

Plutocrats with Pitchforks:
The Distinctive Politics of Right-Wing Populism in the United States

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Right-Wing Populism is an international phenomenon, visible from England to Hungary, from Poland to Italy. But it is turning out to look very different in the United States—the one rich democracy where it has succeeded in gaining single-party majority power. To be sure, Trump’s nativist rhetoric and core constituency are not so different from that of right-wing populists abroad. His priorities in office, however, look very different. In other rich nations, animus toward non-white immigrants is typically paired with fervent defense of social benefits for white citizens. By contrast, the most consequential policy moves of Trump’s presidency have proved much less “populist” than “plutocratic”—fixated on helping the wealthiest Americans and, indeed, designed in ways that would have particularly dire effects for Trump’s most loyal working-class voters.

Consider the two biggest Republican policy drives of Trump’s first year in office: the failed attempt to “repeal and replace” the Affordable Care Act and the hugely regressive tax-cut bill designed to slash corporate taxes and open up lucrative new opportunities for the affluent to shield business and capital income from taxation. The former was barely defeated; the latter passed late in 2017 (Hacker and Pierson 2018). Both were radically inegalitarian: highly favorable toward corporate interests and super-wealthy donors and distinctly unfavorable toward non-urban white voters with modest incomes.

Nor is the plutocratic thrust limited to congressional legislation. On the campaign trail, Trump promised to “drain the swamp” of D.C. self-dealing and money-driven politics. In office, he has handed his key policy posts to those with direct ties to huge corporations, the super-wealthy, and the network of radical libertarians organized around billionaire brothers Charles and David Koch (Nazaryan 2019). The result has already been two super-conservative appointees to an already very conservative Supreme Court; a significant scaling back of

environmental, consumer, worker, and financial regulations; an ongoing sabotage campaign against valued social benefits, including Medicaid, Food Stamps, and key provisions of the Affordable Care Act—and substantial benefits for rent-seeking corporate interests.

America's peculiar marriage of populism and plutocracy defies a personalistic explanation. Yes, Trump is a billionaire, but his rhetoric and campaign priorities tilt much more toward standard right-wing populist themes: restriction on immigration and globalization, defense of the welfare state for white citizens, and claims of singular representation of "the people." Trump's inclinations are certainly part of the story—and his actions even more so—but Trump's own policy priorities matter less than journalistic accounts would lead one to believe.

Less misdirected but still incomplete are accounts that focus on the "Civil War" within the Republican Party—an alleged struggle between a tax-cutting, pro-business old guard and an anti-immigrant, rabble-rousing new guard, with Trump leading the upstarts (Alberta 2019). If the GOP is engaged in a war for the soul of the party, it is a strange sort of war in which both sides are advancing at once (Hertel-Fernandez et al. 2018; Skocpol and Tervo forthcoming). The Republican "establishment" has certainly found cause for disagreement with the President and his most fervent followers—disagreement that has at times spilled out into the open. But the reality is that the rising plutocracy and right-wing populism haven't proved to be opposing forces. Instead, we will argue that America's extreme inequalities of political and economic power, crystallized in a right-shifting Republican Party, are helping to *propel* America's peculiar brand of right-wing populism. What's more, the anti-system outrage and racialized backlash that define this unusual hybrid have so far mostly enabled, rather than restrained, the intense economic conservatism of the GOP and, with it, the ongoing upward shift of economic and political rewards.

The Distinctiveness of American Political Institutions

A start at solving this riddle of “plutocratic populism” (Zakaria 2017) can be found in America’s unique political structure. For all of Trump’s outsized effects on contemporary public debates, he is a product of, and operates within, a totally different kind of party and political system than do right-wing populists abroad. Trump seized on one institutional feature—the prize of the presidency—that a candidate may grasp if he gains the support of one of our political parties. Capitalizing on America’s distinctive combination of two-partyism and presidentialism, Trump executed what might be called the “half of a half” stratagem: win enough extremist support to capture a party, then rely on party loyalty in an intensely polarized era (along with what one could politely call good fortune) to springboard from nomination to the White House.

Once there, however, Trump had to operate under the restrictions of another institutional feature: American political institutions give congressional Republicans a pivotal role in domestic lawmaking. Their agenda—the themes of which have been consistent for a quarter-century but the radicalism of which has mounted steadily—is remarkably, unashamedly plutocratic. The congressional GOP’s flagship bills, enthusiastically backed by Trump, have shattered all records in unpopularity for an American governing party. Both by enabling Trump’s election and then compelling him to work in what House Speaker Paul Ryan called a “coalition government,” our unique Madisonian institutions have help shape our unique politics.

Yet the true resolution of the riddle lies deeper: in the tightly connected long-term trends of worsening inequality and the growing extremism of the American right. “Inequality” entered the conversation about American democracy’s troubles during the shock of the financial crisis (remember Occupy Wall Street?). Yet it has received scant attention amid our current political

travails. Its one narrow passageway into our ongoing dialogue is revealing: a focus on the “left behind,” the communities far from booming cities that have suffered economically over the past generation. These struggling areas gave Trump surprising and decisive support in 2016.

Divining the thinking within these outposts has become something of a parlor game in Blue America. Reporters fanned out across small town and rural America to take the pulse of Trump voters. Books like *Hillbilly Elegy* (Vance 2016) and *Strangers in Their Own Land* (Hochschild 2016) reached the top of the best-seller list.

The plight of the “left behind” is genuine and deep, and concern about the white working class’s voting behavior understandable. Nonetheless, this preoccupation gets the inequality puzzle upside down. The key to comprehending American misgovernance and our increasingly inegalitarian politics lies not, first and foremost, in the fall of middle America, but in the (closely connected) rise of American plutocracy. Moreover, while we are experiencing the full flowering of plutocratic populism today, its roots have been spreading for decades. Neither the unlikely emergence of Donald Trump nor the strange juxtaposition of a government that combines rhetorical anti-elitism with unabashed service to the rich can be understood without focusing on the long-term shift of economic and political power to large corporations and the wealthy.

Indeed, the “Make America Great Again” mobilization of rural and small-town America is one of the principal products of plutocratic populism. As the ostensible tribunes of the forgotten man shift income to the already wealthy, the challenge of attracting left-behind voters becomes greater—and the resort to divisive claims of white identity more imperative. As those in power slash restrictions on polluters and financial speculators, life expectancy in the United States for white Americans without a college degree is *in decline* (Case and Deaton forthcoming). As those in power eviscerate the possibilities for ordinary workers and consumers

to join together to protect their shared interests, tens of millions of Americans face lives of growing dysfunction and isolation, economic hardship, and declining social mobility. Yet in the topsy-turvy world of plutocratic populism, these embattled voters aren't throwing the plutocrats out of office; they are cheering them on.

The Conservative Dilemma

Plutocratic populism is relatively new; the political dilemma behind it is very old. Indeed, today's destructive dynamics express a tension that has been evident within democracy since before democracy was born. For as long as the idea of popular rule has existed, thoughtful observers and statesmen—both those who supported democracy and those who opposed it—have asked the fundamental question: What happens when an economic system that concentrates wealth in the hands of the few co-exists with a political system that gives the ballot to the many?

Social scientists studying struggles to establish democracy across the globe have fixated on the same question. They have long seen extreme inequality as something of a triple threat to democracy. It empowers economic elites. It cleaves their interests from those of less fortunate citizens. And, as a result, it encourages them to view democracy as a mortal danger to their privileges of status, power and property.

Understandably, these analysts have largely focused on how democracies were born and secured. About established democracies they have been optimistic. Functioning democracies turned out to create a “positive-sum” environment, considerably less unequal than prior social arrangements but facilitating notable improvements in quality of life for most groups across the income distribution. Democracies generally made life better for most people. For this reason, among others, established democracies could be expected to endure.

The rise of inequality within long-standing democracies over the last generation has given this old debate a new and troubling relevance. With growing inequality, why couldn't the triple threat of unequal political power, growing social distance, and growing fear of democracy among economic elites re-emerge?

Arguably, the fundamental challenge for democracy associated with inequality is more specific: It is *conservative* parties that wrestle first and most fatefully with that tension. Why conservatives? Because they are generally the parties most closely aligned with traditional economic elites (of course, this has been true of the Republican Party virtually since its founding). In a democracy, however, conservative politicians must carry that allegiance into a new kind of political contest, one where votes are roughly equally distributed.

As Daniel Ziblatt (2017) has observed, this juxtaposition compels a fateful choice. If economic resources are vastly unequal, and the conservative party is politically aligned with the small circle of winners, something besides economics must be offered as a rationale for voting conservative. Political survival depends on introducing new divisions into the political bloodstream. And in modern politics the list of candidates for an alternative cleavage, a political divider between "us" and "them," is short and grim: nationalism; sectional loyalties; racial, ethnic, religious or cultural divisions; demonization of government and political elites; and fear of immigrants.

The question is not whether these "cleavages" will enter democratic politics. They will. The imperatives of electoral competition within an unequal society compel conservative parties to find and exploit new lines of cleavage. The crucial question, as Ziblatt notes, is a subtler one: In finding grounds for successful political contestation, can conservatives create a politics that is multi-faceted and relatively stable? Or do they create one that is increasingly extreme and

dangerous? The risks are evident. The greater the degree of inequality, the greater the need for conservatives to make strong appeals to alternative motivations. If inequality is growing over time, it will likely be necessary to amplify the nature of those appeals.

And nowhere in the affluent world, of course, has the rise of inequality been more dramatic, more sustained, and more concentrated than in the United States.

The Rise of American Plutocracy

A generation of political observers of American politics saw limited cause for concern from rising inequality. They were confident of both the strength of American democracy and the irrelevance of the historical experience of other nations. If pressed, they typically argued that the problem of inequality would be self-correcting. As inequality grew, politicians would face growing pressure to push back and protect the middle class. In the process of protecting the middle class, democracy would return to equilibrium.

Needless to say, this has not happened. Instead, as inequality skyrocketed in the United States, the Republican Party made a fundamentally different choice: It embraced the trend with growing enthusiasm. As the GOP became a congressionally centered party with its stunning capture of the House under Newt Gingrich in 1994, the voting records of members of Congress hewed ever farther right on economic issues (Bonica et al. 2013). In the White House, Republican leadership transited from the relatively moderate George H. W. Bush to his much more conservative son, George W. Bush. (At one black-tie event, W. joked to the audience, “Some people call you the elites; I call you my base.”) Meanwhile, wealthy donors and powerful corporations gained ever-greater clout in the Party, not only building powerful nation-spanning organizations (Hertel-Fernandez 2019), but also capitalizing on (and sometimes capitalizing)

conservative movement-building (Skocpol and Williamson 2011). Over time, the increasingly formidable U.S. Chamber of Commerce became essentially a political arm of the GOP (Hacker and Pierson 2016). The Koch network of billionaires built a massive shadow party-within-the-party, pulling Republicans even farther right (Skocpol and Hertel-Fernandez 2016; Mayer 2016). All these increasingly powerful players pushed relentlessly, and effectively, for plutocratic policies.

As the GOP aligned with these forces, it turned its back on the economic concerns of the middle class, even as ordinary Americans faced growing economic challenges. Instead, the party made tax cuts for the wealthiest Americans and corporations the centerpiece—indeed, almost the entirety—of its economic platform. It became ever more aggressive in criticizing government spending programs of all kinds. Despite the reliance of the party’s own voters on Medicare and Social Security, its antipathy for these massively popular and vital middle-class programs was only thinly veiled.

In lockstep with the growing economic power of elites, the Republican Party also adopted increasingly radical views of government regulation. It worked openly with Wall Street to block regulations of the financial sector, even after a catastrophic financial crisis. It resisted any effort to gain control over skyrocketing health care costs that did not rely on slashing benefits (a feature, not a bug of Republican health care proposals). Alone among conservative parties in rich democracies, the GOP refused to acknowledge the increasingly obvious threat of climate change (Båtstrand 2015). Indeed, its main response to this existential challenge was to attack the messengers, allying with the fossil fuel industry to undercut the very notion of expertise and disinterested analysis with a blizzard of disinformation. Climate denialism (along with its racist

cousin, birtherism) would serve as a trial run for Donald Trump's much more wide-ranging demolition of truth claims and accountability.

The choice to embrace inequality and the economy's big winners has sharpened the tensions that conservatives naturally face in a democracy. None of the policy positions just described has strong popular support. On the contrary, they are, for the most part, massively unpopular (Hacker and Pierson 2018). Among ordinary *Republicans* the biggest complaint about taxes has long been consistent: *the rich and corporations do not pay their fair share* (Willamson 2017). Republican officials have been consistent, too—they want to make sure these increasingly wealthy groups pay less and less. It is impossible to make sense of our current politics without wrestling with this central contradiction of the past twenty-five years of Republican governance.

Paths Not Taken

The past generation of American politics amply justifies the fears of those who've worried that rapidly rising inequality could place conservative parties on a perilous course. In retrospect, the GOP's original sin is clear: it embraced the winner-take-all economy and growing political inequalities. It compensated by opening a Pandora's box of racial resentment and anti-system outrage, coupled with ever-more-aggressive forms of electoral rigging, from routinized racial gerrymandering to restrictions on voting rights designed to deter democratic (but especially *Democratic*) participation. As its economic focus narrowed to a smaller and smaller slice at the top, the Party maintained political support from an electoral base drawn more and more from the white working class—and more and more through the manufacture and exploitation of tribalism, the demonization of political opponents, and increasingly shrill appeals to racial, ethnic and cultural loyalties.

On occasion, figures within the party have argued for a different course—one that would diminish the GOP’s responsiveness to the wealthy and expand its appeal to those of more limited means, including racial minorities. More typically, and echoing Ziblatt’s analysis of conservative parties of old (Ziblatt 2017), GOP elites and some of their powerful allies have tried to harness and domesticate the party’s ethno-nationalist and anti-system forces, hoping to paper over the conservative dilemma by using but containing these non-economic appeals. These efforts have often put establishment figures at odds with extremists who resist compromise and demand confrontation. Recent GOP history from Reagan to Pat Buchanan, from Gingrich to George W. Bush, to Sarah Palin and the Tea Party, and on to John Boehner’s and Paul Ryan’s rocky tenures as Speakers of the House can be seen as a struggle between these forces. Crucially, however, this fight has largely taken for granted the intense economic conservatism of the party’s governing priorities, and thus its resolution has predictably favored plutocratic populism, rather than genuine moderation. The rarity and quick marginalization of those centrally challenging the party’s conservative economic programs, such as John McCain in his initial 2000 run for the presidency—a bid that was buried by party’s more plutocrat-friendly candidate, George W. Bush, with a racially charged campaign in South Carolina—provides yet more evidence of how economic power on the right has come to dominate the inner circles of the GOP.

No episode better illustrates this push-and-pull than the party’s ultimately aborted attempts in to bring more Latino voters into the Republican fold. In 2013, after two elections in which Barack Obama had handily captured the Hispanic vote, the RNC issued a post-election report that reporters immediately labeled the “autopsy.” In it, top party insiders issued an urgent call: “America is changing demographically, and...the changes tilt the playing field even more in the Democratic direction....[W]e must embrace and champion comprehensive immigration

reform. If we do not, our Party's appeal will continue to shrink to its core constituencies only" (RNC 2013, 7-8).

The potential payoff was undeniable. In the five presidential contests between 2000 and 2016, Republicans lost the popular vote in every election except 2004. That year, of course, George W. Bush successfully wooed Hispanics, winning 44 percent of the Hispanic vote, a record for a Republican presidential candidate. In 2013, moreover, over half of Hispanic voters told pollsters they had voted for a Republican candidate in a prior election (Baretto and Segura 2014). Bigger margins among Latino voters thus seemed possible; certainly, it seemed highly desirable. As Republican Senator Lindsay Graham summed up the strategic imperative in 2012, "We're not generating enough angry white guys to stay in business for the long term" (quoted in Craig et al. 2018). Within four years, however, Trump would galvanize enough of them to win by razor-thin margins in key Midwestern states, doubling down on the party's ever-more-open embrace of anti-immigrant outrage.

In explaining this reversal, it is tempting to pin all the blame on the party's repeated failure to pass comprehensive immigration reform. But the GOP's serial inability to fix a broken immigration policy ultimately reflects a deeper problem. Contrary to the conventional spin, Latinos are far from single-issue voters—immigration policy ranks high on their list of concerns, but other economic and social issues generally loom larger. Nor, despite strong religious convictions and frequent church attendance, are they anywhere close to as socially conservative as are members of the Christian Right. On issues unrelated to immigration, in fact, they don't look so different from white Americans without a college degree: they hold many conservative values but prioritize economic security and upward mobility (Baretto and Segura 2014). For

example, in the 2004 American National Election Study (ANES), they were only slightly more supportive of generous government services than were working-class whites.

Latinos, in other words, share in common with the white working class a generally leftward orientation on bread-and-butter economic issues (Drutman 2017). To appeal to Latino voters, Republicans would have had to moderate not only on immigration, but on economics, too. Having put all their chips on tax cuts and other policies focused on the affluent, however, Republicans only really had immigration reform to offer. Re-elected with a record share of the Hispanic vote, Bush said he had earned “political capital.” What did he want to spend it on? Privatizing Social Security, a program loathed by many economic conservatives but beloved by the overwhelming majority of American voters. His drive for immigration reform as the 2008 elections neared was a Hail Mary pass at the close of the game. But completing it required that everyone on the team work together, when a good chunk of his party was more than happy to reap the electoral rewards of anti-immigrant backlash.

To be sure, Bush did have some backing from the plutocratic elements of the party. Yet big business was mostly a big no-show. In 1986, low-wage employers that relied heavily on immigrants had spoken out in favor of comprehensive action that was ultimately signed by President Reagan. By the 2000s, with China’s impact on the world economy gathering force, many of these employers had moved overseas, mechanized their production, or gone out of business (Peters 2017). The Chamber of Commerce and other business groups issued press releases, but they rarely testified in Congress and the amount they spent on lobbying on immigration was a rounding error next to their advocacy for tax cuts, deregulation, and corporate subsidies.

In short, the crux of the problem was the Republicans' intensifying Conservative Dilemma. They couldn't reliably win a larger share of the Hispanic vote without moving towards the center on economic issues. But they couldn't move left on economic issues without threatening their tightening alliance with plutocracy. And, absent economic moderation, they couldn't win elections without ginning up outrage against immigrants and minorities. Once the ethnic bidding war heated up, it was only a matter of time before a candidate no one thought could win would discover that calling immigrants "rapists" was a fast track to the Republican nomination.

The Distorted Electoral Roots of Plutocratic Populism

Electoral geography is a key contributor to and enabler of this GOP radicalization. Over the last two decades, rural areas have grown more Republican and urban areas more Democratic. This has gone hand in hand with the growing concentration of prosperity in urban and coastal areas. The most affluent regions of the country are increasingly Democratic; the most depressed, increasingly Republicans.

In pursuing a plutocratic agenda, Republicans are thus hurting their downscale voting base even more than in the past. These trends, however, have magnified the electoral advantages for Republicans that flow from America's territorially based electoral system: the outsized power of rural states in the Senate, the control over redistricting that comes with the GOP's disproportionate dominance of state capitals (itself facilitated by the rural bias of many state legislative maps), and the ease of "packing" Democratic voters into a small number of districts as urban areas have trended blue. These GOP advantages have, ironically, heightened the party's audacity in pursuing upwardly redistributive policies that will be devastating in many of the

areas of the country where Republican electoral strength is greatest. Republicans can adopt more extreme stances with less fear of backlash from moderate voters. Meanwhile, they fear primary challengers from their right flank at least as much as general-election opponents.

The growth of powerful conservative media had been another important force isolating conservative voters and intensifying their hostility. As the right-wing outrage industry has flourished, social scientists have struggled to come to terms with its impact. At first, they labored to fit outlets like Fox News, talk radio, and conservative social media into a conventional framework of organizations that “mediated” between ordinary citizens and government—seeing media on the right and left as more or less the same. At the same time, they struggled to pinpoint the causal influence of right-wing media, given that already-conservative voters were most likely to consume conservative news. These analytic challenges encouraged scholars to treat this stunning transformation of the media landscape as mostly a sideshow.

In recent years, however, the picture has come into clearer focus, and the sideshow has moved toward center stage. The world of conservative media is very distinctive (Benkler, Faris and Roberts 2018). It is its own ecosystem, with its own rules. Indeed, Fox and other major outlets are closer to representing a new kind of social movement—albeit one fixated on profits—than a set of conventional news organizations (Skocpol and Williamson 2011). And this media movement has had big effects (Arcenaux et al 2016; Martin and Yurukoglu 2017; Ash and Poyker 2019), becoming a vital source of GOP persuasion and electoral strength.

More important, the new world of right-wing media has changed the Republican Party, instigating and intensifying tribalism among both rank-and-file Republicans and politicians who compete for conservative media attention. In doing so, it has opened up space for a range of norm-busting behavior—so long as conservative media sources did not find that behavior

objectionable. With base voters increasingly saying they trust only a handful of right-wing outlets, practices that previously would have been untenable—from personal corruption to abusive or authoritarian behavior—have become much more feasible. Right-wing media has also helped foster a GOP electorate motivated primarily by negative partisanship and affective polarization (Mason 2018). This is a key reason why Trump won the support of Republicans who thought he was unqualified: they couldn't bring themselves to vote for Clinton. The voters who allowed Trump to out-perform Romney (and even poach some of Obama's erstwhile supporters) came from places prosperity had left behind. But Trump couldn't have won without the support of many suburban and upscale Republicans who were mainly motivated by negative partisanship.

There is a debate in social science circles about whether economic dislocation or racial animus is key to Trump's support. But this is a false opposition: Racial animus and a sense of decline are both ingredients in a poisonous stew that has been simmering for decades, with organized forces within the conservative coalition steadily turning up the heat. Moreover, as we have tried to show, this "horse race" approach ignores the biggest way in which runaway inequality fostered Trump's rise: it was a motor force behind the Republican Party's turn toward strategies of division and demonization. The party embraced the plutocrats even as the policies embraced by the plutocrats contributed to the economic devastation of the white working class. Backlash against immigrants and racial minorities certainly does not require America's extreme inequality. But right-wing populism is most potent where, and among those who feel, opportunities for economic security and advancement have been lost (Tavits and Potter 2015; DeVries et al. 2017; Iversen and Soskice 2019).

Consider the findings of David Autor and his colleagues (Autor et al. 2016), who employs a novel measure of trade-related job displacement that is arguably exogenous from local political variation. In areas of the country most devastated by the influx of Chinese imports, moderate politicians disappeared from office. In a few of the places, they were replaced with strongly left-leaning representatives, but this was only true in places that were highly diverse, highly Democratic, or both. Elsewhere, conservative Republicans gained power. There is no reason to think these places were more prone to racial resentment than those that did not get hit by the “China shock.” They were clearly much more prone to resentment once they had.

Plutocratic Populism in Power

When Trump won the nomination, many of the deep-pocketed backers of the GOP were worried—not because they thought he was a liberal, but because they thought he was a loser. Conservative plutocrats nonetheless stayed loyal to their team, pouring money into contested Senate races in states that Trump had to win. But with a few conspicuous exceptions—the casino magnate Sheldon Adelson, the hedge-fund billionaire Robert Mercer—they did not offer rhetorical or financial support to Trump himself. Even after the election, many complained about particular examples of Trump overstepping the wide bounds of acceptable behavior. Meanwhile, the most influential organized forces approached the Trump agenda with a strategy of “block and tackle” (Leonard 2019), pushing back against policies they disliked, such as tariffs (block), while encouraging Trump to double down on policies they desired, such as tax cuts (tackle).

The plutocratic elements of the GOP have had to grapple with Trump’s increasingly extreme forays into right-wing populism. But it has not had to compromise much on its core policy goals. Indeed, if anything, Trump has solidified the alliance of conservative plutocrats and

the GOP—in part because his dominance of conservative media and attacks on in-party critics have strengthened elite party loyalty, in part because Trump’s own ethical and political vulnerability have made him highly dependent on the establishment he criticizes.

Just as Trump won, then, because he gained the support of voters who didn’t share many of his populist views, he has had to govern by working with Republican elites who are interested primarily in pursuing a stunningly conservative economic agenda. Under GOP control, Congress has become the citadel of plutocratic influence in American politics. To achieve his core goals, Trump must enter that citadel, embrace its troops, and burnish its weapons.

Back in 2012, conservative activist Grover Norquist described the key qualities a future GOP president needed to have:

We are not auditioning for fearless leader. We don’t need a president to tell us in what direction to go. We know what direction to go. We want the Ryan budget. ... We just need a president to sign this stuff. We don’t need someone to think it up or design it. The leadership now for the modern conservative movement for the next 20 years will be coming out of the House and the Senate. Pick a Republican with enough working digits to handle a pen to become president of the United States...His job is to be captain of the team, to sign the legislation that has already been prepared (quoted in Frum 2017).

Given the unpopularity of their agenda and our system’s proclivity for gridlock, Republicans have had mixed success in advancing their inegalitarian goals. But Trump’s willingness to “sign the legislation that has already been prepared” has never been in doubt. He offered his backing to starkly inegalitarian health care and tax policies designed in Congress. He allowed his (Koch-aligned) Vice President to oversee key personnel appointments in domestic agencies, ensuring that executive policy on finance, the environment, and other regulatory issues would hew to plutocratic priorities. He installed as budget director and then chief of staff a conservative cut from the same hard-right cloth, Mick Mulvaney—who now oversees virtually

all the White House’s domestic policy agenda. And he pursued judicial nominations, including two pivotal ones to the U.S. Supreme Court, that will provide critical and long-term support for those same priorities. These achievements should not be under-appreciated. Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell was expressing genuine delight when he pronounced 2017 “the best year for conservatives—on all fronts—in thirty years.”

Looking Forward

Where will plutocratic populism leave American politics? If Trumpism represents an intensification of the contemporary GOP’s long-term coalitional strategy more than a departure from it, does ramping it up lead to breakthrough or rupture? Even before Trump’s ascendance, it was clear that the party’s elites were producing a “Frankenstein’s monster” problem: they needed the support of an outraged voting base they had helped to create but in many ways could no longer control. Now that base is directed by Trump far more than the congressional GOP.

Indeed, the president is himself one of the principal products of the GOP’s Conservative Dilemma. Having sided with the top but needing support from the middle and bottom, Republicans paved the way for the extreme rhetoric and norm-breaking behavior that brought Trump to power. Trump’s volatility and aggression and unprecedented unpopularity now loom over American politics—and the future of the Republican Party. They generated the stunning unpopularity of and backlash against the Republican Congress that caused Republicans to lose the House despite an impressive storm wall built from gerrymandering and the anti-urban bias of American political representation. They have also made the GOP elite’s anti-system strategy ever-more dependent upon the unstable alliance between its super-wealthy donors and its less

affluent electoral base—a base that has to be worked into an ever more dangerous frenzy to distract from what is happening in Washington.

The coalition between establishment forces in Congress and right-wing populists in the White House is neither stable nor peaceful. Power has clearly shifted to the Executive Branch. It is Trump, rather than congressional leaders, who attracts the loyalty of Republican voters. Establishment figures who insist on independence have exited the White House and Congress. Fear of their own voters and fear that the GOP cannot survive Trump's collapse bind the party's political elites to him, even as his dangers to the party—and the nation's fragile social cohesion—become ever more apparent.

Back in the quaint old days of 2010, President Obama observed that perhaps we just had to wait for “the fever to break.” Indeed, it is clear this cannot go on. But whether the resolution of the GOP's three-decade march away from normal democratic politics will take the form of a salutary electoral backlash or a devastating crisis of the American political regime is difficult to say. What can be said is that roots of Trumpism go back much farther than the short presidential career of Donald J. Trump. It will take much more than a lost reelection bid to purge the GOP of the plutocratic populism that increasingly defines American politics.

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