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Obstinate Anger and Pessimism: An (Academic) History of Right-Wing Populism

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Introduction

On the night of November 8th, 2016, Donald Trump was elected as the 45th United States President in an upset, defeating Hillary Clinton, whose political career spanning a quarter-century ended with her concession speech that night. The presidential election season had been unlike any other, with Trump expressing an ideology and style considered extreme even for the Republican Party, which included xenophobia, bombastic speeches, anti-establishmentism, calls for law and order and attacks on economic and political elites (Dionne Jr. 434-437). His victory brought into question the forces that drove him to the White House, which included feelings of anger and resentment among non-urban Americans towards urban and educated America (Guo 2016). Across the Atlantic Ocean, similar political forces were elated at Trump's victory, seeing it as an opportunity to make an impact on the European political scene (o'Grady 2016). Attention turned to France, Germany and The Netherlands, which featured far-right parties on the rise and were holding parliamentary (Netherlands and Germany) or presidential (France) elections in 2017 (2016). In the aftermath of Trump's victory, analysis showed that right-wing populist parties were expected to be competitive in all three (2016). Meanwhile, the continent was reeling from the effects of Brexit, a successful referendum in Great Britain to leave the European Union, which was masterminded by the far-right United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) (LeKander-Karis et al 1).

The election of Donald Trump illustrates a larger ongoing trend in the Western world, which is the rise and popularity of a political ideology known as Right-Wing Populism. Right-wing populism is defined as an ideology that combines anti-establishmentism, traditional left-

wing views on economics, and right-wing and far-right views on international organizations, minorities and immigration (Betz 664). Right-wing populist movements combine political and economic elites with minorities under a single label, which are considered as the “Them” label in the “Us. Vs. Them” dichotomy that such populism promotes (Rydgren 245). However, while the movement as a whole oppose the establishment political class, they usually continue to support democracy or not be antidemocratic out of fear of possible social exclusion (245). In this research paper, I will chronologically explore the history of right-wing populism in the Western World, and focus on academic coverage of the ideology. The first section will cover the early rise of Atlantic World right-wing populism in the late 1980s, 1990s and early 2000s, focusing on the early rise of right-wing populism in Europe. The second section will highlight the Great Recession and how it fueled the rise of America’s Tea Party Movement and right-wing populism in Hungary. The final section will cover the most recent wave of right-wing populism, which includes Trump, the alternative right (or Alt-Right) and European far-wing figures such as France’s Marine le Pen and Brexit mastermind Nigel Farage. Across the historical timeline that I covered, the most significant similarity in how academia has covered right-wing populism is the identification of the core group supporting right-wing populism and the overall grievances they propagate. This core group is composed mostly of White males residing outside of urban areas and having low levels of education. The main grievances behind those supporting right-wing populism have remained the same throughout the timespan covered by this paper. Such grievances can be defined as political antipathy stemming from anger over social, cultural and economic changes occurring within the Western World combined with anger towards political elites for not responding well to such changes.

The Early Rise of Far-Right Populism

As the Cold War began to wind down in the 1980s, a new political wave was building in the Atlantic World, which was the rise of Right-Wing Populism (Betz 663-664). While political parties based around that ideology had existed for years, the rise of such parties was notable because of the unique challenge such parties presented to the existing system (664). Since the 1970s, the anti-tax Progress Party in Denmark and Norway had formed and gained popularity immediately, winning a notable share of the vote in both countries (Zaslove 2004 61-62). These two parties are cited to have caused the rise of similar far-right parties in the 1990s, which included France's National Front, Vlaams Blok in Belgium and Denmark's People's Party, among others (62). At the same time, European Integration was accelerating, but also causing a rise in right-wing based Euroscepticism in Great Britain over the ratification of the Maastricht Treaty (Gifford 852, 858). Meanwhile, Canada featured the Reform Party, a right-wing party that found popular appeal due to its support for plebiscitarianist politics, or politics based on popular referendums (Barney 317).

Comparing the different far-right movements and political parties that emerged during the 1990s, several key ideological similarities can be pointed out among the various movements on both sides of the Atlantic. One of the key similarities in ideology is that most emphasize nationalism, particularly economic and political. Economic nationalism was cited by contemporary academics as a defining factor behind the rise of right-wing parties in the 1990s (Betz 664). In addition, political nationalism became a staple of far-right populist parties in Europe, taking various forms such as nativism (Zaslove 2009, 311). In Great Britain, much of the debate that led to the referendum was concern over British sovereignty, and that it would be lost or weakened if Britain were to sign the Maastricht Treaty (Gifford 862). Another key similarity

noted among the different far-right populist parties during the 1990s emphasize voter anger towards establishment politics. This argument was noted in Betz's previously-mentioned article, where he emphasizes the contemporary argument that establishment parties were weak at adjusting voters to changing socio-economic conditions (664-665). Similarly, Canada's Reform party saw its plebiscitarianist agenda become popular as a result of popular disenchantment with traditional politics (Barney 336). Finally, academic research on far-right parties in the 1990s and early 2000s emphasized cultural and social grievances as a critical part of far-right populist ideology, which manifested itself in varying forms from xenophobia to explicit racism (Betz 664). Academic research on 1990s right-wing populism also noted that a particular group of voters tended to express very high support for right-wing populism. According to such research, this group consisted mostly of White, working-class men residing in rural areas (677-678). Furthermore, the same research also noted that the grievances of these voters comprised much of the ideology of right-wing populist parties described above, including social, economic and political grievances towards society and politics (678-680).

Right-Wing Populism in the Great Recession

Right-wing populism in the Western World took a positive turn as a result of the Great Recession's onset in 2008. In the United States, the Tea Party movement began as a movement showing distrust of minorities, government and economic elites (Berlet 12-13). Popular legend holds that it started after a CNBC news anchor ranted about George W. Bush's bailouts in February 2009 (Suster 58). However, the main target of the movement quickly became the newly-elected President Obama, whom many in the movement saw as a threat to their security and identity (Berlet 11-12). More than its opposition to Obama's administration, the movement brought attention to the grievances and ideology of its core base, which called for smaller

government and greater emphasis on the needs of White working-class people, who felt betrayed during the Recession (12-13). The movement's main political goals were to vent the frustrations of a broad group of far-right movements against the Obama administration, block political progress and advance conspiracy theories about political enemies to ruin them (15-16). The Tea Party gained popularity quickly, and achieved numerous electoral successes in the 2010 midterm elections (Suster 63). Two years later during the 2012 presidential election, the Tea Party became more prominent, although missteps by some of its Congressional candidates caused speculation that the movement was reaching a maximum point (63). The whole time it was alive and influencing American politics, the movement was mostly a popular one, but had the support of wealthy libertarians and Republican donors, who saw it as a way to change the party's philosophical direction during the Recession (Suster 58-59).

At the same time that the Tea Party was making a scene in America, Europe was facing similar political upheaval as a result of the Great Recession. As the recession entered its peak after the Lehman Brothers collapse in September 2008, several European countries, including Spain, Finland Sweden and The Netherlands witnessed political swings to the right (Lindvall 757). However, within two years, most of those same countries swung back towards the left end of the political spectrum (757). The main European country which became notable for rising right-wing populism during the Recession years was Hungary, where right-wing populists won control as the Social Democrats collapsed due to popular disgust with their policies (Becker 29). At the forefront of Hungary's right-wing populist wave was Viktor Orban, who took the reins of power at a point when Hungarian politics were polarizing rapidly (31). The same political polarization and anger towards the existing regime were heightened by corruption scandals, rising unemployment and bailout attempts by the International Monetary Fund (30-32). Orban

and his party, the Hungarian Civil Union (FIDESZ) easily rode into the Hungarian Parliament in 2010 along with Jobbik, a far-right radical party that fed heavily off of middle-class fears of social decline and rising xenophobia (35, 37).

Academic analysis of both the Tea Party Movement and Viktor Orbán's rise reveal a stunning difference between right-wing populism in the 1990s and Great Recession right-wing populism. Unlike earlier right-wing populist movements which grew slowly and had some success, both were influencing electoral politics in their respective countries relatively quickly after the economic crash. In the case of the Tea Party, its successes in the 2010 Congressional elections are a clear reflection of this (Suster 63). Meanwhile, Orbán's rise to power in Hungary was rapid, with his party winning a majority in 2010 after failing to win against the Socialist Party four years earlier (Becker 34). Both can be explained by a rapid rise in popular anger due to the Great Recession and its effects on large segments of the working class combined with existing cultural anger towards immigration (Berlet 12-13, Becker 37). However, like with earlier analysis of right-wing populism, a notable similarity between the earlier and new waves of right-wing populism is the core group supporting such waves. Academic analysis showed that rural areas of the country, which have lower incomes relative to Budapest and higher rates of unemployment and xenophobia, were more likely to vote for FIDESZ and Jobbik (Becker 37-38). In the United States, the White working and middle classes were the main proponents behind the Tea Party movement as a result of mass fear that their identity was compromised due to a combination of the Obama presidency, the Great Recession and socio-demographic changes (Berlet 12). Furthermore, existing concerns by those group towards social and moral issues and the urban-rural cultural divide are combined with the previously mentioned grievances as a trigger for defending a common identity (23-24).

Trump et al in 2015 and beyond

Prior to the Summer of 2015, projections for the 2016 election indicated that Democrat (and former First Lady and Secretary of State) Hillary Clinton would compete with Republicans Jeb Bush (The brother of George W. Bush and son of George H.W. Bush), Marco Rubio or John Kasich for the presidency (Hawley 115). That summer, the race took an unexpected turn when a new candidate, businessman Donald Trump, joined the group of Republicans (Dionne Jr. 2, 434). He gained massive popularity immediately as he propagated his ideology and style, which included xenophobia, racism, anti-establishmentism and attacks on economic and political elites (434-438). Just over a year later, Trump won the presidential election, defying expectations that he would lose to Clinton (Hawley 126). Rising parallel to Trump was a movement known as the Alternative Right (Popularly referred to as the Alt-Right), which like Trump, had a unique ideology and composition (11). The Alternative Right differed from previous far-right movements in that it was decentralized, had no concrete unifying ideology and was mostly confined to the internet (11). However, it also borrowed much of its ideology from previous movements, such as xenophobia, White Nationalism and feelings of alienation and distrust towards establishment political figures (12-13, 16). The Alternative Right manifested itself into Trump's victory through his hiring of *Breitbart* writer Stephen Bannon as Chief Strategist for his campaign; later on, Bannon would become a critical part of the Trump Administration (127, 155).

As narrated in the opening paragraph of this essay, right-wing populist forces in Europe saw opportunities to rise up and vie for power following Trump's success, although they had been building strength as the American did. In France, Marine le Pen, the daughter of the National Front's former leader, promoted an anti-globalization and French nationalist ideology

going into France's 2017 presidential election (Greven 2). Austria's version of Donald Trump, Norbert Hofer, surged heavily in the Austrian Presidential Election, upending the existing party system (2). Viktor Orban's right-wing populist regime in Hungary had increased in popularity since his election, to the point of restricting political freedoms and advancing an anti-European agenda (3). Poland had also seen the rise of a right-wing populist regime, which began restricting civil liberties, among other authoritarian-leaning moves (3). Even in Germany, right-wing populism was on the rise in 2015. In 2013, the right-wing Alternative for Germany (German: AfD) had originally formed as a reaction to Europe's economic problems, but it gained significant attention in 2015 for its anti-immigration rhetoric (3). Meanwhile, Britain's United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP, discussed previously) had claimed a significant victory with the success of Brexit, a referendum to leave the European Union (LeKander-Kanis et al 1). Combined with Trump's victory later that year, it can be said that 2016 was the Year of Right-Wing Populism, the year where it altered the Western political discussion and most importantly, won (or was preparing to win) victories in key Western countries.

The new wave of right-wing populism that began to gain momentum in 2015 shows many striking differences between earlier waves, but also has unique ideological points and political styles as a result of cultural changes. Like earlier right-wing populist waves, one of the main ideological points of the current wave of right-wing populism is the combination of economic, political and cultural nationalism that right-wing populists propagate (Greven 1-2). In addition, contemporary academic research suggested that feelings of alienation and pessimism towards one's country, self and identity is a notable predictor of supporting right-wing populist figures (LeKander-Kanis et al 2-3). The same source also gave a new explanation for support for newer right-wing populism, in which a combination of consumption of tabloid-style media and

low level of educations further predicted individual support for right-wing parties (11, 13). This new media environment has been further cited to be accelerating the rise of right-wing populism because of how such candidates use bombastic, emotional, attack-based and simple rhetoric in their campaigns, which gives opportunities for media to focus their attention and garner viewers (6). Ironically, the same right-wing candidates often openly despise and attack mainstream media, with Trump being a notable example (4, 6). In connection with the previous study, the main group cited by academic research as the core supporters of right-wing populist candidates on both sides of the Atlantic are usually male, have low levels of education and reside in rural areas (6). A European-specific cause behind the rise of right-wing populism on that continent is dissatisfaction with the European Union and the (re-)rise of national identities, which is a central part of right-wing populist ideology in several European countries (2-3). Finally, many of the grievances echoed by those who supported right-wing populism in this era are very similar to those of previous eras, which include economic nationalism, distrust of international institutions and antipathy towards immigrants and minorities among others (2-4). Unlike the various government-level right-wing movements described above, the Alternative Right movement has its own unique core base, which consists of young White males who are highly educated (Hawley 77-78). However, that same group has many of the same grievances as formal right-wing populist movements, such as concern over demographic change, immigration and news coverage of minority justice movements such as Black Lives Matter (16, 78). In addition, such feelings of antipathy also stem from economic conditions facing younger people during this time period, which included high rates of unemployment, underemployment and residing with parents after graduating college (80).

Conclusion and Future Implications

The rise of Donald Trump and similar right-wing populist figures captured the world's attention in the latter half of the 2010s because of the particular ideologies and style they embellish (Greven 2-4). Over the last thirty years, right-wing populist movements and parties have undergone changes as world events changed. My academic analysis of the three waves of right-wing populism did show two trends common across the historical period covered by this essay. First, the core electoral group, middle- and working-class White males residing outside urban areas, have always been the core group behind right-wing populist politics. Second, the combination of economic and social grievances of those supporting right-wing populism have remained consistent, although variation exists in how these people seek to have their problems fixed. These findings are significant because the rise of right-wing populist parties presents a political challenge on how to calm the anger and resentment of such voters and adjust them to changing times. Knowing the backgrounds and grievances of those supporting right-wing populism is important because it allows researchers and politicians to craft policies that address their legitimate concerns (e.g. economic inequality) without bowing to their more extreme positions such as xenophobia.

Whether the current right-wing populist wave survives and tries again for power in the near future remains to be seen. If 2016 was my self-dubbed "year of right-wing populism," 2017 could be considered the year the ideology saw electoral opportunities but also faced challenges in getting there. The German Parliamentary election in September saw Chancellor Angela Merkel's party triumph despite gains made by AfD ("German Election"). After her victory, she pledged to address the grievances that had been causing the rise in support for AfD and other far-right movements ("German Election"). The German Election fell on the heels of the earlier Dutch

Parliamentary and French Presidential Elections, in which right-wing populist candidates made gains but failed to win top leadership positions (Busse 2017). Meanwhile, as of the writing of this paper in November 2017, President Trump was unpopular nationwide despite his core electoral group staying dedicated to his administration (Oliphant 2017). The Virginia Gubernatorial Election earlier that month saw a decisive victory for Democrat Ralph Northam, whose Republican opponent had used aspects of Trump's campaign philosophy, particularly the stoking of cultural and racial tensions (2017). Speculation began that Northam's victory was a warning sign that Trump's unpopularity would put the Republican Party in danger going into the 2018 midterms and beyond (2017). Despite these events, only by waiting until future elections on both sides of the Atlantic can it be seen if the current right-wing populist wave declines, stays at its present level of support or has a second electoral surge similar to 2016.

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