosened party system alignments structured by class cleavages, distributive conflicts, and state–market programmatic distinctions, contributing to a generalized detachment of citizens from established parties and representative institutions (Dalton and Wattenberg 2000). These long-term processes of de-structuration and de-institutionalization of political representation have created fertile soil for populist mobilization in response to more recent, conjunctural disturbances, such as the economic hardships associated with the post-2008 global financial crisis and the war-induced surge of immigration to Europe from Africa and the Middle East.

Such fertile soil, however, can give rise to strikingly different forms of populism that respond to – or, perhaps better put, that politicize – distinct grievances or representational deficiencies. A useful starting point for differentiating sub-types of populist structuring of competitive space is Stokes’ (1963: 373) classic distinction between positional (or spatial) issue
competition and valence competition in party systems. Adapted for the analysis of populism, positional competition requires that a populist movement take a stand on programmatic issues that divide an electorate, according to a given (but rarely if ever fixed) distribution of societal preferences along a particular issue dimension. Large-scale populist mobilization around positional issues is unlikely where established or mainstream parties effectively articulate and compete on the basis of rival stands that reflect the distribution of societal preferences. Positional populist mobilization, therefore, is a response to a particular type of representational deficiency: the neglect or ineffectual articulation by mainstream parties of positional stands that are broadly valued by a significant bloc of voters. Needless to say, such societal preferences may be latent or inchoate in advance of populist mobilization itself; it is precisely the role of populist mobilization to politicize, or increase the salience of, issue stands that are spatially located outside or on the margins of institutionalized partisan competition.

By contrast, valence competition does not occur along issue dimensions that divide or polarize the electorate on the basis of programmatic preferences. Instead, it occurs around values or outcomes that are consensually shared among citizens, but about which rival contenders compete to establish their credibility or competence to achieve. If distributional outcomes and their attendant state vs. market programmatic orientations create archetypal patterns of positional competition, values such as economic prosperity, public safety, and honest, responsive government are widely associated with valence competition. No party or candidate runs in opposition to these latter goals; all compete over their respective abilities to achieve them. Populist mobilization centered on valence concerns would emphasize the competence or commitment of a populist leader to achieve widely-shared goals that established elites have failed to deliver.

Positional and valence competition are not mutually exclusive; as shown below, some forms of populist contestation, like some patterns of partisan competition, may combine elements of both valence and positional competition. Like party organizations (Luna 2014), populist leaders and movements can craft different kinds of messages or linkages that appeal to distinct constituencies. Indeed, as Laclau (2005: 93–100) recognizes, the very internal heterogeneity of the societal demands aggregated within any populist movement leads inevitably to an emphasis on the least common denominator that they share in common and, hence, a dilution of their particularities. Such dilution produces an intrinsic ideological ambiguity and malleability that militates against strict positional definition and nourishes more valence types of anti-establishment contestation. Nevertheless, as Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser stress (2012), the “thin” character of populist ideology allows it to be supplemented with a wide range of other ideological stands that lend programmatic content and substance to a populist project. It is often this latter content that “positions” populism in political space, transforming and restructuring political competition. The distinctions between valance and positional competition, and the orthogonal and outflanking sub-types of the latter, are analyzed in the sections that follow.

Orthogonal positional competition: politicizing the cultural dimension

In his influential study of new party formation, Simon Hug (2001) argued that new parties form when they succeed in articulating an issue position that resonates with voters but is not effectively covered by established party organizations. New issue positions may lie along a programmatic axis of contestation that is orthogonal to – and thus dissects – the conventional left-right axis based on distributive conflicts and state-market preferences. Orthogonal, cross-cutting issue dimensions are central to a large body of work that tries to understand the
transformation of West European party systems in recent decades, in particular the “thawing” of party systems once thought to have been “frozen” by the crystallization of class cleavages and left–right programmatic structuring in the early 20th century (Lipset and Rokkan 1967; Bartolini and Mair 1990). Much of this work emphasized the growing importance of a cultural dimension of competition, one that was historically shaped by conflicts over religious values but gradually transformed by the “new social movements” arising in the 1960s and the eventual conservative backlash against liberal multiculturalism (Kriesi 2008: 13).

As Inglehart (1984) suggests, the transformation of the cultural axis was embedded within the larger transition from industrial to post-industrial society and the spread of post-materialist values. These developments encouraged the rise of new “left-libertarian” parties out of the ecological, peace, feminist, and other new social movements of post-industrial societies (Kitschelt 1988). Left-libertarian or Green parties challenged the traditional, more labor-based Socialist and Social Democratic parties on the left (anti-market) side of the spectrum, but largely competed along an orthogonal vertical axis of cultural contestation (see Figure 9.1 below). These parties relied heavily on the support of educated middle sectors and positioned themselves as defenders of universalistic values associated with cultural liberalism, multiculturalism, and cosmopolitanism, at times putting them at odds with the traditional blue-collar constituencies (and centralized bureaucratic organizations) of the Social Democratic left (Kitschelt 1994).

Right-wing nationalist and populist parties – such as the National Front in France, the Austrian Freedom Party, and the Party for Freedom in the Netherlands – largely developed around the other, lower pole of this vertical axis of cultural contestation (Kriesi et al. 2008; Bornschier 2010). As Bornschier (2010) suggests, this pole was defined by cultural values of traditionalism, communitarianism, and nationalism, in contrast to the liberal-universalist-multicultural values on the other side of the cleavage. Parties that located around this lower pole differentiated themselves from traditional conservative parties through their politicization and staunch defense of national cultural identities, which they saw being threatened by processes of immigration, multiculturalism, globalization, and European integration. Indeed, this differentiation was given a populist twist and transformed, in Laclauian terms, into an antagonistic frontier that demarcated the nationalist and populist right from all other mainstream parties on both the left and right sides of the traditional ideological spectrum. In the discourse of the populist right, these mainstream parties belonged to a transversal political establishment whose pursuit of a multicultural pan-European project had caused it to lose touch with the politico-cultural identities of distinct national populations – that is, “the people,” as defined in nationalist, or even nativist, cultural terms (see Mudde 2007; Berezin 2009; Art 2011; Kriesi and Pappas 2015).

This politicization of a post-industrial cultural cleavage – by new left-libertarian parties on one pole of the axis, and by right-wing nationalist-populist parties on the other pole – has redefined the two-dimensional spatial configuration of democratic competition in much of Europe. The nationalist-populist right is located near the lower pole of the vertical (cultural) axis, but it is not located on the right (pro-market) side of the economic cleavage; instead, it cuts across this cleavage, as some of these parties have adopted free-market or neoliberal positions, whereas others lean toward more protectionist stands in keeping with their opposition to globalization. Indeed, many of these parties have appealed to less educated and blue-collar workers – often seen as the “losers” of globalization (Kriesi et al. 2008) – through protectionist stands and forms of “welfare chauvinism” that defend generous welfare states for traditional members of the national community, while excluding immigrants and outsiders from costly social services. In so doing, they have competed with social democratic parties
(and, in countries like France, with traditional communist parties) for support in the lower-left quadrant of Figure 9.1 – a quadrant defined by the combination of economic statism and cultural nationalism.

As Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2013) argue, this type of nationalistic populism can assume highly exclusionary forms in its conceptualization of “the people.” Recognized membership in the national community and the political and civil rights that are attached to it may be restricted to citizens that belong to the dominant culture, largely excluding immigrants and religious or ethnic minorities – the subordinate “others” that are allegedly protected by an alien political establishment. Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser contrast this exclusionary brand of populism, which is on the ascendance in much of Europe (and the U.S.) in recent times, with the more inclusionary, leftist forms of populism found in Latin America at the beginning of the 21st century.

According to Filc (2015: 269–270), these sub-types of populism are legacies of distinct colonial experiences: right-wing populism in modern Europe reflects colonial understandings of natural racial hierarchies and their “exclusionary notions” of national political communities, whereas inclusive left-wing populism in Latin America is indicative of broad, anti-elite forms of struggle where “the category ‘people’ is synonymous with the colonial subaltern.” The recent emergence of inclusionary leftist populism in Southern Europe (Aslinidis 2016) as well as Latin America, however, suggests that more contemporary patterns of political and economic divergence between core and periphery areas of global capitalism may also be associated with distinct sub-types of populism. To understand the different characteristics and sources of these exclusionary and inclusionary variants of populism, however, it is first necessary to locate the latter spatially and understand the very different type of positional competition that it represents.

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**Figure 9.1** Two-dimensional competitive space

Left, right, and populist structuring
Positional outflanking and the populist restructuring of programmatic competition

Positional populist competition need not entail the politicization of a new issue dimension that is orthogonal to the left-right economic axis. It may also entail the repoliticization of the economic dimension itself where mainstream parties have converged programatically or largely ceased to contest the state-market divide, leaving at least one of the horizontal axis poles devoid of partisan representation. Under such conditions, positional outflanking can occur when populist mobilization articulates issue positions that lie closer to a vacant pole than those represented by established parties.

Such positional outflanking – on the left flank of mainstream parties – was common in Latin America in the late 1990s and early 2000s, when left-populist leaders and movements arose to challenge neoliberal policies around which mainstream parties had converged. Market-based structural adjustment policies were adopted across the region in response to the debt and inflationary crises of the 1980s, but they did not everywhere lead to major populist eruptions; societal resistance to market liberalization could be channeled into institutionalized outlets where a major party of the left remained in opposition during the period of structural adjustment. Populist outflanking was more likely, however, where center-left or labor-based parties that traditionally supported statist policies played a major role in the market liberalization process, essentially converging on the right-of-center programmatic positions of their conservative rivals. Such forms of “neoliberal convergence” vacated large swaths of political space on the left side of the spectrum; as societal resistance to market liberalization intensified in the post-adjustment era, this space was occupied by new populist and leftist contenders (Roberts 2014).

These new contenders articulated a wide and diverse range of societal grievances with the neoliberal model. Indeed, opposition to neoliberalism became a common reference point for the construction of an antagonistic frontier between “the people” and a technocratic, multi-party political establishment that took turns administering the economic model. In Venezuela and Ecuador, mass protest movements against neoliberal reforms weakened mainstream parties and demonstrated the depth of popular disenchantment (Silva 2009). These protests set the stage for the election of charismatic left-populist figures – Hugo Chávez and Rafael Correa, respectively – who promised to reverse neoliberal reforms, sweep aside the corrupt political establishment, and employ plebiscitary measures of popular sovereignty to convok constituent assemblies and refound regime institutions. In Bolivia, mass protest movements against neoliberal reforms toppled two presidents and swelled the ranks of a new “movement party,” the Movement Towards Socialism (MAS), which had been founded by the largely-indigenous coca growers’ union led by Evo Morales. The MAS used an ethnically-inclusive, multi-class left-populist discourse to stitch together diverse strands of opposition found in peasant, indigenous, labor, and community-based movements (see Madrid 2012; Anria 2013). With the election of Morales to the presidency in 2005, Bolivia put an end to five centuries of colonial and white minority rule, providing a rare example of the non-violent capture of state power by social movements and their partisan vehicle.

The singularity of the Bolivian experience warrants closer examination, as it provides important insights on the spatial and organizational structuring of socio-political competition. First, it is important to note that although the Bolivian MAS appealed to Andean indigenous identities, it also made explicit efforts to incorporate mixed-race (mestizo) groups into its fold, and it rejected ethnically exclusive conceptualizations of the Bolivian nation (see Madrid 2008). Indeed, the MAS did not politicize ethnicity along an orthogonal, vertical dimension
of cultural contestation as depicted in Figure 9.1 above. Instead, it absorbed indigenous cultural identities along with peasant and labor-based class identities and myriad forms of community-based claims within an overarching popular project that was clearly positioned on the left side of the horizontal axis in Figure 9.1. Consequently, while an ethnic cleavage surely exists in Bolivian politics, it largely overlaps rather than cross-cuts divisions structured by social class and state-market preferences.

Second, the strength and relative autonomy of grass-roots social mobilization in Bolivia inevitably created tensions between a plurality of social subjects, the partisan vehicle that sought to aggregate them around a common platform, and the party’s dominant personality who claimed to speak on behalf of the whole – that is, “the people.” These tensions were often submerged when Bolivia’s popular bloc united in opposition to an entrenched political establishment, but they percolated out into the open once this popular bloc had taken state power and assumed responsibility for managing a plethora of social claims. Indeed, the strength of popular mobilization “from below” and the transparent movement origins of the MAS differentiated the party from most conventional forms of populism in Latin America, where the phenomenon has long been associated with top-down patterns of political mobilization centered around dominant personalities and their plebiscitary, rather than participatory, linkages to popular constituencies (see Barr 2009; Roberts 2015).

The Bolivian case illustrates how such distinctions can become blurred in practice, however, and also demonstrates how a populist discourse can be employed by strikingly different kinds of political movements. In part for this reason, scholarship on populism in both European and U.S. settings has been receptive to the possibility of social movement-based as well as personalistic forms of populist mobilization. The emphasis in the European literature on the role of ideology and discourse in the structuring of elite/popular divides clearly allows for both top-down and bottom-up – or plebiscitary and participatory – types of populist mobilization (Aslanidis 2016). In so doing, it also suggests that the differences between exclusionary and inclusionary forms of populism are not determined by distinctive regional characteristics of elite/popular divides in Europe and Latin America, respectively. Instead, they rest on more contingent national configurations of socio-political and partisan competition in concrete historical settings.

This is readily apparent when the political fallout from Southern Europe’s post-2008 financial crisis is compared to that in Latin America following the latter’s debt crisis and market restructuring in the 1980s and 1990s. As in Latin America, the financial crisis in Southern Europe created powerful international political and economic pressures on national governments to implement painful austerity and structural adjustment measures. Such measures were adopted by social democratic or center-left governments in Greece, Spain, and Portugal as the crisis deepened, and by a technocratic government supported by the main center-left party in Italy. These reforms shifted mainstream parties of the left toward the pro-market positions of their conservative rivals – in essence, moving social democracy rightward along the horizontal axis in Figure 9.1. This programmatic convergence, as in Latin America, sparked widespread social protest, weakened established parties, and opened vacant political space on the left side of the axis for a diverse array of new or reconfigured leftist and populist alternatives (della Porta 2015; della Porta et al. 2017).

Most of these alternatives were sharply critical of austerity, market orthodoxy, and the cozy ties that linked economic elites to the political establishment. In Greece and Spain, they were positioned programatically on the left flank of mainstream options, especially as traditional Socialist parties converged on pro-market positions. Nevertheless, several of these new
alternatives were wary of explicit self-identification with the partisan or ideological left, fearing such definition would ultimately narrow their appeal. Instead, they opted for broader and more inclusive collective action frames that emphasized citizenship identities and the restoration of power to “the people” (Aslanidis 2016; della Porta et al. 2017) – ideologically ambivalent, catch-all designations designed to broaden the base of what were, in reality, leftist political projects that were sharply critical of market inequality.

The Spanish case is especially instructive for understanding how outflanking on the left may involve a fluid and complex interplay between social movements, populist discourse, and party development, not unlike the Bolivian case analyzed above. The adoption of orthodox austerity and adjustment measures by Spain’s Socialist government triggered a massive wave of social protest that began in 2011, when the so-called indignados (indignant) movement brought millions of people into the streets and public squares. The indignados protested against the social costs of austerity, the transfer of these costs to society at large following a crisis triggered by the financial sector, and the failure of mainstream parties to offer meaningful programmatic alternatives or provide effective representation for the bulk of the Spanish population (Romanos 2017). By early 2014, leaders from activist networks had joined with a small leftist party and a group of leftist intellectuals to found a new party, Podemos (“We Can”), that drew inspiration from the protest movement. As in Bolivia, mass social protest was then translated into electoral protest: in 2015 general elections Podemos earned 21 percent of the vote and entered parliament as the third leading party. The new movement party thereafter challenged the much-weakened Socialist Party for leadership of the opposition to Spain’s conservative party government.

Although Podemos sought to avoid conventional ideological labels, in practice it positioned itself in the vacant space on the left flank of the old order. Like Bolivia’s MAS, Podemos combined a leftist critique of market liberalism with an overarching rejection of traditional parties and the entire political establishment, which it colorfully labeled the casta política (political caste). In the discourse of Podemos, this political caste had ceased to represent the people of Spain; it was a corrupted and collusive elite which had bailed out the banks that brought on the crisis while passing the burdens of adjustment down to everyday citizens from diverse walks of life (della Porta et al. 2017). So conceived, Podemos structured political competition along a fundamental divide between the people and the elite, while pushing this antagonistic frontier in a leftward direction. This frontier was quite different from the one politicized by Europe’s right-wing nationalist-populist parties, as it was based on a far more inclusive conception of the people, the national community, and citizenship. Indeed, it was constructed along an alternative axis of identification and issue contestation that was largely orthogonal to that of the populist right.

Valence competition and anti-establishment politics

Left- and right-wing expressions of populism may structure competition along orthogonal issue dimensions, but both have a positional character that politicizes a specified pole on their primary competitive axis (whether cultural or economic). Both, however, combine this positional contestation with elements of valence competition as well. Populist discourse on both the right and the left is rife with charges that the political establishment is corrupt, self-serving, incompetent, detached from the common people, and unresponsive to their “true” interests – all common tropes of valence competition in inter-party settings. Likewise, the pledge to empower a more “authentic” set of representatives who are attuned and responsive to the interests and sentiments of a virtuous “people” has intrinsic valence properties. Indeed,
since valence appeals are predicated on outcomes or values that are broadly (if not universally) shared among the public, they are especially susceptible to populist framing.

Some forms of populism may, in fact, offer little more than such valence considerations – the “thin” core of populist ideology as identified by Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2012). They do not, in other words, politicize a new issue dimension or outflank mainstream parties on an established dimension of competition. They adopt issue stands that lie within mainstream positions, or stands that are so ambiguous, ill-defined, or inconsistent as to defy positional definition altogether. What such forms of populism offer, then, is not so much a change in policies as a qualitatively different type of political leadership – a leadership that is new and authentic, hailing from the ranks of “the people” itself and, above all, from outside the political establishment. Oftentimes, such appeals are combined with pledges to construct new forms of popular participation or direct democracy that provide opportunities for “the people” to express themselves more directly in the political process.

Italy’s Five Star Movement (M5S) provides a telling example of this latter type of populism. Founded in 2009 by a prominent comedian and blogger, Beppe Grillo, M5S grew quickly to receive the largest share of votes in 2013 parliamentary elections, obtaining over a quarter of the vote in Italy’s deeply fragmented and increasingly volatile party system. Unlike Podemos in Spain or the leftist SYRIZA in Greece (Stavrakakis and Katsambekis 2014), however, the rapid growth of M5S did not constitute a leftist outflanking of mainstream parties, and the new movement did not politicize economic austerity and adjustment to the extent that Podemos and SYRIZA did. Although the M5S drew support from environmental and other traditional social movement networks, it did not clearly position itself along any of the conventional axes of competition. Indeed, it adopted a “post-ideological” discourse that claimed to be “beyond left and right” (della Porta et al. 2017: 126), in keeping with its catch-all identity.

The policy stances adopted by the M5S reflected this catch-all orientation, as it advocated an unusual mix of moderately left-libertarian and conservative positions. On the left, this mix included support for environmental protection, public goods, social welfare, and same-sex marriage, along with a critical stance toward large corporations and financial industries. The movement took more conservative positions on a range of other issues, however, including support for lower property taxes and small business owners, and a skepticism toward European integration, globalization, and immigration. Given this ideological eclecticism, the central focus of the M5S’ appeal – the least common denominator that bound together its varied strands – was its anti-establishment identity and its efforts to use social media to encourage non-traditional forms of citizen engagement in the democratic process.

**Donald Trump and political realignment in the U.S.**

Taken together, the Southern European cases suggest that the politicization of a sharp cleavage between a partisan establishment and common citizens can help a populist leader or movement cultivate support that would not be forthcoming on policy or programmatic grounds alone. In short, such a cleavage can provide political cover for more radical positional challenges, or divert attention from secondary issue positions that are otherwise obtuse or internally inconsistent and divisive. Indeed, it may allow for a basic dealignment, scrambling, and reconfiguration of partisan and programmatic lines of contestation in a given polity.

A dramatic example of this can be seen in Donald Trump’s stunning capture of the Republican Party nomination and his subsequent election to the U.S. presidency in 2016. Trump’s victory demonstrated that in a presidential system with internal party primaries, a
mainstream party can become a vehicle for an anti-establishment populist outsider who is capable of mobilizing rank-and-file voters against the party elite. Trump’s “hostile takeover” of the party was preceded by, and ultimately drew energy from, the anti-establishment Tea Party movement on the right flank of the Republican Party (Parker and Barreto 2013). Trump’s outsider candidacy channeled much of this anti-establishment sentiment in order to displace not only traditional party elites, including the designated successor in the Bush family dynasty, but also the hard-line Christian conservative leadership of Senator Ted Cruz, an insurgent figure with Tea Party ties inside the party organization.

In so doing, Trump’s candidacy posed fundamental challenges to the Republican Party’s central ideological identities and the socio-political coalitions that had been built around them since the Reagan era. These identities were firmly located on the orthogonal economic and cultural axes depicted in Figure 9.2. These axes are the same as those shown in Figure 9.1 for the analysis of Western Europe; what distinguished U.S. politics prior to the rise of Trump was the Republican combination of staunch market fundamentalism on the right (economic) pole of the horizontal axis with Christian fundamentalism on the lower pole of the vertical (cultural) axis. This combination clearly placed the center of gravity of the Republican Party in the lower-right quadrant of Figure 9.2, while that of the Democratic Party was diagonally located in the upper-left quadrant defined by social liberalism and (very moderate) statist/redistributive preferences.

As Miller and Schofield (2008) recognized, two-party competition in such two-dimensional space is inherently unstable. Since the two dimensions create four quadrants, each party is forced to build a coalition among actors whose preferences overlap along one axis but diverge on the other. This is apparent in Figure 9.2, where the lower-left and top-right quadrants have no natural or obvious partisan referent. They are, in essence, the hunting grounds where the two parties compete for votes, as shown by the arrows pointing into these quadrants from the two parties in their primary quadrants. A wealthy, pro-market, socially-liberal voter in the top-right quadrant is likely to agree with the Democratic Party on one set of issues and the Republican Party on another, as will a socially-conservative blue-collar worker in the lower-left quadrant who supports more protectionist or redistributive economic policies. There is, in short, no obvious reason why moral traditionalists and social conservatives should also be market fundamentalists – or, for that matter, why social liberals should also be advocates for statist and redistributive economic policies.

Trump’s populist, outsider campaign demonstrated how fluid and contingent these alignments can be when candidates have to compete for support in the lower-left and top-right quadrants. Indeed, his campaign was decidedly unorthodox within the Republican Party on both the economic and cultural dimensions of competition, and it clearly demonstrated that there is no such thing as a uniform conservative movement in the U.S., as opposed to distinct and potentially separable currents of market fundamentalism, moral traditionalism, and cultural nativism. Although the billionaire populist took pains to win over Christian social conservatives – largely by appealing to their concerns over judicial appointments – his lifestyle was deeply at odds with their cultural milieu, and he had long taken public stands on issues like abortion and gay rights that clashed with their core values and principles. As such, he downplayed (at least initially) the religious dimensions of the so-called “culture wars” (Frank 2005) and doubled down on their nationalist and nativist strands, taking highly inflammatory positions on Mexican immigration and Islam. Cloaked in the imagery of threats to national security, these positions entailed a populist construction of “the people” that was laden with ethno-nationalist symbols and identities, evoking a largely white and Christian “heartland” that excluded Latinos and Muslims. This brand of populism politicized a wide range of...
cultural resentments and drove a political wedge between “middle America” and cosmopolitan “coastal elites” with their liberal multicultural values.

Nativistic populism, in turn, fed into Trump’s departure from Republican market orthodoxy on the economic dimension. Although Trump followed the traditional Republican script on deregulation and massive tax cuts for the rich, he combined such pro-market planks with support for a range of statist and nationalist positions, including trade protectionism, ad hoc industrial policies, and opposition to multilateral economic integration. These latter positions were integral features of a neo-mercantilist vision to use unilateral state power to put “America First.” Framed largely in terms of bringing back American industries and jobs, this neo-mercantilist vision helped to contest traditional Democratic terrain in the lower-left quadrant of Figure 9.2. In particular, it was targeted at blue-collar and less educated workers who felt threatened by immigration and global trade and recoiled at the liberal multiculturalism of the Democratic Party (see Rothwell 2016). This strategy entailed a calculated risk that Trump could compete in the lower-left quadrant without losing too much ground in the diagonal upper-right quadrant, where pro-market social liberals were located, and where the Clinton campaign expected to make large gains.

Trump not only proved capable of containing these positional tradeoffs, but also, arguably, used his ideological heterodoxy – along with his contempt for political correctness – to accentuate his outsider qualities. Ideological heterodoxy demonstrated Trump’s independence from the Republican Party itself and reinforced his image as a leader who “broke the mold.” This image, moreover, was repeatedly burnished through Trump’s willful violation of the normal – that is, the establishment’s – rules and etiquette for political speech and behavior. Trump’s unwillingness to be scripted, to be polished, or to “act presidential,” and his frequent

![Figure 9.2 The spatial configuration of U.S. politics](image-url)
resort to coarseness and incivility were all means to authenticate that he wasn’t “one of them” (see Ostiguy 2017). He belonged, instead, to “the people,” in spite of — indeed, because of — his wealth and success outside the political arena. As he put it at the Republican National Convention, in remarkably redemptive terms, he had “seen firsthand how the system is rigged against our citizens” and joined the political arena so that the powerful can no longer beat up on people that cannot defend themselves. Nobody knows the system better than me, which is why I alone can fix it . . . My pledge reads, “I’m with you, the American people.” I am your voice . . . I am with you, I will fight for you, and I will win for you.

(“Full Text” 2016)

For many of Trump’s supporters, the abstract promise of change represented by this displacement of an entrenched political elite by a powerful outsider who defended “the people” probably weighed more heavily than the content of any specific policy pledges he made. “Change,” however, may well be the most vacuous concept in the political lexicon; on its own it is almost entirely devoid of substantive content, and it can thus be inscribed with a plethora of different meanings. In that sense, Trump’s populist leadership was, as Laclau (2005: 67–124) surmised, a classic “empty signifier” to which followers could ascribe varied meanings and project myriad claims and aspirations. More remarkable, perhaps, was the celerity with which various elites and political entrepreneurs — including much of the Republican establishment — tried to ascribe meaning to this empty signifier by jumping on the bandwagon and transforming President-elect Trump into a vehicle for their own personal and ideological projects, from market and Christian fundamentalism to alt-Right ethno-nationalism. Given that Trump openly clashed with many of these currents during his campaign, the fluid process of partisan realignment and redefinition that gave rise to Trump in the first place is sure to continue into the foreseeable future.

Conclusion

Populist movements structure political contestation along an antagonistic divide between “the people” and an establishment, but they do so in many different ways. The people can be constructed along multiple competitive axes, including most prominently economic and cultural divides, and these vary in the extent to which they overlap or cross-cut each other. While some populist movements rely heavily on positional or issue-based contestation, others eschew positional definition and engage in valence types of competition that are largely centered on the differential attributes of established elites and populist outsiders. These factors heavily condition the nature of the relationships between populist leaders and mass constituencies, and they largely account for the differences between inclusionary and exclusionary forms of populism on the left and right sides of the spectrum, respectively. These differences are not clearly determined by geographical regions, however, as recent political and economic crises in Europe have spawned remarkably diverse populist expressions. The contemporary global political scene appears destined to do the same.

Note

1 It should be noted that the isolationist thrust of Trump’s nationalism also broke sharply with the Republican Party’s internationalist foreign policy orientation since World War II.
References


