Introduction

White racial populism has been an important force both inside and outside of mainstream electoral politics in the United States since 1968. White populists have been hostile critics of the GOP while providing a key source of the party’s popular support. Driven by an ethnonationalism that opposes non-white immigration, racial egalitarianism and challenges to “traditional” family structure, this identity has also been given political passion and direction through opposition to empire, financialization, economic disparity and managerial rule. Prior to the 1960s, race was not a central focus of populist politics in the United States. Indeed, populism itself had not a prominent theme in US politics for most of the century. However, the emergence of the black freedom struggle as a mass movement in the late 1950s created an opportunity that was taken up by the political right over the next decade. White southerners seeking to maintain an order that denied African Americans basic civil and political rights made common cause with conservatives outside the South who sought to reduce the power of the national state to redistribute wealth and regulate the economy. Exploiting white racial anxiety about civil rights by using a populist language of “the people” versus the elites, this emergent populistic discourse figured the enemies of the people as government officials above and people of color below.

The post-1960s articulation of populism featured the white producer as the protagonist in American political life, as the deserving figure of protection and support (Berlet and Lyons, 2000). The social binary between notions of dependence and independence goes back to the early days of the republic. As historian David Roediger and others have demonstrated, industrial working-class formation in the 1830s was also race formation (Roediger, 2007). Struggles for worker rights and benefits in the emergent manufacturing economy were cast in Republican terms of political freedom, individual autonomy and civic virtue in contrast particularly to the degradation and perceived dependence of black slavery.

The cherished idea of Republican virtue was carried into the New Deal state of the 20th century and built into the two tiers of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s social security plan separating what would be called earned “entitlements” from “relief” – the latter which he claimed as a kind of dependence which induced “spiritual and moral disintegration.” (Gordon
and Fraser, 1994; Disch, 2012) The structure of New Deal labor, agricultural and family policy often made African Americans ineligible for pensions and relegated them to relief as opposed to work programs or pensions. Thus formally race blind policies and concepts quite powerfully generated a notion of white citizenship wherein certain forms of state dependence or protection of which whites were the primary beneficiaries were made discursively invisible while others came to be overly visible, welfare in particular (Katznelson, 2006).

Demands for civil rights, voting rights, open unions, fair housing and welfare rights from the 1950s through the 1970s spurred Republican Party organizers to ensure white voters that their party would protect the gains they had made across the middle decades of the 20th century. Seen this way, rising GOP fortunes were not solely or even principally a result of a turn toward economic conservatism. Rather the party tapped into strands of producerism that could traverse Democratic Party liberalism and Republican Party conservatism by emphasizing issues of hard work, deservedness, and entitlement cast in racial terms. It was, as Richard Nixon said in his Republican Party nomination speech in 1968, “the voice of the great majority of Americans, the forgotten Americans, the non shouters, the non demonstrators.”

**George Wallace**

Modern racial populism first issued, however, not from the Republican Party, but from Democratic Alabama Governor George C. Wallace. Wallace entered into the open political moment of the 1960s by describing the main cleavage in society as one of productive members of society against parasitic elites and subversive protesters. He counterposed “pointy-headed intellectuals,” “bearded bureaucrats,” “anarchists” and “law-breakers” to “this man in the textile mill, this man in the steel mill, this barber, the beautician, the policeman on the beat.” Wallace ran in the Democratic primaries for President in 1964, where he won roughly 10 percent of the vote. He ran for President in 1968 as a third-party candidate of the American Independent Party, where drawing votes from both major parties, he won 11 million votes, or about 10 percent (Carter, 1996).

In northern states, Wallace tended to attract support from older white skilled workers who feared black incursions into their neighborhoods and schools and from young production workers who were drawn to Wallace’s antiestablishment attacks on liberal elites. But Wallace also drew support from middle-class, suburban voters. Linking race to economic conservatism, Wallace pledged to make the federal Congress change “these so-called civil rights laws,” which, he claimed, were “really an attack on the property rights of this country and on the free enterprise system and local government.” In an era that also saw the emergence of a powerful student New Left and antiwar movement, he also recommended that the “activists, anarchists, revolutionaries and Communists” who were responsible for all the civil unrest in the country “be thrown under a good jail” (Witcover, 1997).

Wallace’s political fortunes were boosted by a series of black urban uprising that became a regular occurrence in what came to be known as the “long, hot summers” of the late 1960s. His emphasis on “law and order” helped forge a unity out of his various themes. As he described it, government was doing nothing to protect the American people from the mounting chaos. In fact, he said, disorder was encouraged by government permissiveness. “President Johnson,” Wallace said in one speech in 1967, “wanted a crime commission report to tell him why they were burning cities down. Well I could have told him why they were burning them down like you could,” the candidate roared, “because you let them burn them down, that’s the reason they burn them down!” However, while Wallace was clearly referring to black rioters, he was careful to disclaim any overt racism. As he said in one speech,
Well, it’s a sad day in this country when you can’t talk about law and order unless they want to call you a racist. I tell you that’s not true and I resent it and they gonna have to pay attention because all the people in this country, in the great majority, the Supreme Court of our country has made it almost impossible to convict a criminal.

(Carlson, 1980)

Richard Nixon

Richard Nixon, who was the Republican candidate for president in 1968, found himself competing for votes with Wallace, particularly in southern states. As the campaign season went on, Nixon adopted more and more of Wallace’s language about busing and “law and order.” In this way populism becomes a force within GOP. Across the 1968 election season, Nixon drew increasingly on Wallaceite rhetoric. Using George Wallace’s style of bestowing populist dignity on the lives and occupations of his constituents in contrast to threatening parasites, Nixon spoke frequently of a populist middle he described alternately as “Middle America,” the “Silent Majority” and “Forgotten Americans” – people squeezed by government bureaucrats above and by welfare recipients, criminals and rioters below.

Nixon campaigned hard on the law and order theme in 1968, a tactic that was increasingly effective, as it was with Wallace, given the growing social disorder across that the decade. Detroit, Newark and dozens of other cities had experienced major riots in 1967, growing more intense following the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., in April 1968. Nixon also angled for alienated, working-class Democrats who were neither conservatives of the Goldwater stripe nor fully comfortable with racial liberalism. In the immediate term, Nixon had to keep Wallace from getting enough votes sabotage his own candidacy. But Wallace also represented a potential political constituency that could be built into Nixon’s coalition. For his analysis of who these voters were and how he could appeal to them, Nixon relied on the work of a young elections analyst named Kevin Phillips, who laid out the election strategy that later became the book The Emerging Republican Majority (Phillips, 1968).

Phillips asserted that a combination of demographic changes and growing racial anxiety among whites would create new openings for Republicans to pull large numbers of voters away from the Democratic Party in all parts of the country. Based on the Wallace movement in 1964 and Republican gains in the midterm elections in 1966, Phillips saw a potential new racial alignment that would replace the old party division. For working-class urban white ethnics, votes could be reaped by exploiting discomfort with open housing laws and new union rules that were bringing blacks into white neighborhoods and job sites. For southern whites, it meant breaking their old attachments to the Democratic Party, which was now leaning toward racial liberalism. For the tens of thousands of new dwellers in the economically emergent “Sunbelt” cities across the South and Southwest Republican values of private enterprise, lower taxation and reduced government interference in the private sector along the lines promoted by Goldwater would get votes for Nixon. The key was bringing these perspectives into a common political language. As Phillips wrote after the election,

The emerging Republican majority spoke clearly ... for a shift away from the socio- logical jurisprudence, moral permissiveness, experimental residential, welfare and educational programming and massive federal spending by which the Liberal establishment sought to propagate liberal institutions and ideology. Democrats among these groups
were principally alienated from their party by its increasing identification with the Northeastern Establishment and ghetto alike.

(Phillips, 1968)

Phrases like “Middle American” and “Forgotten American” became commonplace at the White House. Nixon aides began a “Middle American working group” for a presidency increasingly obsessed with identifying and winning over this group.

While Nixon was able to re-cast the Republican Party as populist, this orientation did not sit comfortably with all conservatives. The most prominent conservative writer in the United States at the time, National Review Magazine founder and editor William F. Buckley, was suspicious of the populist turn on the right. While Buckley supported Nixon’s appeal to the Silent Majority, he sought to draw a sharp line between Nixon and Wallace. When Wallace appeared on Buckley’s Firing Line television program in April 1968, Buckley put the matter flatly:

I think that Mr. Wallace is trying to persuade a lot of people that he should appeal to (conservatives), but his background is that of a New Dealer, a person who is intensely concerned to multiply the functions of the state.

Addressing Wallace directly, he went on,

If I may say so you have a fanatical concern for using public money for certain functions. For instance you want to take care of hospitalization, you want to take care of old people, you want to take care of the poor. This is a free enterprise country and we have a tradition here of private philanthropy and programs that haven’t required the mobilization of the machinery of the state at the federal and local government.

(Firing Line, 1968)

Although Nixon won decisively in the 1972 election, Watergate soon disrupted his efforts to cement the populist Silent Majority. Lacking a clear center of gravity in the GOP, the elements of the Silent Majority were open for re-association. Kevin Phillips for his part was disillusioned at the direction of conservatism in the 1970s, believing that National Review represented only the interests of a wealthy, educated few. As Phillips said of Buckley in the run-up to the 1976 Republican primaries, “Hell, Wallace isn’t going to hook up with Squire Willy and his companions of the Oxford Unabridged Dictionary. Nor can we expect Alabama truck drivers or Ohio steelworkers to sign on with a politics captained by five-syllable-word-pushers” (Judis, 2001).

In his 1976 book A Plague on Both Your Houses, rightist Robert Whitaker ranted in Wallaceite tones, attacking those both above and below who aligned against the middle. “American society is ... generally split increasingly into a coalition of the rich and poor against the middle.” On the one hand, he wrote, “One thinks of the Chicano with a picture of the enormously wealthy John Kennedy on the wall of his shack.” And on the other hand, “Republicans and conservatives make use of our patriotism to expand an already fat and inefficient Pentagon and to protect business from necessary public scrutiny” (Whitaker, 1976). Yet while Whitaker’s book had conservative and business elites in its crosshairs, it was anointed with a glowing foreword by National Review publisher William Rusher.

After the brief Democratic interregnum in presidential politics following Watergate, white working-class voters leaned toward the GOP again in 1980. Democratic pollster Stanley Greenberg identified this demographic specifically among unionized workers outside Detroit,
calling them “Reagan Democrats.” These voters, in the midst of a deep recession, were chiefly animated by their resentments toward African Americans, particularly over issues of crime and welfare. Reagan rebuilt and expanded Nixon’s coalition among voters in all parts of the country. His appeal connected a sharp conservatism on social and economic issues to a revival of Cold War sentiment, delivered in a genial, folksy, optimistic tone. Reagan was far to the right of Nixon on many issues, and did not have to court union members or the white working class by appeals to Keynesianism or social provision. Nostalgic appeals to an America that was not saddled with (black) welfare cheats, criminals or an intrusive state, along with a commitment to combat international communism were enough: Reagan’s coded racial appeals and tough talk toward the Soviet Union kept populist voters in his coalition.

Unlike Nixon, Reagan began an era of deregulation and tax-cutting that would transfer wealth radically upward and begin to destroy the economic power of the middle and working class. Indeed, Reagan’s first acts as President was to break a federal air traffic controllers strike, which signaled a long-term decline in the political power of labor. Thus while Reagan had populist appeal, the policies he promoted began a long-term economic separation of white working and middle-class voters from ultra-wealthy elites who reaped the benefits of an emergent financialized economic order.

The populist promise of Jesse Jackson

Although the main thrust of US populism after George Wallace centered on antiblack animus among white working and middle-class voters, there was one significant attempt to produce a broad populism rooted in the black experience in the United States. Jesse Jackson’s Democratic presidential campaigns in 1984 and 1988 attempted to revive an older economic language of populism and express it through struggles for racial equality of the mid-20th century. These campaigns drew from a legacy of black exclusion and protest politics, and extended it to include rural whites and Latinos as well.

Jackson sought to build a “rainbow coalition” that would be multiracial and focused on economic equality by bestowing dignity on the labor of those whose work is largely unseen. “We work every day,” he would tell crowds, in the cadence of the black church,

And we are still poor. We pick up your garbage; we work every day. We drive your cars, we take care of your children, we empty your bedpans, we sweep your apartments; we work every day. We cook your food, and we don’t have time to cook our own. We change your hospital beds and wipe your fevered brow, and we can’t afford to lie in that bed when we get sick. We work every day. (The Nation, 1988)

Yet the coalition of outsiders Jackson sought to represent – coal miners in Appalachia, African Americans in urban slums, migrant workers in agricultural production – did not easily fit a recognizable political category in US politics, particularly as the Democratic Party was beginning to move in more conservative directions in regard to questions of both race and class.

Pat Buchanan

In 1992, when Republican President George H.W. Bush was running for his second term, fissures between populism and establishment conservatism emerged again. Pat Buchanan, the Nixon speechwriter who had focused so strongly on the idea of “Middle America,” decided to
challenge Bush in the Republican primaries. Buchanan yoked working-class alienation to white identity in a politics that opposed free trade, immigration, affirmative action and cultural decadence. Buchanan sought to draw Republicans, Democrats and independents into a political force to unseat the sitting president. Referring to Bush as “King George” on the campaign trail, “Pitchfork Pat,” as he came to be called, led a racial populist revolt in the party.

Buchanan already had a reputation for anti-Jewish sentiment, and he received support from Klan and Neo-Nazi groups. Although he repudiated their support, the political formation he engendered opened new territory in racial populism. As Leonard Zeskind from the hate-monitoring Center for Democratic Renewal wrote at the time,

What Buchanan has catalyzed is a racist movement, whether or not he is personally anti-Semitic. I don’t know exactly what it will produce, but one of the things I expect it to produce is an extremist, conservative movement, in which race, ethnicity, nativism, and nationalism, play a greater role than the anti-communism of the past.

(Applebome, 1992)

Although Buchanan never came close to winning the Republican presidential nomination in 1992, he did win over two million votes, which earned him a major speaking slot at the Republican National convention. There, in what came to be known as the “Culture War” speech, he famously thundered against feminism, lesbian and gay rights, pornography and liberalism generally. Tellingly, the metaphor he used was of taking America back “block by block” just as federal troops had done to quell the riots in South Central Los Angeles that year.

Buchanan ran again in the Republican primaries in 1996, where throngs of passionate “Buchanan Brigades” in many states were drawn once again to his message weaving antiestablishment rage with racism and nativism. He had an early win in the New Hampshire primary over the eventual winner Bob Dole. As he told a crowd in classic populist language:

We shocked them in Alaska. Stunned them in Louisiana. Stunned them in Iowa. They are in a terminal panic. They hear the shouts of the peasants from over the hill. All the knights and barons will be riding into the castle pulling up the drawbridge in a minute. All the peasants are coming with pitchforks. We’re going to take this over the top.

(Stanley, 2012)

Buchanan withdrew from the nomination contest, however, having won only about 20 percent of the vote in the primaries. He ran once more as a third-party candidate on the Reform Party ticket in 2000, garnering only about 500,000 votes nationally.

Samuel Francis, a close advisor to Buchanan, helped to his candidate to more radical racial populist elements to his right. Francis was an editor at the conservative Washington Times newspaper until he was fired in 1995 for racist assertions in his editorial columns. Francis went on to edit the newspaper for of the Council of Conservative Citizens, a far right, white nationalist organization descended from the southern segregationist Citizens’ Councils of the 1950s and 1960s. Francis was committed to white supremacy, but one that was yoked to a fairly complex view of twentieth century social organization that understood the administrative state and a growing managerial class as the immediate threat to “Middle America.” As he wrote in a 1996 essay “From Household to Nation,”

If the post-bourgeois middle class seriously wishes to avoid its own extinction, it will have to evolve a new group consciousness and a new identity independent of both the
moribund bourgeois elite and the techno-bureaucracy of the global managerial order . . . and it must aspire to form the core of a new political and cultural order in which it can assert its own hegemony.

(Ansara, 1996)

Francis’s populist diagnosis would become central to later racial populist politics in the United States.

Meanwhile the Democratic Party, powerfully influenced by the centrist Democratic Leadership Council and its rising star Bill Clinton, began moving to recapture white populist working and middle-class voters it had lost to the Republicans in the 1980s. Clinton spoke sympathetically of “the angry white man” and made federal crime legislation and the dismantling of the welfare system central features of his politics as president from 1992–2000.

The Tea Party

Following on both a major financial crisis in 2008 and the election of the first black president, a right-wing social movement with populist tendencies called the Tea Party movement emerged across the United States, which initially directed ire at both Wall Street and the federal government. The nascent movement solidified over the summer of 2009 with a focus directed solely on the Obama administration through the public spectacle of protests at town hall meetings across the country where elected officials at public fora discussed federal health care reform legislation.

Tea Partiers went back to the American Revolution in their theatrical enactment of popular sovereignty not just through protest but also costume. Early Tea Party rallies featured revolutionary-era iconography and costume. Reaching back to the founding authorized Tea Party activity as both regime founding and rebellion. It also romanticized an era when neither women, blacks or propertyless whites were enfranchised. Such gestures could bring together libertarians, who tended to opposed Bush, and culturally conservative activists – but more importantly provide a language and set of practices through which new agents could see themselves as an aggrieved people targeting both the state and its embodiment in a black president.

Obama was portrayed as both a figure of racial abjection and a symbol of totalitarian control on Tea Party placards and in supporters’ rhetoric, suggesting a powerful link between race and the state in Tea Party rage. Racism played out in regionally specific ways for the Tea Party: the South and Midwest showed the influence of neo-confederate politics, the Southwest, and particularly in Arizona, anti-immigrant politics drove much Tea Party activity. Across regions, demonization of Obama was consistent.

Increasing links to racism between groups and individuals associated with the Tea Party movement led the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) to pass a resolution calling on the Tea Party movement to denounce racist elements in its midst. The NAACP also partnered with the Institute for Research and Education on Human Rights to analyze the presence of racism in the Tea Party movement. The resulting report, Tea Party Nationalism, showed that there are racists in the movement, and that in certain locales, particularly in the South, there is overlap between racist organizations like the Council of Conservative Citizens and Tea Party groups (Burghart and Zeskind, 2010). Professional Islamophobes such as Pamela Geller have close ties to some Tea Party organizations, and Burghart and Zeskind document hundreds of Tea Party blog posts expressing anti-Muslim sentiment. Nativist activity, particularly in Arizona around Senate Bill 1070, and the campaign to repeal birthright citizenship, has had Tea Party groups in the vanguard. Klan, neo-Nazi,
militia and border vigilante groups have all tried to make inroads to the Tea Party movement at the local level as well.

For an antistatist populism that contrasts a virtuous white middle against black dependents below and controlling elites above, Obama represented both poles. Racial antagonism was extraordinarily productive for Tea Partiers in an age where antiblack animus could be directed at a head of state, as was evident at the notorious protest at the US Capitol Building on 19 March 2009 when black members of Congress were subject to racial epithets and spitting by Tea Partiers who were there to protest the passage of federal health care reform.

Obama’s taking office coincided not just with the rise of the Tea Party movement but also with what became known as the “birther” movement. Birthers argued that Obama held the office of the presidency illegally because of the constitutional requirement that presidents be born on U.S. soil. Beyond the geographic fact of his birth in the state of Hawaii, Obama successfully claimed political and cultural birthright through maternal forebears in the American heartland, through the strivings of an immigrant father, and through his national creedal commitments to equality and pluralism redeemed by his blackness in a post-civil rights era. Thus his birther opponents sought to nullify his claims by locating him outside the boundaries of the nation not ideologically, but rather bodily. This movement which had strong resonance for Americans unable to accept a black president.

**Trumpism**

In the 2016 presidential election, real estate mogul and reality television star Donald Trump ran for the Republican nomination. Politically, Trump had been highly visible during the Obama administration as a promoter of birtherism. Trump announced his entrance into the 2016 race with an anti-immigrant speech in which he asserted,

> When Mexico sends its people, they’re not sending their best. They’re not sending you. They’re not sending you. They’re sending people that have lots of problems, and they’re bringing those problems with us. They’re bringing drugs. They’re bringing crime. They’re rapists. And some, I assume, are good people.

Throughout the campaign Trump elaborated his brutal nativism, directed not just at Latin American immigrants but also at Muslims. “Islam,” he said, “hates America.”

Producerism was a central element in the Trump campaign. He spoke of bringing manufacturing jobs back to the U.S., and sought to do so through criticism of free trade—an issue that ties criticism of unrepresentative elites to what the producerist ethic. Trump continually linked national decline to the absence of production. Throughout his campaign Trump told crowds: “We don’t win any more.” “We don’t make anything.” “We are losing so much.”

Stated in its barest form, Trumpism links anxious racial standing to economic precarity, masculine worth, and political abandonment. Each of these terms impacts and amplifies the other through circuits that are at once rhetorical, visual and emotional. Today, this formation can no longer sustain the dream of white majoritarianism in a demographically changing electorate, the comfort of economic security after decades of growing precarity, nor the perceived masculine virtue of producerism in an increasingly financialized economy. It was in this context that the billionaire deal-maker and reality television star yoked traditions of right-wing populism to contemporary mass-media skills to produce a singularly affective political
campaign of rage, violence, melancholy and profound intra-party disruption that dramatically
exploited fissures already present in the Republican Party.

Observers were continually startled by the open white nationalism that marked both
Trump’s own actions and those of his supporters. Trump announced his candidacy by calling
Mexicans rapists and criminals, and promising to build a wall across the border with Mexico.
He continued to expand the dimensions of his racist platform by calling for the tracking of
Muslims within the U.S. and a ban on those who seek to enter the country.

The 2016 presidential campaign of Donald Trump was also marked by violence in his
rhetoric, at his rallies and among white nationalists more generally. Negative comments about
Latino immigrants and Muslims drew people to his rallies, where physical assaults on black and
Latino protesters were common. His rhetoric also inspired attacks, including two men severely
beating and urinating on a homeless Latino man in Boston, one of whom said afterward,
“Donald Trump was right; all these illegals need to be deported.” Far from denouncing the
assault, Trump said when asked about it, “I will say that people who are following me are
very passionate. They love this country and they want this country to be great again. They are
passionate” (Walker, 2015).

The relationship between transgressive rage and racism is complex. Right-wing populism
in the U.S. was conceived principally in opposition to the black freedom struggle of the
1960s, but also in opposition to changing politics of gender and family. The representative
figure of populism was an aggrieved white man displaced from his centrality in politics, the
workplace and the home. The moral force of what came to be called identity politics forbade
this figure from expressions of racism, chauvinism, etc. Hence the extraordinary popularity of
the phrase “politically correct.” Within this logic, any opposition to expressions of racism,
misogyny or homophobia are acts of repression – indeed of “repressed truths.”

Racial violence underscored the campaign in numerous ways. While Trump unabashedly
employed the language of white supremacy and misogyny, rage and even violence at Trump
rallies was like nothing seen in decades. The number of assaults on people of color and
Muslims spiked into the high hundreds during Trump’s campaign. From white racists
shouting “Trump 2016” while shooting into a crowd and wounding two Black Lives Matter
protesters in Minneapolis to the burning down of a mosque in North Dakota, Trumpism
emerged as a social phenomenon beyond electoral politics.

This urge to violence toward protesters easily recalls that George Wallace in 1968 who
threatened to run over any demonstrator who lay down in front of his car. Indeed, in a
strategy that anticipated Trump, the Wallace campaign purposely held rallies in venues that
were too small in order to encourage fistfights between protesters and supporters. It also
echoes white populist Pat Buchanan’s 1992 GOP convention speech when he associated
feminism, gay rights and pornography with the Los Angeles riots that year, and compared the
GOP’s political task to the federal troops called in to Los Angeles, exhorting the party to “take
the country back block by block.” Yet Trump was neither a third-party candidate, nor an
inter-party insurgent who could be ultimately marginalized and contained, but the party
nominee for president.

The other side of this rage was the language of permanent loss. While Trump’s campaign
slogan was “Make America Great Again,” much more emphasis was placed on defeat. Unlike
the leaders of past populist revolts, Trump seems less a champion of working people than a
figure who confirms their debased status. Unlike past populists, Trump’s followers respond less
to appeals to their value as producers, which in a financialized economy seems nostalgic
anyway, than to brutal rage against immigrants and Muslims, and a new generation of black
insurgents, who along with establishment elites are seen as the authors of the misery Trump
supporters feel themselves as experiencing. In the Super Tuesday primaries Trump performed most strongly in the counties where middle-aged whites were dying the fastest.

Trump drew on many alienated white voters, many of them from outside of the GOP. And it is of course true that Trump’s margin of victory in the Electoral College came from those states along the lower rim of the Great Lakes where globalization has hammered industrial jobs the worst. More generally, the conditions wrought by 40 years of neoliberalism are central to the story – which have caused extraordinary economic and social dislocation and abandonment across U.S. society in what many scholars have called the second Gilded Age.

Trump was aided in the 2016 election by an assemblage of far-right ideologues known as the “alt right.” This formation is distinguished by its overt commitment to both white nationalism and patriarchy. Adept with social media skills, alt-rightists associated with each other across internet platforms such as Reddit and 4Chan, and ultimately the right-wing commentary and opinion site Breitbart News. While not populist, many alt-rightists drew on the work of self-described populists such as the white nationalist writer, editor and advisor to Pat Buchanan’s campaigns, Samuel Francis; as well as on elements of the European New Right.

Former Breitbart executive chair Steven Bannon, who left that position to work as chief executive of the Trump campaign, became Trump’s White House Chief of Staff in January 2017. Bannon is a self-described populist, who links his strongly anti-immigrant and anti-Islam stands to an opposition to “globalist” elites who together with immigrants have launched an assault on white middle and working-class Americans.

After Trump was elected President, Pat Buchanan was asked why Trump had fared so much better than he had in the 1990s. Buchanan replied:

> What’s different today is that the returns are in, the results are known. Everyone sees clearly now the de-industrialization of America, the cost in blood and treasure from decade-long wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and the pervasive presence of illegal immigrants. What I saw at the San Diego border 25 years ago, everyone sees now on cable TV. And not just a few communities but almost every community is experiencing the social impact.

Buchanan clearly states here the worldview of the Trump populist – the particular way in which personal miseries are tied to public politics in racial populist discourse. It is a durable worldview, one that will likely shape U.S. politics both within and outside the electoral system for some time to come.

References


