

Jeremy Rabkin

Professor, George Mason University
<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0618-849X>

SOVEREIGNTY, NATIONALISM, POPULISM

Introduction

“Populism” has been much in the news. When Britain’s referendum on EU membership yielded a majority for Brexit in June 2016, that was blamed on populism. When Donald Trump was elected President the following November, that was blamed on populism. When governments in Central Europe, notably in Hungary and Poland, voiced opposition to EU policies or rejected criticism from the European Court of Human Rights in 2017, that was also blamed on populism.

For a doctrine that does so much political work, there seems to be no agreed definition of what it means. It is, according to MEP Daniel Hannan, a term that in Brussels means, “something that other people like, but I don’t”.¹ In fact, it’s quite possible to endorse some trends called “populist” and feel anxious about others.

I offer my own feelings in evidence. I was pleased about Brexit. I am open-minded about populist governments in Central Europe. But I have great misgivings about Donald Trump as President – enough so that I could not bring myself to vote for him (though I couldn’t support Hillary Clinton, either). I have not become more confident after seeing his first year and a half in office. My views are not idiosyncratic. The most prominent conservative magazines and

¹ D. Hannan, “Insects of the Hour”, [in:] *Vox Populi, The Perils And Promises Of Populism*, ed. R. Kimball, Encounter, New York–London 2017, p. 43.

conservative commentators welcomed Brexit, declined to condemn populist governments in Central Europe – but continually voice uneasiness (or outright disdain) for President Trump.²

We can be wrong, of course. But at the least it's worthwhile to distinguish the cases. What I want to argue here is that at the most basic level, these differing reactions correspond to different concerns or different doctrines. The EU is a threat to national sovereignty. One can be a strong advocate for national sovereignty without embracing nationalism. The latter seems to be the special irritant fueling resistance to European policies in Central Europe and raising hackles in Brussels and other western European capitals. But one can be a nationalist without embracing populism.

It's not that these doctrines or attitudes are unrelated. A good reason to try to disentangle them is that they are so readily confused because they do overlap in various ways.

The Appeal of Sovereignty

Sovereignty sounds so general and abstract, one might think it is co-eval with political life. But the term did not enter western languages until the 16th or 17th centuries. It came into use with wider currents of “modern” thought.

Many political terms in modern languages derive from Latin – like “republic” or “senate” or “legislation”. Or they derive from Greek – like “democracy” and its companion, “demagoguery”. Such terms were knowingly adapted from ancient political writings commenting on practices or concepts familiar in the political life of ancient Rome or the Greek city states.

But “sovereignty” is a French term, which came into general use only when writers began to publish their political treatises in modern languages. The term was coined or at least popularized by the French jurist Jean Bodin, whose 1576 treatise, *Les Six Livres de la République*, first appeared in French and only later appeared in Latin and then, within a few decades, was translated into English and other modern languages. The impulse behind the word was also, from the outset, distinctively modern – or at least, anti-medieval. The term expresses, in a way, the most characteristic features of modern thought, along with the related term “state” which first entered western languages in this same era (as “the state” comes to be seen as the bearer of “sovereignty”).

To give a very brief summary, one could say sovereignty was launched to clarify political authority. It was directed, on the one hand, against the Church, insisting that, within its sphere, sovereign authority could not be countermanded by bishops or popes. On the other side, it was directed against feudal claims,

² For useful survey, emphasizing Trump skepticism or opposition from major conservative magazines, T.A. Frank, “Welcome to the Golden Age of Conservative Magazines”, *Washington Post*, January 28, 2018.

insisting that the claims of large land-owners on their tenants were not simply a local variant of the claims that a king exercises over the entire realm. Advocates for sovereignty sought to isolate and protect political authority from competing claims in medieval Europe.

The term “state” captures this purpose. It means most when contrasted with religion (as in “separation of church and state”) or with private life (as in the phrase, “state and society”). States can be sovereign but it is strange to say a religion or a market or network of voluntary relations could be sovereign.

Historically, the idea of sovereignty has close connections with legislative power. The term “legislature” was a new coinage of the same era and for the same reason: it implied a new kind of power or a new way of viewing it. Attributing laws to a legislature implies that law rests on choice or will, not mere adaptation or extension of existing rules. Law is not simply determined by social custom nor by divine ordinance as interpreted by clerics. If law can be remade, it matters who makes it.

So, by the mid-18th century, William Blackstone’s *Commentaries On The Laws Of England* asserted that the ultimate sovereign power is the power to make legislation: “Sovereignty and legislation are indeed convertible terms; one cannot subsist without the other”.³ By this logic, the revolutionary leaders in America insisted that Parliament in London could not make law for the colonies because it was not hold sovereign authority over them. The ensuing war for independence made good on this claim.

But sovereignty was not simply about power or force. It sought to distinguish accepted or established authority from mere brute imposition. Even Bodin, the first writer to make sovereignty a theme (in late 16th century), distinguished a lawful sovereign from a usurper.⁴

The most basic question about government is who makes the law. Sovereignty, in trying to give a definitive answer, has a close kinship with constitutionalism. We can even say it requires some version of constitutionalism, because it presumes a settled authority to make and enforce law and a system of offices that connects these “powers”.

It doesn’t necessarily follow that sovereign power or powers must be accountable to citizens through regular, genuine elections. But the core idea – which we could call “legitimate” power or rightful authority – emphasizes at least the acceptance of sovereign power, which in turn might be characterized as “consent”. That is already explicit in Bodin’s account, that the sovereign’s duty to protect subjects follows from the agreement of subjects or citizens to obey. Bodin

³ W. Blackstone, *Commentaries on the Laws of England: a facsimile of the first edition of 1765–1769*, Vol. I: *Of the rights of persons (1765)*, introd. by S.N. Katz, University of Chicago Press, Chicago–London 1979, p. 46.

⁴ J. Bodin, *Les Six Livres de la République* [reprinted], Fayard, Paris 1986, Bk I, Ch. 8, p. 197.

thought even taxes could not be rightly levied without agreement expressed by an elected, representative body.⁵

It hardly needs saying that anyone who cares about the historic aims of sovereignty would have great reservations about the European Union. At its heart is a wholesale transfer of lawmaking from elected parliaments in the member states to an amorphous supranational structure. Binding law somehow emerges from conferences among national ministers – different ones for different policy fields – which set general standards whose details are filled out by unelected commissioners and their administrative staffs.

The system is often described as an arrangement based on the “pooling of sovereignty”. The term is almost mystical in its obscurity, but seems to be a tacit acknowledgement that the ramshackle architecture of the EU is exceptional in our world. The EU has neither armed forces nor police, neither criminal courts nor prosecutors, neither a general, independent taxing power nor the general fiscal obligations of a modern state. It is not trusted to exercise basic sovereign power. But it has somehow acquired power to override and displace the legislative determinations of sovereign nations, most of which had maintained their sovereignties for centuries past.

Support for Brexit seems to have reflected, in a part, a protective feeling for Britain’s tradition of parliamentary sovereignty. It has been estimated that something like 70 per cent of new law in Britain emanated from EU directives, which British officials were still obligated to enforce. The encroachments of this system – by turns brazenly expansionist and coyly reticent – was seen as an affront to honest government.

The United States has never agreed to join an international organization which has independent law-making capacity. Certainly the North American Free Trade Association (NAFTA) and the World Trade Organization (WTO) lack the legislative organs that power the EU’s authority, nor do their arrangements for arbitration of disputes bind domestic courts, as is true for most judgments of the Court of Justice of the European Union.

Even for the United States, however, expectations for global governance sometimes seem to challenge traditional notions of national sovereignty. To cite a recent example, President Trump provoked a great deal of angry reaction, particularly among European leaders, when he announced that the United States would no longer be bound by the 2015 Iran nuclear deal (the so-called Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action) nor the 2016 Paris Climate Agreement (technically, implementing accords to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change). Both agreements had been structured so that President Barack Obama could claim to commit the United States without any action by Congress (let alone ratification by a 2/3 majority in the Senate, as the Constitution requires for full treaties). To critics of President Trump’s withdrawals, it seemed perfectly reasonable that the

⁵ *Ibidem*, Bk I, Ch. 8, p. 201.

United States should be bound by the personal say-so of a previous president – since that is more or less how the EU operates. Not by coincidence, President Trump talks a great deal about sovereignty. His address to the UN General Assembly in September of 2017 mentioned the term seventeen times, approximately once on every page of the text.⁶

Of course, it is easier for a large, powerful state to insist on its sovereignty. The EU has gained strength by persuading members that it can do more for them than they can do for themselves. Just as people who feel helpless are often tempted to sacrifice their own rights to the supporting reach of an all-powerful state, so smaller states feel more dependent on supra-national authority. Sovereignty rests on more than formalities of consent. The claim to supreme political authority is necessarily entangled with a claim to independent capacity. The point is reflected in international law – sovereign authority depends on effective control and a government cannot expect others to respect its territorial claims where it does not exercise reliable control (at least in normal peacetime conditions).⁷

So sovereignty appeals to a spirit of self-confidence. Brexit advocates have bemoaned the way the British government let itself become bogged down in seemingly endless bargaining with EU authorities over the terms of future UK–EU relations. The critics see this display of incapacity as a new threat to sovereignty. As Conservative MP Jacob Rees-Mogg put it in the spring of 2018, the failure of these negotiations “would be the most almighty smash to the national psyche [...] an admission of abject failure, a view of our politicians, of our leaders, of our establishment that were were not fit, that were were too craven, that we were too weak to be able to govern ourselves”.⁸

Efficacy is important even if one thinks of sovereignty as an appeal to each individual citizen – is this a government (or a constitutional structure) you trust to govern you? But it is also an appeal to national pride. It rests on the confidence that the relevant political community can stand on its own amongst the other nations of the world. It is, at least, harder to sustain, without a spirit of attachment and solidarity often called nationalism.

The Benefits of Nationalism

Nationalism does not have prominent theorists in the same way as sovereignty. The original theorists of sovereignty saw nothing at all odd in arguing for

⁶ “Remarks by President Trump to the 72nd Session of the United Nations General Assembly”, September 19, 2017, available online at: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-72nd-session-united-nations-general-assembly/> [accessed: 20.08.2017].

⁷ For a classic statement, *Island of Palmas Case (Netherlands v. U.S., 1928)*, Scott, *Hague Court Reports*, 2d 83 (1932), awarding sovereignty over a disputed Pacific island based on effective control in modern times, rather than claims founded in 17th century treaties.

⁸ J. Rees-Mogg, “Failed Brexit would be biggest humiliation since Suez Crisis”, *Sunday Telegraph* (UK), March 26, 2018.

sovereignty in France or the Netherlands or England and also in every other country which could assert its independence. The most famous nationalist writers extolled the special merit or special destiny of their own people – notably, in the 19th and early 20th centuries, Germany or Russia and in our own time, North Korea.

So there is much less agreement on what “nationalism” means. Some writers see it as simply a more vehement version of patriotism, while others see it as a particularly deformed or noxious variant. Today, it is still often associated with the bellicose, predatory sentiments stirred up by fascist demagogues in the 1930s.

There is no point disputing abstract terminology here. There is surely a dangerous version of national feeling which threatens neighbors, by extolling one nation above all claims of other peoples. There is surely a version of patriotism which inspires devotion to one’s own country without much interest in others – as children may love their parents without much concern about whether they are better than other people’s parents.

What all kinds of nationalism have in common is an identification with a collective entity, with a people, rather than merely with a specific government. It is possible to have national feeling without a sovereign authority, as illustrated in our time by Scottish nationalists, Quebec nationalists, Catalan nationalists and in the early 20th century by nationalities submerged into the Habsburg, Romanov or Ottoman empires. But nationalists typically seek sovereign status for their nations, as these examples indicate.

Sovereignty adds a layer of confirmation to nationalism, giving it responsibility at home and a higher status abroad: we are not only people who feel loyalty to each other, but people capable of governing ourselves. The converse is also true. If you want to support sovereignty – as an anchor of constitutionalism, as a hedge against supranational encroachments – you should welcome national feelings as a support to sovereignty.

National feeling may help to stabilize a government or governing system when it runs into serious challenge. It can nurture patience or political ballast in stormy weather. As Burke pointed out, it is usually a “selfish temper” that inspires plans that completely disregard national traditions or institutions: “People will not look forward to posterity who never look backward to their ancestors”.⁹ Some form of national feeling may generate a sense of fellow-feeling which softens other divisions and makes even those who are disappointed in current outcomes reluctant to challenge the established, sovereign authority. It is a resource which national states may draw on and which the European Union notably lacks (since Europe has never been a nation and the EU does nothing to inspire a sense of genuinely common undertakings).

If you care about your nation’s sovereignty, you have an instinctive aversion to having it undermined by neighboring states (or more distant but more

⁹ *Select Works of Edmund Burke*, Vol. II: *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, compiled and with a foreword and notes by F. Canavan, Liberty Fund, Indianapolis 1999, p. 121.

powerful states). You might be willing to accept hardships simply to maintain sovereignty. But you're much more likely to care about sovereignty if you feel loyalty or attachment to the people for whom the sovereign power claims to act – if you think of it as “our” government. Without some form of national feeling, it's hard to see why you wouldn't be inclined to favor concessions for the sake of peace or trade advantages and so finally negotiate away much of the sovereignty of what had been your nation, as the history of European integration in recent decades illustrates.

Finally, I think it is very much worth noticing that some form of national feeling – something which could very reasonably be called nationalism – has been a central element of politics and statecraft in nations which have also liberal constitutionalism. Nationalism (at least in some version) is not only compatible with liberalism or democratic governance in theory; they have often been closely associated in practice.

As far back as the late 17th century, the philosopher John Locke defended the claims of ethnic Greeks to revive their own national state, as if it were self-evident: “Who doubts but the Grecian Christians descendants of the ancient possessors of that country may justly cast off the Turkish yoke which they have so long groaned under when ever they have a power to do it?”¹⁰

A century later, when *The Federalist* urged Americans to replace their initial confederation with a national constitution, it appealed to the claims of common ancestry: “Providence has been pleased to give this one connected country to one united people – a people descended from the same ancestors, speaking the same language, professing the same religion, attached to the same principles of government [...]”¹¹ The author of this paper, John Jay (subsequently first chief justice of the US Supreme Court), saw no contradiction in the fact that the new Constitution contained an explicit prohibition on religious tests for office (Art. VI).

Nearly a century later, John Stuart Mill, with an eye to the seeming failure of parliamentary institutions in the Habsburg Empire, argued that representative government would have much better prospects in nation states: it is “a necessary condition of free institutions that the boundaries of government should coincide in the main with those of nationalities”¹² The author of *On Liberty* did not acknowledge this limitation as a tragic or paradoxical constraint.

¹⁰ J. Lock, *Second Treatise of Government*, 1689, Sect. 192.

¹¹ *The Federalist*, No. 2 *Concerning Dangers from Foreign Force and Influence*, [in:] A. Hamilton, J. Madison, J. Jay, *The Federalist Papers*, ed. C. Rossiter, introduction and notes by Ch.R. Kesler, Signet Classics, New York 2003, p. 32.

¹² J.S.Mills, *Considerations on Representative Government* (1861), [in:] *idem*, *Utilitarianism, On Liberty and Considerations on Representative Government*, ed. G. Williams, Everyman, London 1993, p. 394.

A nationalist does not have to insist that everyone be the same nor endorse persecution to make them so. But it is not inherently illiberal to want to preserve at least a solid majority in your country of people who are attached to its existing institutions, political principles, social norms. To say otherwise, is to say that there is nothing distinctive or particular about your own country. If that is true, then there is no good reason to defend your own country in any dispute. If you are fortunate to live in a nation that respects the rule of law and the rights of individuals, not to prefer your own country means not preferring these national achievements. Of course, you might imagine that they can all be just as well preserved by international human rights conventions. If you believe that, however, you must prefer not only a different nation but a different planet or a different era in human history.

So it was entirely reasonable, it seems to me, for Eastern European governments to resist Germany's plan for resettling millions of refugees from Muslim countries within their borders. Do such people share the same ideas about law, human rights, justice, as Europeans? Surely the experience of their home countries suggests quite otherwise, nor does recent experience with immigrant communities within Europe give much cause for optimism, at least in the short term or medium term.

Chancellor Angela Merkel's policy seems to have been driven by the determination to prove that Germany had overcome past demons and could now welcome an immigrant surge of people who are very different from most present-day Germans. But if Germany has "mastered its past", perhaps that owes something to shared national memories of a terrible past and decades of national effort to embrace principles suited to a liberal democratic state, living in peace with its neighbors. Would people coming from strife-torn tyrannies hold to the same views? Especially, people from Muslim states where Nazi-style hatreds have been preached for decades as official state doctrine?¹³

The Merkel policy seems to rest on the premise that history can be readily redirected by wise rulers. So the past – of this nation, of any other – means nothing. In today's world, where human rights conventions and international trade agreements and environmental commitments encompass almost all nations, people can be managed in similar ways, wherever they are. It is an outlook that suits the EU. It suits much opinion in today's Germany. It is not surprising that other sees it as an affront to their national pride.

A British columnist was rude enough to make the point when Germany's ambassador to the UK complained that British "national folklore" focused "only

¹³ See, e.g., documented episodes of state-sponsored television programs in depicting Jews using the blood of Christian children for "religious" rites: "The Blood Libel On Arab TV: Reports On Jews Using Christian Children's Blood For Passover Matzos – From The MEMRI TV Archives", *MEMRI*, April 3, 2015, <https://www.memri.org/reports/blood-libel-arab-tv-reports-jews-using-christian-childrens-blood-passover-matzos---memri-tv> [accessed: 2.06.2021].

on how Britain stood alone in 1940". Germans, he retorted, "dislike too much concentration on history because their recent past is such a shameful one" while Britain's "heroic stand [in 1940–1941] was the greatest moment in our island story [...]".¹⁴

Some commentators think the Brexit vote was as much about resistance to uncontrolled immigration as to anything else.¹⁵ European authorities had overruled British government policies, even when it came to deporting suspected terrorists with foreign passports. To lose control of who comes into your country is to lose a fundamental element of sovereignty, as well as a basic safeguard of national identity.

Concerns about uncontrolled immigration also seem to have helped fuel Donald Trump's surprise victory in 2016. I think it was reasonable to talk about getting a grip on "who is coming into our country" and even to urge special controls on immigration from Muslim countries. Even liberal commentators have acknowledged that it is not inherently illiberal or irrational to want to control immigration.¹⁶

It was characteristic of Trump, however, to voice these concerns with extreme rhetoric and impulsive policies. The characteristic Trump style reflects the difference between nationalism and populism.

The Dangers of Populism

Trends associated with populism have developed quite differently in different countries. In Britain, the Brexit referendum might have been seen as the triumph of the UK Independence Party (UKIP), the one party devoted to leaving the EU. In fact, the governing Conservatives embraced Brexit – at least in principle – and remained in power, though they lost seats in the 2017 elections. UKIP failed to elect a single MP to the national Parliament (though it retains three members of the House of Lords who previously affiliated with it).

In America, Donald Trump remains intensely controversial and candidates for office, even on the Republican side, have without exception failed to gain office by presenting themselves as Trump followers challenging the (Republican) "establishment". The actual Republican Congress has not enacted any distinctive Trump measures, or other large proposals of the new administration, apart from tax reductions already favored by establishment Republicans.

¹⁴ L. McKinstry, "Britain should be proud of its war record", *Daily Telegraph* (UK), January 31, 2018.

¹⁵ D. Frum, "Why Britain Left", *The Atlantic*, June 24, 2016.

¹⁶ J. Cogan, R. Keohane, "The Liberal Order is Rugged: Fix it Now or Watch It Wither", *Foreign Affairs*, May/June 2017, p. 44: "It is not bigotry to calibrate immigration levels to the ability of immigrants to assimilate and to society's ability to adjust".

In Poland and Hungary, by contrast, populists have very large majorities in parliament, repeatedly returned by voters. Indeed, critics complain that they are abusing their larger majorities to make changes in constitutional structures. They are not only more broadly based but more tied to long-term constituencies and institutions – most notably to Christian worship.

So it may well be that discussing all these political trends under the same rubric is a mistake. It may encourage mistaken associations, attributing to others what is only true of some. In what follows, therefore, I will concentrate on Trump, the case with which, as an American, I am most familiar and about which I have most fully formed opinions. I will then suggest some possible parallels – with caution.

As a candidate for the Republican nomination, Trump positioned himself as something new. He stressed issues – notably immigration control and protection from foreign trade – which were new to Republicans. So it was reasonable to think of him as an analogue to anti-EU populists in Europe, some of whom emphasized the same issues. Analysts afterwards attributed his victory to support from workers dispossessed by trade and immigration. But closer analyses raised doubts that Trump’s victory reflected economic dislocation.¹⁷

Several aspects of the Trump phenomenon remain notable. First, the reliance on confrontational, belligerent rhetoric. In the primary contests for the Republican nomination in the spring of 2016, Trump defied conventions of civility, mocking his rivals with sneering nick-names (“Low energy Jeb”, “Little Marco”, “Lyn’ Ted” etc). A regular feature of his election rallies in the fall of 2016 was the promise to put Hillary Clinton on trial for alleged crimes, with Trump beaming in approval as crowds chanted, “Lock her up!”. He repeatedly promised not just to stop illegal entry into the country (an entirely reasonable commitment) but to do so by building “a wall” across the border with Mexico (a dubious strategy) and then “make Mexico pay for it” (a preposterous promise – as if the blame for unlawful entry did not rest with American laxness but Mexico’s failure to keep its own people from leaving). Trump’s Inaugural Address in January of 2017 depicted America as a country devastated by past policies, as if it had been run by hostile foreign occupiers rather than the opposing party. As president, he has continued daily “tweets”, taunting rivals, critics, even fellow Republicans in Congress for their “sad” or “disgraceful” or “disloyal” resistance to his policies.

It is true, and important, that much of the Democratic Party has responded with rhetoric that is at least equally overheated. *The New Yorker*, one of the most widely read or widely cited American magazines, published an editorial comment

¹⁷ For review of conflicting evidence from economic surveys, concluding “survey research demonstrates that voters’ economic anxiety does not offer an adequate explanation of the 2016 elections”, see W.A. Galston, *Anti-Pluralism. The Populist Threat to Liberal Democracy*, foreword by J.D.Hunter and J.M. Owen IV, Yale, University Press, New Haven–London 2018, starting at pp. 76–77.

belaboring comparisons between Trump and the Roman emperor Nero – and pointedly noting that Nero’s crazed and chaotic reign was ended by assassination.¹⁸ It is also true and relevant that political polarization was already quite evident under his predecessors, Barack Obama and George W. Bush. Cooperation or coalition building in Congress became increasingly difficult and rare – no Republicans at all, for example, voted for Obama’s signature legislation, the Affordable Care Act. More and more localities became overwhelmingly dominated by one party or the other, as people moved to neighborhoods where most neighbors would share their views. Recent surveys find that, in contrast to earlier times, majorities or near majorities in each party say they feel “afraid” of the opposing party and would be “somewhat or very unhappy” if their children married someone from the other party.¹⁹

But Trump seems to take pride in provoking his critics and rivals and stoking rancor in public life. He complains about media coverage but constantly taunts the media as “fake” – a term he uses so broadly and regularly, it has now come to refer to a multitude of otherwise quite differing mistakes (from sloppiness to bias, from willful misrepresentation to outright invention of “stories”). He derides mainstream media as “enemies of the American people” and has called for changes in law to “make them accountable” for their coverage. He regularly leaves Washington for events in different parts of the country, including “rallies” which have the intensity and partisan edge of campaign events – long after the campaign was supposed to have ended.

The second notable thing about this constant stoking of belligerence and resentment is that it does not focus on any well-defined grievance or remedial policy. During the campaign, Trump denounced trade agreements in general and NAFTA in particular as having “drained” vast wealth and millions of jobs from the US economy. But he did not rush to repudiate American commitments to NAFTA or the WTO. His efforts to renegotiate NAFTA focused on issues (like protection for foreign investment) that seemed to have no direct connection with plant closings in the United States and he made no effort to clarify his views. In fact, he appointed White House economic advisers (notable successive appointments to serve as Chairman of the Council of Economic Advisers) known to disagree with his views on international trade.

So with foreign policy. Denunciation of the Bush administration’s invasion of Iraq in 2003 was a staple of Trump rhetoric in the campaign and seemed to inspire his slogan, “America First” on the theory that Bush administration policy was primarily aimed at benefitting foreigners. In office, Trump appointed Bush administration veterans to key foreign policy posts, most notably John Bolton

¹⁸ D. Remnick, “The Lost Emperor”, *The New Yorker*, January 15, 2018.

¹⁹ S. Levitsky, D. Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die*, Crown, New York 2018, pp. 167–168. Among “politically engaged” citizens, 70 per cent of Democrats and 62 per cent of Republicans say they “fear” the other party.

(Bush’s UN ambassador) as National Security Adviser. Trump authorized US troops to keep fighting in Afghanistan and other troops to fight ISIS in Syria and then to stay on to help stabilize the situation.

Perhaps most notable was the retreat on immigration policy. Though it had been a major theme of Trump’s campaign, it did not receive priority from the Trump White House. He did not lobby Congress to change immigration laws or even to appropriate money for the wall. The budget bill adopted in 2018 provided very little extra funding for border security, let alone for construction of a wall on the Mexican border. One of his most fervid defenders, columnist Ann Coulter, denounced the betrayal: “I knew he was a shallow, lazy ignoramus [in 2016]” but relied on “what he promised at every single campaign stop [...]. It kind of breaks my heart”.²⁰ In 2016, she had published a book called, *In Trump We Trust* (playing on the national motto, “In God we Trust”).

Meanwhile, Trump did not even bother to press his White House staff to gear up political appointments to major departments and agencies, where top posts are expected to be filled by the president’s choices. The idea that the Trump administration aimed at a marked change from the past implied that federal agencies needed new leadership loyal to Trump’s vision. Well into his second year, he was way behind his predecessors in installing new appointees at middle levels, even in the State Department and Defense Department – as if the details of policy implementation or policy analysis were not, after all, important compared to the daily drama of White House pronouncements.²¹

None of this, however, seemed to make much difference to Trump supporters. His public support, measured by polls, was down at the end of his first year but then rallied somewhat – on good news about the economy and seeming successes in foreign policy, as with initially promising negotiations over Korea’s nuclear program. Trump rallies remained enthusiastic.

Yet the voters who support Trump do not seem interested in a Trump party or political formation beyond the man himself. Attempts to supplant mainstream Republicans with self-proclaimed “Trump candidates” have repeatedly failed at the polls. The one exception proves the rule. In a special Senate race in Alabama in 2017, the most bellicose, Trump-sounding candidate, Roy Moore, won the Republican nomination (even after Trump endorsed the mainstream Republican alternative as a likelier winner). In the ensuing general election, Moore went down to defeat – in a state so reliably conservative it had not elected a Democrat in decades. Moore, who often sounded confused about current issues, had been charged with pursuing teenaged girls decades earlier, a charge he denied and which Trump brushed away on the grounds that “he denies it”. Trump was not

²⁰ L. Grove, “Heart-broken Trump Critic Ann Coulter”, *Daily Beast*, March 28, 2018.

²¹ J. Fund, “Trump is Running ‘Home Alone’ Administration”, *National Review*, March 25, 2018, <https://www.nationalreview.com/2018/03/trump-administration-staff-vacancies-leave-career-civil-servants-in-place/> [accessed: 2.06.2021].

seen as the leader of a movement or at least not one who would necessarily be followed everywhere by his supporters.

There are two obvious explanations for this odd pattern, which might both apply, since they are not mutually exclusive. The first is that Trump supporters feel that they have been dismissed or disrespected by the political mainstream in both parties. They think liberals look down on their conservative values and that Republican leaders, solicitous of donations from big corporations and financiers, take them for granted. Trump expresses their resentment. They don't mind that Trump has failed to follow through on different policies because their complaint was not about actual policy – the details of which they don't follow and don't have very definite opinions about – but about civic status.

Trump sounds like an angry working guy (perhaps after a few beers), not like a polished, genteel insider who frequent elegant wine-and-cheese gatherings. It doesn't matter that Trump surrounds himself with luxury (and used to be a regular at New York “society” fund-raising dinners and receptions), nor that he never drinks alcohol in any form. Trump presents himself as a typical sort of crude guy who dares to embrace crude opinions in public. People who are made to feel like outsiders for their crude opinions are drawn to Trump for voicing them (as in thinking unlawful immigrants should just be “kicked out” or countries that export more to America than we export to them out to be “hit with higher tariffs”).

The other explanation is that Trump may reflect not so much rage and deep resentment or a kind of boredom and disaffection with conventional party politics. Voters have come to distrust the promises of politicians and don't expect it will make much difference who gets elected. But Trump is fun. He is entertaining. Before he ran for president, he had been host of a successful TV game show in which he pretended to be a hard-nosed but brilliant businessman helping young people (or later, Hollywood celebrities) launch business careers or commercial ventures. He knows about timing, holding an audience, generating a sense of drama. And he performs all the time as president, starting with his often outrageous morning tweets, which regularly provoke a full day of huffing from people who see themselves as the guardians of propriety and respectability (“political correctness”) – making them perfect foils for Trump's naughtiness.

It is possible that Trump will prove a successful president, leaving a stronger economy and a more stable world. People who find his daily antics in bad taste might then be told they should (or should have) swallowed their qualms because the diverting or dismaying side shows were a small price to pay for so much good policy.

For several reasons, I doubt things will turn out that well. The first is that Trump has provoked and sustained a level of rancor in national politics – bordering at times on hysteria – which is not likely to subside just because objective measures of performance suggest Trump has done well. His main theme is that he is the victim – of a legal investigation that is a “witch hunt”, of “fake news”, of

the “deep state” and of “nasty people” who want to reverse the results of the 2016 elections. He stirs up his followers to believe that dark forces are in a conspiracy against democracy and so against them.

It is hard to imagine that Democrats will learn to live with Trump – or that Trump followers would accept impeachment or even electoral repudiation with calm good will. Commentators who take the most dire view (mostly on the left) point out that extreme polarization is one of the developments that precedes collapse of democratic systems (as in military coups or revolutionary take-overs).²² People so stirred up with rage and fear may readily conclude that thwarting their (domestic) enemies is more urgent than abiding by democratic process.

I think this is way too alarmist – Trump has not closed any media outlet, has not arrested any opponents, has not defied court orders, has not done any of the things that authoritarian regimes do to consolidate control. His main offenses have been rhetorical. But he does talk in very abusive ways – about journalists, about senators, even about judges. The American expression is “trash talk”. Even if neither he nor his followers take this to mean that democratic procedures no longer matter, his rhetoric devalues American institutions.

The premise of Trump’s campaign from the outset was that someone with no previous political experience of any kind – someone who had never held even appointive office in government – was a plausible candidate to be chief executive of the United States. Not one of his predecessors came to office with such a blank resume. Trump was not shy about presenting himself as a man of exceptional gifts, especially at “making deals”. But his main theme was that previous politicians had been so “stupid” and so corrupt, that none could be trusted.

It was Trump’s principal argument on trade. NAFTA was “the worst treaty in history” and America continues to import more than it exports due to “stupid politicians doing stupid things”.²³ That would include Ronald Reagan, George H.W. Bush, Bill Clinton and George W. Bush – were they all “so stupid”? The supporters of trade agreements over many decades have included leaders of both political parties. They could have made mistakes on some details, they could have overlooked some very important countervailing concerns – but stupid and corrupt, all of them, all the time?

Trump rhetoric plays to the conceit that the first impulse of the ordinary, uninformed voter is more likely to be right than the long-running judgment of the overwhelming majority of specialists (here, trade economists) and political actors (members of Congress and executive officials with trade responsibilities). It’s not impossible that this could be true, but it’s characteristic that Trump has never bothered to set out his account of why so many economists have the wrong understanding and has never bothered to explain why this should be

²² The theme of Levitsky and Ziblatt, *op. cit.*, pp. 72–117, citing examples from Latin America and eastern Europe.

²³ Speech in Pittsburgh, March 10, 2018.

true in this area – or whether it is also true across a broad range of government policies.

If out-of-control inflation were devouring the savings of ordinary Americans, if a huge proportion of the American workforce were unemployed, if crime were soaring in American cities or American soldiers dying in vast numbers in hopeless foreign wars – if there were such undeniable failures, it would make sense for a protest movement to say, “This is unacceptable!”. But none of those things is true. So the premise of the Trump candidacy and presidency is that somehow the existing political institutions and political figures cannot be trusted, because the American political system routinely puts incompetent fools and knaves into positions of trust.

One can’t say this must be false or could never be true. But a lot of voters seem quite open to the idea that is already true, without expressing the level of panic this conclusion would imply. Trump retains support (according to polls) from almost half the electorate. People who think the problems are severe enough for Trump to be the answer do not think the problems are severe enough to riot in the streets, to fire-bomb banks or foreign car dealerships, or even to stage large outdoor rallies (when not convened to see Trump himself).

So maybe it is not serious. A British commentator makes the point about the rhetoric of the extreme left in Britain – now in control of the Labour Party: “It’s not about ideology; it’s about drama and feeling. [...] like most of today’s sectarian movements, it prioritises entertainment over ideology. [...] The 21st Century is full of [...] showmen passing off old tricks as original thinking. They get away with it because there’s no appetite for sustained political argument. What we want is a dopamine hit”.²⁴

Perhaps Trump’s antics are mostly appreciated in this spirit – as entertainment. But that is in itself dismaying – the background thought that politics can be left to slightly buffoonish showmen, who keep us entertained or at least distracted every day. Inevitably, there will come a time when economic conditions are more difficult and there are serious setbacks in foreign policy. America may face an epidemic disease or some terrible technology failure that generates mass casualties. A country that has been taught to regard its institutions as dysfunctional and its leaders as “stupid” or “corrupt” may not have an easy time keeping its balance.

How could it happen, after all, that the government continually defies obvious requirements of the situation to do something completely at odds with the real needs or interests of the country? For some people, this line of questioning has an inescapable answer: a conspiracy – of government officials (in the “deep state”) or “the political establishment” or investment bankers or more shady powers in the background. For some, inevitably, the conspiracy turns on Jews. I think that is a small fraction even of conspiracy theorists but the Internet helps them find each

²⁴ D. Thompson, “Momentum isn’t hard left. It’s a theatrical cult”, *The Spectator* (UK), January 26, 2018.

other. It seems to me absurd to suspect Trump himself of secret anti-Semitism (among other things, he spent his entire life in New York City, doing real estate deals with Jewish investors, lawyers, accountants and none have indicated his ever voicing hostile opinions).

But one can't say the same about Trump and other conspiracy theories – which he seems to enjoy trading in. Among other things, he repeatedly warned that the primary elections and then the general election might be “rigged” – as if officials and procedures in dozens of states could be coordinated to the same effect by the same small group of conspirators without any of this coming to light. Conspiracy theories may be appealing, even entertaining (hence the wide readership of publications hinting that news of space aliens has been suppressed by government authorities). But conspiracy theories undermine confidence in constitutional government: they imply that the visible, law-bound, accountable structures are only a charade to cover the real forces that determine outcomes – in secret.

Political scientists distinguish parties that advocate for (or against) particular government policies from parties that demand revolutionary change in the entire political system – so-called anti-system parties.²⁵ There is no Trump political party in the United States and there is ongoing dispute about whether Trump is training Republicans in Congress to follow his lead or congressional Republicans are implementing their own agenda by invoking Trump's name.²⁶ But Trump himself is, in many ways, an anti-system politician or at least he often talks that way.

Is this a uniquely American phenomenon? Obviously it is unique to the extent that it turns on a separately elected chief executive. No European prime minister could take office without a reliable majority (or coalition) in Parliament and no one becomes party leader without any previous political experience. So Poland and Hungary are different.

What is probably similar, even in Central Europe (so far as one can judge from a distance), is the polarization and rancor between the governing parties and the opposition, with much of the news media aligning with the opposition. As in America, it may be that critics on the left are as much (or more) to blame, for refusing to accept election results, than the governments charged with “authoritarian” leanings. I am struck by this similarity: the governments seem to relish enraging opponents or at least, relish stirring up their own supporters to a high pitch of intense disdain for the opposition. The Orbán campaign against George Soros looks like the sort of thing that was designed to enrage opponents and energize

²⁵ For critical review of literature, G. Capoccia, “Anti-system parties: A Conceptual Reassessment”, *Journal of Theoretical Politics* 2002, Vol. 14, Issue 1, pp. 9–35, <https://doi.org/10.1177/095169280201400103>.

²⁶ For a particularly cogent statement of the latter view: B. Shapiro, “Conservative Policy, Populist Attitude”, *National Review*, December 27, 2017, <https://www.nationalreview.com/2017/12/2017-conservative-policy-trump-nationalism-populism-attitude/> [accessed: 2.06.2021].

supporters just for that reason – that it sets up a conflict between the high-minded or liberal-minded and the national-minded. The Polish law criminalizing expression of opinions about Polish complicity in the Holocaust seems to have a similar character. The aim seems to be not merely to win elections and change concrete policies but to discredit opposing views or at least shift the cultural center of gravity a substantial distance from those views.

Conclusion

I can sum up the argument – or at least, the perceptions or impressions – of this account in a few concise claims. Sovereignty is a device for ordering the political world. Sovereignty is to states what rights are to individuals, a way of delineating boundaries of control. Nationalism, at least in its better forms, can provide emotional, even spiritual support for political order. A healthy nationalism is what family ties or spiritual creeds are to individuals, inspiring and guiding sound choices about how to exercise rights. Populism seems to be an expression of frustration, which can easily be stoked into rage – where it becomes a threat to a healthy nationalism and even a stable sovereignty.

In some circumstances, populist passion might be an understandable, even effective protest against failing government policies and the smugness of governing circles (and their supporters) who would otherwise be blind to their own failings. But that sort of populism is unlikely to yield good results unless it has a relatively clear focus, so it could be satisfied with relatively concrete and quick responses. If populism merely builds on a generalized resentment at being disrespected, it does not point toward reforms. If it merely expresses rage, it invites demagogues to fill in the content – almost at random. Any policy might serve so long as it hits the targets of populist rage.

We have seen this for decades in leftwing advocacy, which claims to speak for various constituencies of “oppressed” people – racial minorities, unskilled workers, women, more recently homosexuals or transgendered people. The underlying appeal of such protests seems to reduce to a solipsistic syllogism: we are hurt, therefore we are angry – therefore you must give in to our demands. Otherwise, we will continue to disrupt your society: “No justice, no peace”. In the original Marxist doctrine, there was an elaborate historical and philosophic argument to demonstrate that the working class was the genuinely “universal class”, so the triumph of its interests would lead humanity to a classless utopia. It has been decades since leftwing advocates bothered with any of that. It is enough now that protestors are battering against an unjust society and that they are, right now, hurt and angry.

At its worst, what is called populism seems to be an appropriation of leftwing protest politics on behalf of a contrary constituency, a constituency that

sees itself as the dispossessed majority. It is hurt, therefore angry, therefore entitled, But the focus shifts from immigration to trade deals to drug companies to investment bankers and always back to some amorphous, all-encompassing “establishment” which stands against the happiness of the many. I am doubtful that this mood can be channeled into concrete reform policies, much less that these policies, when implemented, will give satisfaction.

In the meantime, populism seems to exacerbate social division, which generates a cloud of suspicion that overs over government and existing constitutional norms – which after all, failed to constrain the establishment. It is hard to sustain national pride when the nation seems so divided and its institutions so challenged. Trump’s slogan, “Make America Great Again”, implies that America has now fallen off quite considerably from what once made it great.

I would like to say that nationalism appeals to pride and populism to resentment. Of course, that is somewhat too simple. The nationalist is bound to feel affronted – and then resentful – when others disdain the honor of his country. Even in the heyday of the 18th century Enlightenment, affronts to national honor were regarded as justification for war: pride could be belligerent. Today, when elites are committed to supranational institutions, national pride may be inextricably entangled with resentment at disdainful treatment.

Still, it should be possible to defend national interests without extremely belligerent rhetoric or contemptuous gestures. It should be possible to acknowledge and pursue policies favored by the majority (as on immigration controls) with calm and reasonable arguments. At least, I hope political change can be driven by such argument. I hope so, first, because I think many of the policies which Trump voters seem to favor can be well defended by calm argument. Second, I put my hopes in argument because I fear that people who are stirred up by angry or extreme rhetoric will be too easily led from defensible policies to destructive lashing out. That is the danger of demagogic politics. It thrives on confrontation and becomes more focused on battling enemies than accumulating actual achievements.

The Founders of the American Constitution defended the importance of checks on popular leaders: “Enlightened statesmen will not always be at the helm”.²⁷ It is surely an understatement to say that Trump is not “enlightened” in the aims and methods of statesmanship. It seems unlikely to me that Trump’s angry, impulsive leadership style will be adequate to “make America great” amidst the challenges of our time. Populism of this kind does not seem to be a good strategy for national renovation. It may be a sign of deep problems (or bad alternatives) that so many Americans preferred someone like Trump. Perhaps it was

²⁷ *The Federalist*, No. 10: *The Same Subject Continued: The Union as a Safeguard Against Domestic Faction and Insurrection*, [in:] A. Hamilton, J. Madison, J. Jay, *op. cit.*, p. 75.

a desperate recourse. But adopting a desperate recourse is an act of desperation because it does entail great risks.

My hope is that Americans and Europeans will grow tired of politics at fever pitch and then find they can agree on a great many compromise policies. I have no good argument for why this should be expected. But I think patience is not often the riskiest stance. It is, at any rate, quite consistent with respect for sovereign institutions and sentiments of national pride.

References

- Blackstone W., *Commentaries on the Laws of England: a facsimile of the first edition of 1765–1769*, Vol. I: *Of the rights of persons (1765)*, introd. by S.N. Katz, University of Chicago Press, Chicago–London 1979.
- Bodin J., *Les Six Livres de la République* [reprint], Fayard, Paris 1986.
- Capoccia G., “Anti-system parties: A Conceptual Reassessment”, *Journal of Theoretical Politics* 2002, Vol. 14, Issue 1, pp. 9–35, <https://doi.org/10.1177/095169280201400103>.
- Cogan J.D., Keohane R., “The Liberal Order is Rigged: Fix it Now or Watch It Wither”, *Foreign Affairs*, May/June 2017, pp. 36–44.
- Frank T.A., “Welcome to the Golden Age of Conservative Magazines”, *Washington Post*, January 28, 2018.
- Frum D., “Why Britain Left”, *The Atlantic*, June 24, 2016.
- Fund J., “Trump is Running ‘Home Alone’ Administration”, *National Review*, March 25, 2018, <https://www.nationalreview.com/2018/03/trump-administration-staff-vacancies-leave-career-civil-servants-in-place/> [accessed: 2.06.2021].
- Galston W.A., *Anti-Pluralism. The Populist Threat to Liberal Democracy*, foreword by J.D. Hunter and J.M. Owen IV, Yale University Press, New Haven–London 2018.
- Grove L., “Heart-broken Trump Critic Ann Coulter”, *Daily Beast*, March 28, 2018.
- Hannan D., “Insects of the Hour,” [in:] *Vox Populi: The Perils And Promises Of Populism*, ed. R. Kimball, Encounter, New York–London 2017, pp. 43–56.
- Island of Palmas Case (Netherlands v. U.S., 1928), Scott, Hague Court Reports, 2d 83 (1932).
- Levitsky S., Ziblatt D., *How Democracies Die*, Crown, New York 2018.
- Locke J., *Second Treatise of Government*, 1689.
- McKinstry L., “Britain should be proud of its war record”, *Daily Telegraph* (UK), January 31, 2018.
- Mill J.S., *Considerations on Representative Government* (1861), [in:] J.S. Mill, *Utilitarianism, On Liberty and Considerations on Representative Government*, ed. G. Williams Everyman, London 1993.
- Reese-Mogg J., “Failed Brexit would be biggest humiliation since Suez Crisis”, *Sunday Telegraph* (UK), March 26, 2018.
- Remarks by President Trump to the 72nd Session of the United Nations General Assembly, September 19, 2017, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-72nd-session-united-nations-general-assembly/> [accessed: 20.08.2017].

- Remnick D., “The Lost Emperor”, *The New Yorker*, January 15, 2018.
- Select Works of Edmund Burke*, Vol. II: *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, compiled and with a foreword and notes by F. Canavan, Liberty Fund, Indianapolis 1999.
- Shapiro B., “Conservative Policy, Populist Attitude”, *National Review*, December 27, 2017, <https://www.nationalreview.com/2017/12/2017-conservative-policy-trump-nationalism-populism-attitude/> [accessed: 2.06.2021].
- “The Blood Libel On Arab TV: Reports On Jews Using Christian Children’s Blood For Passover Matzos – From The MEMRI TV Archives”, *MEMRI*, April 3, 2015, <https://www.memri.org/reports/blood-libel-arab-tv-reports-jews-using-christian-childrens-blood-passover-matzos---memri-tv> [accessed: 2.06.2021].
- The Federalist*, No. 2. *Concerning Dangers from Foreign Force and Influence*, [in:] A. Hamilton, J. Madison, J. Jay, *The Federalist Papers*, ed. C. Rossiter, introduction and notes by Ch.R. Kesler, Signet Classics, New York 2003, pp. 31–35.
- The Federalist*, No. 10: *The Same Subject Continued: The Union as a Safeguard Against Domestic Faction and Insurrection*, [in:] A. Hamilton, J. Madison, J. Jay, *The Federalist Papers*, ed. C. Rossiter, introduction and notes by Ch.R. Kesler, Signet Classics, New York 2003, pp. 71–78.
- Thompson D., “Momentum isn’t hard left. It’s a theatrical cult”, *The Spectator* (UK), January 26, 2018.

Sovereignty, Nationalism, Populism

Nationalists do not identify themselves with one particular political system, but they aim to create and sustain sovereign nation states. There is no doubt that European Union poses a threat to the sovereignty in a traditional sense due to the transfer of executive authority from the national parliaments to the amorphous supranational structure. It should be noted that United States have never acceded any organization with independent legislative power. Moreover, advocating the nation states does not have to go together with nationalism, while the latter not always occurs combined with the variously defined populism.

Populism can put on different forms. In Poland and Hungary populists have majorities in respective parliaments and are strongly affiliated with traditional institutions. Donald Trump gained support thanks to the creation of an image of an angry ‘ordinary fellow’, which citizens disdained by the elites could relate to. He was also attracting interest, because he ignored the rules of political correctness. But Trump’s rhetoric devaluates the most crucial institutions of the American political system. Furthermore, both Trump and his supporters gravitate towards conspiracy theories and the primacy of common-sense attitude, denying the value of expert’s opinions. Similar phenomena are taking place in Europe. Although there is no one consistent definition of ‘populism’, one could say that populism is a symptom of frustration melting into anger that is a threat to the wholesome nationalism and enduring sovereignty. It does not constitute a reform programme, and the ideological void is filled by demagogues, however posing as guardians protecting the “disinherited majority” from the amorphous “establishment”.

Key words: United States, Donald Trump, populism, sovereignty, nationalism

Suwerenność, nacjonalizm, populizm

Nacjonaści nie identyfikują się z jednym ustrojem, jednak dążą do tworzenia i utrzymania suwerennych państw narodowych. Nie budzi wątpliwości, że Unia Europejska jest zagrożeniem dla tradycyjnie rozumianej suwerenności ze względu na transfer władzy ustawodawczej z parlamentów krajowych do amorficznej struktury ponadnarodowej. Zwraca uwagę, że USA nigdy nie przystąpiły do organizacji dysponującej niezależną władzą prawodawczą. Ponadto obrona państw narodowych nie musi być powiązana z nacjonalizmem, ten zaś nie występuje zawsze obok tak czy inaczej definiowanego populizmu.

Populizm przybiera różne formy. W Polsce i na Węgrzech populiści mają większość w parlamentach i są mocno związani z tradycyjnymi instytucjami. Donald Trump miał poparcie dzięki kreacji wizerunku rozgniewanego „prostego chłopca”, z którym utożsamiali się lekceważeni przez elity obywatele. Był też interesujący dzięki ignorowaniu reguł politycznej poprawności. Jednakże retoryka Trumpa dewaluuje najważniejsze instytucje ustroju USA. Ponadto zarówno on sam, jak i jego zwolennicy skłaniają się ku teoriom spiskowym oraz prymatowi postawy zdroworozsądkowej, negującej wartość ekspertyz. Podobne zjawiska zachodzą w Europie. Choć brak jednolitej definicji, można powiedzieć, że populizm to przejaw frustracji przechodzącej w gniew, zagrażający zdrowemu nacjonalizmowi i stabilnej suwerenności. Nie tworzy on programu reform, a próżnię ideową zajmują demagodzy, kreujący się jednak na obrońców „wydziedziczonej większości” przed amorficznym „establishmentem”.

Słowa kluczowe: Stany Zjednoczone, Donald Trump, populizm, suwerenność, nacjonalizm

