

History of populism and its sudden rise after donald trump's election victory

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Introduction

With Donald J. Trump winning the 2016 presidential election in the United States and doing so through a strikingly provocative campaign, it was apparent that many Americans were unsatisfied with the liberal democratic structure of US politics. There was a sense of a growing distrust towards the elites and many had the feeling of being unrepresented – the zeitgeist was ideal to take a populist approach to reach the masses during the election. An approach focused on less talking and more doing – but most importantly returning the power to the people. But what factors influenced this shift in political appeal? This essay will examine the question; To what extent has automation contributed to the rise of populism in the United States (2013-2016)?

In response to this question, it is crucial to be aware of the fact that any political trend can be explained due to several factors which can be both economic or social. Economic factors in the recent rise of populism are rooted in the transformation of the workforce in post-industrial times and the increased number of jobs lost due to automation but also globalization. The wealth gap keeps expanding in many western democracies and therefore many seek to find a politician who is different from what has been seen – someone uncorrupt who will be able to represent the people who've been neglected.

The History of Populism

People power or “populism” initially grew as a response to the flaws which the industrial revolution had created in the late 1800’s. Whilst the North became home of the elites, being run by the Republican party which was focused on the expansion of business and railroads, the late 1900’s saw many isolated and poor farmers in the primarily state rights and democratic centered South. Henceforth, many farmers came together and relied on co-operation between themselves in order to overcome the isolation of the south, as seen for example through the Grange alliance. Due to the federal government’s clear favourisation of industry over agriculture, the monopolistic pricing of the railroads was the Grange alliance’s primary target, as the tariffs placed on the transportation of goods for example, were too high for the farmers.

In 1891 the people party was founded through a marriage of reform minded people in the city (urban populists) and the farmers in the south (farmer populists) whose goal it was to ensure the public ownership of utilities that serve the public good, such as transport, as well as a currency reform. The presidential election in 1892 saw populist candidate James Weaver receive 8% of the vote, leading to the populists first receiving nationwide recognition. The campaign was mainly focused around devaluing international markets, under the cover of an industrial future replacing America’s agricultural traditions, being in the interest of Eastern financial institutions. For this reason, populist support grew tremendously during the economic recession in the following year, as the farmers’ exploitation by the elites became increasingly relatable to non-agricultural workers.

Due to the fact that the US had recently adopted the gold standard, meaning the dollar was directly linked to the price of gold, investment was encouraged and the currency stabilized, ultimately leading to deflation. With this in mind, it made sense for the populists to nominate democrat William Jennings Bryan as their presidential candidate during the 1896 election. Bryan's famous "Cross of Gold" speech held on July 9th of that year, endorsed the free coinage of silver, which would have increased the amount of money in circulation and aided the farmers.

What is Populism Today?

Populism is a political approach which is neither completely right or left but can be adopted anywhere and by anyone on the political spectrum. In spite of the fact that populism is such a versatile approach, there remain some common themes which are found in all populist campaigns, the most significant of which being the focus on the ordinary people and valuing them over the corrupt elites. Generally, there is a sense of distrust towards these elites, whether this be elected politicians, big banks, multinational corporation or just the rich. It is through this idea of separation and "them" stealing from "us", that populist movements are able to create a sense of unity and often increase the amount of nativism amongst the people. Moreover, populist movements tend to value the importance of direct representation due to the strong belief in the voice of the people through means such as opinion polls. In addition, many politicians authenticate their populist movements by being the complete opposite of the "average politician" and presenting a mindset of "Less talk, more action". In fact,

many would argue that the populism approach is predominantly adopted by male politicians which carry this “strong man” attitude.

Trump as a Populist

Taking these common themes as a guide, it is evident how Donald Trump can be seen as a prime example of a populist. The provocative slogan; “We’re going to build a wall!”, with which Trump appealed to his target audience, is very clearly focused around creating this “strong man” image which is typical for populist leaders. In addition, Trump’s campaign undoubtedly raised the level of anti-immigrant nativism amongst Americans, by making use of the nationalistic slogan “Make America Great Again!”. Most notably, however, Trump can be identified as a populist due to the fact that his behavior and approach taken during the election was quite atypical of politicians. Furthermore, the anti-establishment mindset which was presented to his audience during the election by referring to Hillary Clinton as “Crooked Hillary”, is yet another trait which identifies Trump as a populist. The image of being a self made blue-collar billionaire with a disconnect to D. C politics played a crucial role to present himself as the self-made blue-collar billionaire who understands and empathizes with the American people, who with him now finally found a relatable figure in politics.

What made Trump’s Approach so Effective?

Economic Inequalities

The American Dream – An equal opportunity being available to all Americans to achieve their aspirations and goals. This concept has become increasingly distant for millennials born in the 1980s, who only have a 50% likelihood of earning more money than their parents, according to the Equality of Opportunity Project, as seen in the image below.

There are multiple factors which play a role in this decrease of equal opportunity, with the core three being globalization, automation and government. These income inequalities make average citizens increasingly susceptible to the populism approach in politics. As Lipset and Bell once argued: “ Extremist movements have much in common. They appeal to the disgruntled and psychologically homeless, to the personal failures, the socially isolated, the economically insecure, the uneducated, unsophisticated, and the authoritarian persons.”

Loss of Jobs

Automation

Due to Trump’s scapegoating of Mexico and China as being the main reason for job losses, automation was not often mentioned during the 2016 presidential election. Wrongfully so, because according to a Ball State University study, the decade between 2000-2010 saw the largest decline in manufacturing jobs in American history. However, productivity (which is measured by the average product of labor, or the value of all goods manufactured in the U. S., divided by the number of workers) has increased significantly during this time period as well. In fact, the Ball State University

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study states; “ Had we kept 2000-levels of productivity and applied them to 2010-levels of production, we would have required 20. 9 million manufacturing workers. Instead, we employed only 12. 1 million”. Such statistics create a lot frustrations amongst the average American citizen, who now not only needs to worry about globalization and other countries eliminating job opportunities but also technological advances.

What jobs are threatened?

In a study published in 2013, called “ How Susceptible Are Jobs To Computerisation?”, Carl Benedikt Frey and Michael Osborne examined the probability of computerisation for 702 occupations and found that 47% of workers in America had jobs at high risk of potential automation. The Economist states that subsequent studies found this figure to be at 35% in Great Britain and 49% for Japan. The reason for this variation in susceptibility is due to the number of jobs in a country which are creative and therefore less less susceptible to automation and the number of routine work – hence more susceptible to automation. With that being said, the non-routine workforce can be split into 2 different groups; on one hand there the highly paid skilled workers, such as architects or senior managers, whilst on the other hand there are low-paid unskilled workers, such as cleaners and burger flippers. Robotics being able to replace manual facturing jobs is nothing new and has been a trend ever since the 20th century. In fact, in 1960, John F. Kennedy stated that the major domestic challenge of that decade would be to “ maintain full employment at a time when automation... is replacing men”.

With the development of deep learning and the ability to apply it in the field of medicine, even highly skilled workers, such as radiologists, are now seeing their position being threatened by automation. The startup company Enlitic for example does just that, their focus being on the analysis of X-Rays and CT scans. Internal tests, in which the system was tested against a panel of three expert radiologists, have shown that the system was 50% more accurate when it came to determining the malignancy of tumors detected in chest CT scans. In addition to being more accurate, Enlitic's technology can work up 10'000 times faster than the average radiologist.

With that being said, figures published by the Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis have shown a steady increase of employment in non-routine cognitive and non-routine manual jobs since the 1980s. In comparison, employment in routine jobs has for the most part remained flat and with automation continuing to develop, this trend is likely to continue.

The western social contract is being threatened by these technological advances, as profit driven multinational corporations are becoming more powerful than states and increasingly employ a larger number of machines instead of people in order to increase their productivity. Due to this, many fear that the government won't be able to provide adequate number of jobs, creating a useless society and dramatically increasing the gap between the wealthy and poor. It is this fear which populist campaigns, including Donald Trump, look to exploit.

Silicon Valley Innovations

This growing income inequality has made silicon valley the target for many populists, as the average American citizen feels a sense of disconnect towards these tech giants and innovators. Wall Street analyst Michael Hartnett compared the market capitalization of some of the largest tech companies and compared them to the gross domestic product of major American cities. His findings showed that both Apple and Google are worth more than America's third largest city Chicago, which had a GDP valued at \$581 billion in 2016 whilst Apple had a market cap of \$800 billion and Google valued at \$654 billion. These numbers show that there is an extreme disconnect between the wealth acquired in Silicon Valley and the rest of the US.

In addition, the Silicon Valley startup Otto, which produces self driving trucks, was bought by Uber in 2016 for 618 million dollars and could save the truck industry billions of dollars every year while reducing emissions by $\frac{1}{3}$, as the economist reports. When the use of autonomous vehicles peaks, there could be potentially job losses at a rate of 25'000 a month or 300'000 a year, according to a report from Goldman Sachs Economics Research. Truck driving has played a large role in American history and for middle class citizens it is part of the American culture. Frustrations about these developments are also clear to those contributing to it, as Russell Hancock (President and CEO, Joint Venture Silicon Valley) states; " Silicon Valley companies used to be heroes now they're being cast as villains".

This comes to show that for too many people in the United States, progress is something which happens to other people rather than themselves and the

fact that wealth does not spread on its own. Donald Trump effectively exploited this “them” and “us” separation which he recognized as being part of the zeitgeist in order to appeal to his audience. In comparison, the traditional left seemed to be convinced of the idea that market forces would be able to lead to great prosperity and ultimately help the poorest be better off as well. This wishful thinking simply wasn’t as convincing as concrete political proposals aiming towards a better future for all.

Adaptation

So do all Americans need to start worrying about their livelihood being taken away by the advancement in technology? According to many historians and economists, such as James Bessen, an economist at the Boston School of Law, the Industrial Revolution in the 18th century is historical evidence which suggests these worries are being blown out of proportion. During the industrial revolution an increasingly large number of tasks, like today, were automated, forcing workers to focus on tasks only humans could do, such as operating and tending a machine. So in many cases, technology changed the nature of a certain job and the skills required to do it, rather than eliminating the entire job.

Therefore, societal changes are required in order to adapt to this increasingly serious threat. There are already many who advocate for coding to play a much larger role at school in order to prepare citizens for a changing workforce. Again however, social inequalities play a large role in determining how big of a chance citizens have of receiving a higher education diploma. According to the Chronicle of Higher Education, Trump

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won the vote of 67% white voters without a college degree, as it these citizens who are most likely to become part of the manufacturing workforce.

Globalization

Ever since international trade has become possible, emerging economies and Low Income Countries (LICs) have been developing through a focus on cheap manufacturing labor. Goods which used to be produced by Americans are now often produced more cheaply in various other regions, such as China and then shipped to the US. This trend has decreased job opportunities for middle income citizens, according to economist Garry Burtless. As a large number of people feel threatened by these developments, they seek to find a strong leader who will protect them from these outside dangers which are affecting their chances of achieving the American Dream.

In addition, it has increased the level of interdependence experienced between the US and other nations, which in turn decreases the US's sovereignty. It is the idea of being reliant on other nations which has increased the xenophobic and nationalistic appeal amongst Americans, in addition to supporting protectionist policies such as trade barriers or tariffs. The slogan " Make America Great Again" speaks volumes about what audience Trump's populist campaign was targeted at. In comparison, Obama's quite liberal and open-hearted embrace of globalization was not creating a sense of security amongst the underprivileged and unemployed people in the US but much rather the feeling of being overlooked and mistreated.

Cultural Factors

Generational Differences

Along with the economic inequalities which propelled the populist movement in the United States, there are several cultural factors which could have contributed to this phenomenon. For the most part, the older generation as well as the less educated citizens may feel as if their country is no longer what it used to be due to a shift in values. With the younger generation starting to replace the older generation, Ronald Inglehart argued; “ A transformation may be taking place in the political culture of advanced industrial societies. This transformation seems to be altering the basic value priorities of given generations as a result of changing conditions influencing their basic socialization.”. This change in values from one generation to the next, largely has to do with the difference in the way children grew up after the war and became increasingly post-materialist.

The cultural shift can be directly linked to the growing support for progressive and humanistic values as well as the rise of Green parties. For this reason, the post-materialist generation brought new topics into politics, with an increased focus on LGBT rights, environmental protection as well as racial and gender inequality. As an illustration of this development, the World Values Survey indicates that western societies have become increasingly post-materialist, with an ever growing focus on several social issues, especially amongst the well-educated middle class. Forthwith this change, an increased amount of frustration and resentment has risen amongst the traditionalists and older generation who grew up in much less secure

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environments during the inter-war decades. In contrast, the higher quality of life and increased existential security with which new generations are growing up, has lead to an increased amount of open-mindedness and social tolerance. Furthermore, gender roles are a prime example of traditionalist values fading over time, as today progressive feminist movements have pushed for interchangeable gender roles at home or in the workplace. Therefore, the traditional values which are mostly held by the older generation and less educated sectors have been fading over time, as the new post-materialist generations have changed American culture significantly. For many this meant Trump was the ideal candidate, as he appealed with his nationalistic approach, which for many of the older generation meant he would bring not only jobs back, but also the traditional American culture.

Conclusion

All things considered, the populist approach has been effective due to several factors, both economic as well as social. With technology continuing to develop at an exponential rate, the matter of job loss due to automation is not just an issue of today, but it will become an even more significant concern in the future, especially if government is unable to set regulations ensuring the protection of everybody's livelihoods. It is due to this concern that in recent years, minimum income has become a topic of discussion in many western democracies. Another key point which must be considered, is the negative impact which an interconnected world can bring with it. Citizens can start to feel threatened by outside powers which are continually

becoming more developed and are able to take on an increased amount of jobs. Nonetheless, populism continues to be a quite emotionally driven style of politics, and as long as the feelings of anger, resentment and fear are present within large parts of the United States, this political approach will continue to evoke an emotional response from many. On balance, automation has heavily contributed to the initiation of these emotions and therefore played a direct role in the rise of populism in the United States and creating a zeitgeist which made it possible for candidate Donald Trump to win the presidential election in 2016.