



INTERNATIONAL

The Impact of Populism on U.S. Foreign Policy

Beth Erin Jones

Political Analyst. PhD in Political Science, Universidad Autónoma de Madrid

This essay maintains that the current state of U.S. political affairs, both national and international, is not so much due to the growing political polarization between Democrats and Republicans within American society, but instead the Administration's populist opportunism. The lean of U.S. Foreign Policy towards unilateralism and isolationism is in part a direct consequence of populist rhetoric used by Trump to maintain his electoral base, even as the broader American electorate is less so split than ever before regarding historical divisions—whether they be geographical, race-based or religious.



P. Cuesta



Antiestablishment populism and political polarization seem to be the topic of the day on both sides of the Atlantic, especially as the United States has been on a unilateral route towards international isolationism and protectionism, one in which it has always had a tendency towards but an inability to actually act upon mainly due to both World Wars, the Cold War and the fight on Terrorism. Particularly post-World Wars, international conflict and liberal democratic ideology combined with a sense for the American self-interest at home and abroad has led the American people through the murky waters of what gave birth to a Superpower and as a result, its corresponding influence and responsibilities. Domestically, the discussion over whether the influence outweighs the responsibilities has always been present. Discontent even over WWI, WII, Korea and especially Vietnam, Iraq and Afghanistan has always been a domestic issue. When the American people were most united against common enemies such as the Soviet threat, very much real to those that lived through the Cuban Missile Crisis, and the Islamist Fundamentalist terrorist threat, witnessed firsthand in the 9/11 tragedy, showing involvement and strength on the international stage not only seemed necessary, but fundamentally patriotic for the American people, regardless of partisan lines. Still, as wars drag on towards the twenty-year mark, both Vietnam and now Afghanistan, patriotism understandably swings in the other direction: one in which far-reaching principles lose their hold on the American public. As a result, military withdrawal, begun under the Obama administration, is not just Trump's campaign promise, but seemingly a 'tunnel-vision' sort of outcome, regardless of the advice of military officials and in large part due to the Administration's beelined focus on populist electoral support. Even the latest flareup of tensions with Iran have resulted in a possible 'easy out' of the region. Ironically, and despite Trump's recent insistence upon not truly wanting to completely withdraw militarily from the region, if American troops do leave, it could be because they have been asked to do so—regardless of the tactical loss in fighting ISIS, clearly demonstrated by the American abandonment of its Kurdish allies in Syria. To an extent, this is the result of domestic American politics that have been continually pushed to their limits through the populist exacerbation of political polarization, not necessarily the very presence of said political polarization in the first place. In a variety of ways, it is imperative to keep in mind that political polarization has been a constant, as well as party evolution, within the American democratic system. Simply put, it is the mix with recent populist tendencies, both on the left and right, that lead the American public to sense that polarization is the culprit of domestic tensions, instead of the anti-establishment rhetoric that simply pulls extremes towards their limits—extremes that quite easily find their ultimate expression on the international level as well.



► **Military withdrawal is not just Trump's campaign promise, but a decision made by an Administration more preoccupied with the support of a populist electoral base than by the advice of military officials**

North and South

The United States has historically been separated by a clear line—North and South—especially evident from the nation's very foundation, particularly right before and after the Civil War and again during the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s. The North was traditionally the center for progress and big business (initially industry and railroads) and anti-slavery. Furthermore, it was protectionist under the post-Civil War Republican Party, all the while that it was very much protestant, anti-alcohol and anti-Catholic. The Republicans, post-Lincoln *were* the Union and in the South the Democrats represented the maintenance of the status-quo, slavery and then segregation, while supporting free trade so as to sell their agriculture. At the same time, Democrats were more so open to new Southern European immigration and thus Catholics. Over the next hundred years or so, the parties would transform, and the Democrats and Republicans would both transition into different sets of ideology—Conservatives and Progressives would find their respective niches even as they continued to change. Democrats since then lost their voter base in the South, particularly since the Carter years,¹ and Republicans have continually gained leverage in the Southern states. Republican electoral support has been entrenched within the white and evangelical populations, while black voters generally support the Democrats. The Democratic party currently relies upon the black vote to gain access to the White House, even as they historically prevented their participation within the democratic system for years. Eventually, both out of circumstance and eventual purpose, it was ultimately the Democratic Party that defended the subsequent civil rights movement even as early as the Truman administration² (fair housing laws, anti-lynching laws, and desegregation of the military) as well as during the Kennedy and Johnson administrations (Civil Rights Act of 1964 that desegregated the South and proclaimed illegal any discrimination based on race, color, sex, religion or national origin³). The true transition of the Democratic Party to the left was mostly clearly initiated during the Wilson administration and then on through the Roosevelt (FDR) Truman New Deal, post-depression era.

¹ **Abramowitz, Alan I.** *The Great Alignment: Race Party Transformation, and the Rise of Donald Trump*, Yale University Press: New Haven and London, 2018, p. 86.

² **Jackson, John S.** *The American Political Party System*, Brookings Institution Press: Washington D.C. 2015, p. 24.

³ **Gittinger, Ted & Fisher, Allen.** *LBJ Champions the Civil Rights Act of 1964*, The National Archives, 2004, <https://www.archives.gov/publications/prologue/2004/summer/civil-rights-act-1.html>



► **In this era of increasing political polarization, it is the extremes within the American electorate that have seemed to open the door to a populist way of American political thought.**

Still, while distinctions between North and South have blurred and preferences towards the Republican party and Democratic parties have morphed into a present-day reality, the historical line between North and South is not as distinctive as it was, although what remains of it is greatly based on race and religion. Especially in this era of increasing political polarization, it is the extremes within the American electorate that have seemed to open the door to a populist way of American political thought. Over the years, both the Democratic and Republican parties have gone through a wide range of transitional changes as a response to the evolving American electorate. Said evolution occurred alongside many a period of political polarization as well, all the while that the United States underwent a consistent transformation into a more inclusive, large-scale democracy.

The Historical Transitions of the Democrat and Republican Party

American electoral history can be divided into five ‘party systems’ or moments of realignment. The first, 1790s to 1824, was dominated by the Federalists, that favored increased authority of central government. At the same time, the Jefferson Republicans did not want a more centralized, and what they perceived as aristocratic, government. The second system(1828) was marked by the populist president Andrew Jackson, the founding of the Democratic party and popular electoral participation(white males that were not landowners). Slavery was not so much a concern during this period, so the country was not as divided regionally. Still, when slavery did become an issue, as Democrats and Whigs had membership throughout the nation, the parties had trouble coping with division within their own ranks. Subsequently, the Republican Party emerged, and the third Civil War alignment came to be, followed by the New Deal alignment. The last alignment started in the 1970s as Southern democrats stepped down from office and were mostly replaced by Republicans, voted for by a new generation of Southerners, and in the North, Democrats.⁴ Throughout the years, the two dominant political parties in the United States, both the Republicans and Democrats, have repeatedly chosen electoral sides in an effort to survive. The domestic electorate has shaped and formed them, not necessarily the other way around, and the sides have been redefined and redirected over the more than two centuries of the democratic process. Again, all of

⁴ **Theiss Morse, Elizabeth A.; Wagner, Michael W.; Flanigan, William H.; Zingale, Nancy L.** *Political Behavior of the American Electorate*, Sage: London, 2018, pp. 106-111.



► **The Great Depression was the next great push towards the realignment of the two dominant parties. Franklin D. Roosevelt's "New Deal" would radically change the panorama of the political stage**



Fuente: Wikimedia Commons/LordHarris

The Tennessee Valley Authority, part of the New Deal, being signed into law in 1933. On the right: Franklin Delano Roosevelt.

this occurred during a democratic system in constant transition from one of a quite limited inclusiveness to extreme size and inclusion.

Clear signs of transition that lead up to the New Deal realignment of both the Republican and Democratic parties began as early as the turn of the century under Theodore Roosevelt's era and beyond. Roosevelt took power after McKinley's assassination on September 6, 1901, after having somewhat gently moved towards less protectionism by initiating reciprocal trading treaties (Argentina and France). The 'Rough Rider' Roosevelt was a charismatic conservative progressive, one that believed in addressing social domestic grievances in order to avoid even further radicalization, while at the same time a character that generally failed to put many a conservative Republican at ease, particularly regarding big business. Roosevelt, part of the New York aristocracy, saw the regulation of corporations as a way to assuage social unrest, such as the effects of high railroad rates and tariff on consumers: "If the federal government did not address the major social inequities in American society, then agitation for more drastic reforms would gain converts."⁵ At a time when the very value of political parties was in doubt and many regarded as necessity the government regulation of industry, Roosevelt's progressive tilt on the

⁵ **Gould, Lewis L.** *The Republicans: A History of the Grand Old Party*, Oxford University Press: Oxford, 2014, p. 120.



► **Even as Eisenhower was a true conservative, he showed himself to be a progressive conservative, allowing certain aspects of the New Deal to prevail, considering their popular nature and success**

Republican party appealed to many. Embodied in his idea of the ‘Square Deal’, industry was asked to invest in social inequities in order to gain a higher level of social justice, and if not, said industries became the target of anti-trust laws. With Roosevelt’s support, William Howard Taft then became the next president. Even so, during Taft’s second bid for the presidency, Roosevelt broke off from the GOP and ran against him with his newly founded Progressive Party, eventually leading to Woodrow Wilson gaining office. Wilson was a minority president with 41.9 percent of the vote (Taft 27.4 and Roosevelt 23.2).⁶ Eventually, Roosevelt would dissolve the Progressive Party in 1916, in an effort to beat the hated Wilson. Roosevelt disagreed with a variety of issues, especially the initial neutrality Wilson upheld during WWI, and Roosevelt instructed the Progressives to endorse the Republican ticket so as to beat him in the election.

In an effort to gain more votes for re-election, the Wilson administration turned increasingly towards the left (except in respect to race), appealing to the Progressive Party by supporting women’s suffrage, child labor laws and unions. At the same time, the Republican party tried to court both Northern black voters, by supporting anti-lynching laws, while appealing to white southerners by supporting the equal, but separate, rights for both blacks and whites. Also, the Republican party took up conservative positions regarding the regulation of business, taxation and government size, all the while maintaining their protectionist stance. When Wilson created an income tax (Underwood Tariff that reduced rates on imports as well),⁷ federal revenue would no longer mainly depend upon tariffs and the sale of federal land. As a result, the historically protectionist feature of the Republican party would lessen as “[w]hat had been the main tent of Republican orthodoxy[protectionism] began a gradual shift away from the center of the political debate.”⁸ Also, while Wilson won on the slogan “He Kept Us Out of War”, the US was drawn into the conflict a few months after the election of 1916 anyway, at the end of January 1917, as the Germans pursued outright submarine warfare. The entire war effort was mainly a Democratic one in which Wilson refused Republican assistance and his

⁶ Gould, Lewis L. *The Republicans: A History of the Grand Old Party*, Oxford University Press: Oxford, 2014, pp. 141.

⁷ Gould, Lewis L. *The Republicans: A History of the Grand Old Party*, Oxford University Press: Oxford, 2014, pp 156-164.

⁸ Gould, Lewis L. *The Republicans: A History of the Grand Old Party*, Oxford University Press: Oxford, 2014, p. 144.



► **Over the years, the stark contrasts of regional party affiliation have changed immensely, as the South became more Republican and the Northeast more Democratic**

eventual ‘League of Nations’ was never realized. Many Republicans, after having defeated Wilson’s League of Nations in the Congress, retreated into an isolationist foreign policy.⁹

The Great Depression would be the next great push that in a sense officially realigned the two dominant parties. Franklin D. Roosevelt, a distant relation of Theodore’s and married to the former president’s niece, Eleanor, took the White House by beating Herbert Hoover in the election of 1932. His “New Deal” would radically change the panorama of the political stage: in 1935 FDR and Republicans clashed over a range of contested issues such as Social Security (pensions for old age), the organized labor Wagner Act that guaranteed bargaining rights, the Public Utility Holding Act, The Banking Act and 4.8 billion in relief. New groups such as blacks, union members and other ethnicities became part of the Democratic party while conservative Democrats became even more so discontent, to a degree. Roosevelt was re-elected by a landslide in 1936 (twenty-eight million popular votes as opposed to under seventeen million for the Republican candidate Landon), and his New Deal coalition became the founding force behind the future win of five out of seven of the presidential elections to come. The Coalition included the following constituents: the Democratic South since the New Deal programs had poured money into the region; African Americans that had moved North after the ‘Great Migration’ post WWI and identified themselves as Roosevelt Democrats mainly due to the fact that relief payments and government jobs were distributed among them; and urban voters and unions were also important allies to the Democratic party.¹⁰ The New Deal would only be abandoned by a conservative dominated Congress post-Pearl Harbor (December 7, 1941) as FDR eventually terminated the New Deal in interest of the war effort.¹¹ Still, Republicans did eventually accept quite a bit of New Deal programs such as Social Security, albeit twelve years later.¹² The Modern Welfare State was established and simultaneously, throughout WWII and beyond, the involvement of the United States in international affairs would never be the same. Within the Republican party there were those to the right that would

⁹ Gould, Lewis L. *The Republicans: A History of the Grand Old Party*, Oxford University Press: Oxford, 2014, p. 159.

¹⁰ Gould, Lewis L. *The Republicans: A History of the Grand Old Party*, Oxford University Press: Oxford, 2014, pp. 192-98.

¹¹ Gould, Lewis L. *The Republicans: A History of the Grand Old Party*, Oxford University Press: Oxford, 2014, p. 209.

¹² Gould, Lewis L. *The Republicans: A History of the Grand Old Party*, Oxford University Press: Oxford, 2014, p. 213.



► **Currently, race, religion, education and ‘urban vs rural’ are among the better markers to stand by than stark regional differences of identification with the Democratic or Republican parties**

have the complete dismantling of the New Deal programs, even as many would seek to keep popular programs that were successful, while cutting bureaucracy and limiting spending.¹³ Ultimately, the line between North and South was irrevocably blurred as Democrats built an electoral base through FDR’s New Deal coalition that effectively crossed those lines, only to be redefined even further during the Civil Rights Movement and beyond.

The Democrats would hold onto the White House for the next twenty years, only to relinquish it to General Dwight D. Eisenhower, a WWII war veteran. Even as Eisenhower was a true conservative, he showed himself to be a progressive conservative, allowing certain aspects of the New Deal to prevail, considering their popular nature and success. Vying for reelection in 1956, Eisenhower insisted upon a sound Social Security system, a balanced budget and reduction of national debt, a constitutional amendment ensuring equal rights for men and women, and the lifting of barriers to international trade, while at the same time “safeguard[s] for domestic enterprises, agriculture and labor against unfair import competition.” Protectionism within the Republican party began to lose its hold even more so and Republicans started to gain an electoral base in the South. One of the first indications of an opening for the Republican party in the South was during the Johnson/Goldwater election in which the Republican nominee Goldwater carried five Southern states even as he lost the election to Johnson in 1964. Ultimately, while the Republicans were not necessarily against civil rights, the access to white Southern voters resulted in the ‘courtship’ of votes in what was the old Confederacy.¹⁴ Carter, a Baptist born-again Christian, would be the last Democratic president to truly run well in the South. Over the years, the stark contrasts of regional party affiliation have changed immensely, as the South became more Republican and the Northeast more Democratic. Even so, it is crucial to note that there was a simultaneous regional convergence of party affiliation, not an outright exchange, between the electoral dynamic of both Republicans and Democrats. While it is true that there is a tendency for the South to be Republican and the North Democratic, electoral point-gaps between both parties lessened remarkably in both the North and South. As a result, the North and South alignment established since the Civil War changed dramatically, resulting in the emergence of what is now deemed as ‘flip-states’.

¹³ Gould, Lewis L. *The Republicans: A History of the Grand Old Party*, Oxford University Press: Oxford, 2014, p. 215.

¹⁴ Gould, Lewis L. *The Republicans: A History of the Grand Old Party*, Oxford University Press: Oxford, 2014, pp. 254-57.



► **If one is to measure the populist nature of political rhetoric in debates or speeches, during the 2016 campaign Bernie Sanders actually had a more consistent and populist stance than the more so anti-establishment than ‘people-centrist’ leaning Trump**



Fuente: Wikimedia Commons/Shelly Prevost



Fuente: Wikimedia Commons/Alex Hanson

Bernie Sanders and Donald Trump in different acts during 2016 electoral campaign.

While the South and Western Midwest generally vote Republican and the Northeast and West Democratic, the percentages of regional affiliation have radically come together since the 1950s. Differences in percentage are closer than ever, again even as the South has a red hue and the North blue.¹⁵ Currently, race, religion, education and ‘urban vs rural’ are among the better markers to stand by than stark regional differences, even as the electoral college system by its very nature competitively insists upon separating the electorate into states, and thus North and South, based on partisan support.

Most recently in the 2016 election, blacks overwhelmingly voted for Clinton (87%) as well as Latinos (60%) although to a lesser extent. Within the white population, religion, as well as education, seemed to have a great deal of influence. There was not much of a difference between Evangelicals with some college education as opposed to those without (81% to 74%) while Mainline Protestants voted less for Trump if they were educated as opposed to those who were not (58% to 42%). White Catholics, a generally Democratic group, for the first time leaned towards the Republicans educated or not (51% of those with some university and 57% without voted for Trump). Younger people (18 to 29-year-olds) also had a surprising effect on the 2016 election: they changed from voting more Democratic to Republican. Urban versus Rural also has a cross-pressure effect as rural areas have a tendency to more Republican, and one must not forget social class: the lower and working classes

¹⁵ Theiss-Morse, Elizabeth A.; Wagner, Michael W.; Flanigan, William H.; Zingale, Nancy L. *Political Behavior of the American Electorate*, Sage: London, 2018, pp. 151-153.



► **The average American citizen, first for geographical reasons, and then perhaps out of a privileged unawareness upon a seat of global dominance, most probably has never outright assumed the international responsibilities that come along with American influence throughout the world**

that tended to be more so Democrat, had only an 11-point gap in 2016, signaling possible discontent over economic recovery. In reality, the United States is not as regionally polarized as it has been historically, but cross-pressure is evident in regard to race and religion more than anything else. Education plays a cross-cutting factor as well, particularly as Clinton received quite a bit of support from the educated white population, especially women. Again, educated mainline Protestants voted more so for Clinton also. Regarding age and social class, voting tendencies have actually been less polarized, closing the gap and opening up the possibilities of partisan sway. In a way, while the ideological political climate may be politically polarized and charged, very much due to populist movements, it seems that partisan identification is also evolving, making it not so clear cut as before.¹⁶

Curiously, if one is to measure the populist nature of political rhetoric in debates or speeches, (done so in a study by Kirk Hawkins and Levente Littvay in *Contemporary US Populism in Comparative Perspective*) during the 2016 campaign Bernie Sanders actually had a more consistent and populist stance than Trump (Trump is strongly anti-establishment while not so ‘people-centrist’),¹⁷ but at the same time, the populist nature of Sanders did not seem to ‘appeal to populist attitudes’ while Trump did get the populist vote.¹⁸ In fact, while Sander’s populist appeal was limited to the Democrats, Trump’s was “spread across the ideological and political spectra...One thing is clear. The explanatory factors often conflated with populism—authoritarianism, racial resentment, and anti-immigration attitudes—although important, do not negate the impact of populism. In fact, populism’s impact on Trump’s support is comparable in magnitude to that of explicit racial attitudes. At the same time, though there are no surprises here, these explanations do not work for Sanders, the most populist candidate of the 2016 primaries. This is why it is important not to conflate populism with its ideological content.”¹⁹

¹⁶ Theiss-Morse, Elizabeth A.; Wagner, Michael W.; Flanagan, William H.; Zingale, Nancy L. *Political Behavior of the American Electorate*, Sage: London, 2018, pp. 141-156 & 247.

¹⁷ **Hawkins, Kirk & Littvay, Levente.** *Contemporary US Populism in Comparative Perspective*, Cambridge University Press: 2019, pp. 14-16.

¹⁸ Hawkins, Kirk & Littvay, Levente. *Contemporary US Populism in Comparative Perspective*, Cambridge University Press: 2019, p. 38.

¹⁹ Hawkins, Kirk & Littvay, Levente. *Contemporary US Populism in Comparative Perspective*, Cambridge University Press: 2019, p. 43.



► **Present-day polarization under the Trump administration has also become an erratic political tool, sourced by rhetorical populism**

In other words, populism worked for Trump as it crossed political lines and the very existence of said populism had an effect on the electoral result in and of itself, not just the ideology. On the other hand, Sanders's higher level of populist rhetoric did not cross party lines and his populism did not necessarily appeal to voters' decision-making to the same extent. Therefore, it is crucial not to confuse populism with its ideology, even as it is intertwined.

So as to be clear what populism means, especially within the American context, it would be useful to briefly offer a general definition, and possible options of mitigation of said populism. Regardless of party lines, populism presents itself with the following four aspects: first, policy failure becomes a democratic normative threat as a “danger to democratic values of equality before the law”; second, blame is attributed to said policy failure; third, ‘ingroup’ identities or masses of citizens who ‘embody our democratic virtues’ are reinforced; and finally, populist rhetoric taps emotions that ‘catalyze a populist framing of issues,’ especially anger. The authors insist upon the institutional eroding, or ‘democratic rollback’ during a populist government’s hold on power, while it generally takes time (second or third term) in most cases.²⁰ Consequently, in respect to the future, the authors present three options to mitigate populism: the considered naïve ‘waiting it out’ option that shows an unwillingness to engage in underlying problems; containment through domestic and international actors such as lawsuits, nonviolent protest and sanctions; and engaging in underlying grievances in which the simple recognizing of certain truths in populist complaints may aid in the eventual defense of liberal democratic principles.²¹ In the case of American domestic politics, one could say that internal containment, on the part of the Democrats and U.S. judicial system, seems to be the foremost strategy in curbing Trump’s attacks upon democratic institutions. Regardless, populist complaints stem from the belief in democratic equality, whether it be so on the left or the right of the political spectrum, making it crucial to delve into the underlying truths of grievances as well. At the same time, it is important to not confuse outright populism with what is considered as left or right ideology, all the while keeping in mind the polarizing effects of said populism

²⁰ Hawkins, Kirk & Littvay, Levente. *Contemporary US Populism in Comparative Perspective*, Cambridge University Press: 2019, p. 58.

²¹ Hawkins, Kirk & Littvay, Levente. *Contemporary US Populism in Comparative Perspective*, Cambridge University Press: 2019, p. 59-62.



► **Polarization may not be simply the after-effect of social instability. Being a Republican or a Democrat now defines who a person is, what they represent on all matters, not just a simple leaning towards the left or right, from progressive to conservative**

as both citizens and lawmakers are forced to choose one extreme or the other. Most acutely, in a polarized domestic environment with a populist leader at its helm, foreign policy may take extreme and erratic forms as well, similarly not so based upon ideology but instead upon populist outbursts meant to appease the electoral base.

Conclusions

Both the Republican and Democratic parties have continually redefined themselves out of necessity and historical context, and in large part regionally determined by an indirect democratic representation through the electoral college state system. Is the present-day United States somehow more polarized than ever before? Is it any more protectionist, anti-global and embedded in its own self-interest and immediate goals? –not especially. Even after the World Wars were over, domestic discontent regarding foreign policy was rampant. The ‘Giant’ that was supposedly awakened by the Japanese Pearl Harbor attack did become a ‘True Giant’, but it has consistently been trying to cut down its bean stock in an innate effort towards isolation, especially if one is to take domestic discontent into account. The average American citizen, first for geographical reasons, and then perhaps out of a privileged unawareness upon a seat of global dominance, most probably has never outright assumed the international responsibilities that come along with American influence throughout the world. Even so, its elected leaders have assumed those responsibilities in exchange for said influence as well as the long-term benefit of its citizens—rightly or wrongly depending upon a great deal of hindsight of course and depending upon a variety of circumstances. Populism has come and gone and then come again, but a true insistence on the part of the American constituent to avoid foreign entanglement has always reigned, especially after involvement in countless conflicts, both declared and not so declared.

Overall, while it may be abundantly clear for many that multilateral international cooperation should be a concern for the American people, as opposed to ‘zero-sum’ dealings with enemies and allies alike, capitalizing on domestic discontent regarding collective problems facing the global community—let alone actual solutions—does rum up a great deal of support electorally. Is there a polarizing element to it? Yes, especially in the sense that the Trump administration uses it as a tool



► **Historically, American democracy has always been starkly split by political lines. The North and South were very much separated over the issue of slavery and then segregation**

to gain populist electoral support, but in the end, American political polarization can be traced throughout U.S. history, and again, is nothing new. While it is simply not true that the American electorate is somehow innately more polarized than ever on true issues and policy, that same increasingly internal polarization is greatly exacerbated because the head of the Republican party depends on such populist polarization to survive. Over the years, the rift between North and South has changed hands, even been remodeled itself in partisan terms so that both parties could claim dominance over the electorate in a self-serving effort to work within the electoral college system; and yes, that is how the American representational system works. Still, present-day polarization under the Trump administration has also become an erratic political tool, sourced by rhetorical populism. As a result, polarization may not be simply the after-effect of social instability—the social instability is being actively constructed and insisted upon by redirecting the culpability of strife among its citizens. As a consequence, being a Republican or a Democrat now defines who a person is, what they represent on all matters, not just a simple leaning towards the left or right, from progressive to conservative. Instead, it becomes an identity in which one *is*, in contrast to what one is *against* and not a simple difference of opinion on issues. Populism has a unique flare for fashioning and seizing advantage of the ‘Us and Them’ construct.

Historically, American democracy has always been starkly split by political lines. To reference the most obvious example, the North and South were very much separated over the issue of slavery and then segregation, before and after the Civil War and then throughout the Civil Rights movement. Religion has played its role as well—early Republican protestants, prohibition etc., albeit to a lesser extent in terms of polarization. Even so, religion has recently become yet another rhetorical tool for the Trump administration to pit ‘believers’ against ‘non-believers’. Still, while Trump has recently gained more Catholic support, black constituents continue to vote for Democratic candidates regardless of religious affiliation. Overall, especially since the 1950s, the American electorate has changed and evolved, as should be expected. In some ways it could be argued that polarizing factors have somewhat diminished regarding social class, age and region even as race and religion continue to be an issue. Notwithstanding, a high level of polarized political discourse exists, as converging partisan beliefs can easily produce rifts within communities and even households.



► **The Administration's foreign policy is continually more so unilateral and isolationist: withdrawal from the Iranian Nuclear Deal and the Paris Climate Agreement, its approach towards North Korea, the Trade War with China or the wall on the Southwest border with Mexico**

Regardless of domestic political polarization and divide, what seems to generate a seemingly new-founded instability, especially on the international stage, is how Trump seems to actually act upon his domestic electoral promises to such an extent that it makes him unpredictable, and ultimately irresponsible. Also, it is the Administration's constant upheavals from one unpredictable move to the next that drums up political fervor, both negatively and positively, as well as domestically and internationally. His erratic dealings with the international community are not just strictly military-oriented. The Administration's foreign policy is continually more so unilateral and as a result, isolationist, in a variety of ways: withdrawal from the Iranian Nuclear Deal and the Paris Climate Agreement, its inconsistent approach towards North Korea, the Trade War with China etc., and the appropriation of funds for the wall on the Southwest border with Mexico. It seems, that regardless of facts and even actual necessity, especially in the case of the wall, Trump's focus on electoral support is the main push that drives his policy. Even as Trump is more anti-establishment than 'people-centered' (in defense of the common man) in regard to his populist tilt, he is ever so vigilant of how his populist appeal got him elected in the first place. Without a specific foreign policy strategy, the one-man running of his administration's stance on a number of world issues is not only starkly simplified, but also stripped of its many-layered significance: 'Anything goes'. The source of instability is Trump, not political polarization, and it is this very instability that he cultivates in order to maintain his hold on his electoral base.



Consequently, while political polarization is not simply a recent phenomenon in the United States and neither is populism, it is quite significant in the sense that it commands such an influence both on present-day domestic and international stages. Populist Trump continually takes advantage of rifts within the American society, resulting in instability and doubt. The interesting fact of the matter would be to evaluate to what extent this Administration has contributed to reshaping both political parties, especially the GOP, in the long-term. Obviously, party evolution did not start with Trump, but he did succeed in brusquely taking it to another level. Still, ex-



► **Extreme political polarization is not the root cause of the current state of American domestic and international politics and policy, but instead, populist opportunism**

treme political polarization is not the root cause of the current state of American domestic and international politics and policy, but instead, populist opportunism. American political parties have always evolved in regard to their ideology in order to survive within the democratic political system, and while Trump may be an extension of this, as it is commonly noted, he is not exactly the typical Republican. One difference may lay in that while polarization has always existed, it has generally been divided upon concrete lines: between North and South, industrial and agricultural and deeply rooted in the issue of slavery and then segregation; but now, combined with a more inclusive electorate, the parties are roaming free to evolve and adequate themselves to, and ultimately survive, this changing electorate in a variety of different ways—combined with populist influence. The American people continue to be split along racial and religious lines, but that line has blurred, especially regionally, and then reestablished itself, and both the Democrat and Republican parties have accommodated themselves to such change. Even so, the extreme populist ‘advantage-taking’ of current political polarization, and its resulting exacerbation as a result, seems to never have been so incredibly evident, at least in recent history and especially to the extent that the domestic spills quite so much out onto the international stage—and with such a detrimental and erratic vengeance.

Bibliography

Abramowitz, Alan I. *The Great Alignment: Race Party Transformation, and the Rise of Donald Trump*, Yale University Press: New Haven and London, 2018.

Gould, Lewis L. *The Republicans: A History of the Grand Old Party*, Oxford University Press: Oxford, 2014.

Gittinger, Ted & Fisher, Allen. *LBJ Champions the Civil Rights Act of 1964*, The National Archives, 2004, <https://www.archives.gov/publications/prologue/2004/summer/civil-rights-act-1.html>

Hawkins, Kirk & Littvay, Levente. *Contemporary US Populism in Comparative Perspective*, Cambridge University Press: 2019.

Jackson, John S. *The American Political Party System*, Brookings Institution Press: Washington D.C. 2015.

Theiss-Morse, Elizabeth A.; Wagner, Michael W.; Flanigan, William H.; Zingale, Nancy L. *Political Behavior of the American Electorate*, Sage: London, 2018.

faes
FUNDACION

Suscripción a *Cuadernos de Pensamiento Político*:
www.fundacionfaes.org/pay/confirmBuy?id=6362

Suscripción a la *newsletter*:
www.fundacionfaes.org/es/newsletter

C/ Ruiz de Alarcón, 13. 2ª planta
28014 Madrid
Tlf 915 766 857
info@fundacionfaes.org
fundacionfaes@fundacionfaes.org

DONATIONS

Multimedia

