

Populism's Challenges to Political Parties and Democracy - Taking the United States as an Example

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Abstract. In recent years, with the rise of populism around the world, the traditional party system and democratic system have encountered very serious challenges. This article mainly takes the United States as an example to explore in depth how populism affects American political parties and democratic governance. First, the development history of populism in the United States since the 20th century is analyzed and introduced, focusing on the impact of Trumpism in American politics. Secondly, it mainly explores the impact of populism on the internal structure and policy orientation of the two major political parties, the Republican Party and the Democratic Party, and deeply explores the role of populism in splitting party unity and reshaping party ideology. In addition, it also focuses on the role of populism in democracy from both positive and negative aspects. Finally, this article examines the challenges of American populism to the development of American democratic systems and political parties, including challenges to the electoral process, judicial independence, media freedom and public trust. This article believes that strengthening civic education and promoting party reform can better cope with the impact of populism and enable the healthy development of the democratic system.

Keywords: Populism; democracy; party system.

1. Introduction

1.1. Research Background

Populism has a very important position in the history of American politics, and populism has always influenced the development of American politics. With the end of the 2016 US presidential election, the Republican Party represented by Trump has a very strong populist nature. Trump has gained the support of a large number of Americans through a series of anti-feudal and anti-mainstream elite means, and he was successfully elected as the US president. In fact, since the successful rise of the Obama administration in 2009, populism has become one of the indispensable and important components of modern American politics.

From the perspective of American history, populism was first seen in the anti-federalism movement formed by opposing the Constitution at the Constitutional Convention held in Philadelphia in 1787. The advent of Jacksonian democracy in the 1820s and 1830s is often described as a wave of populism [1]. Roosevelt's New Deal after the Great Depression, the Ku Klux Klan movement in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Ross Perot in the 1990s, the "Occupy Wall Street" movement and the Tea Party movement that emerged after the 2008 financial crisis all have a strong populist color. It can be seen that populism emerged and became active during periods of economic crisis and cultural conflict, and most of the supporters of populism are middle- and lower-class white people in the United States.

This article believes that American politics has long been deeply influenced by populism, and the pursuit of democracy by the American masses has enabled populist parties to continuously improve their status in American society. Such a trend is likely to have a profound impact on the future democratic system of the United States.

This article explores the historical traditions and core characteristics of American populism, sorts out the current situation of American populism, and analyzes the impact of populism on American political parties and democratic development. It attempts to answer the following questions: What are the main trends in the development of American populism in recent years? What impact does

populism have on the political propositions of American political parties? How is the American democratic system affected by democracy?

1.2. Research Objectives

American populism has a profound impact on the development of American political parties. It makes the struggle between American political parties more complicated and full of struggle, and also makes the future development of democracy in the United States full of uncertainty. This article endeavors to provide a novel perspective on American populism. It does so by employing its historical origins, developmental characteristics, legal frameworks, and the genuine impact of the Trump era. Additionally, it explores other pertinent cases and theories. The analysis focuses on the influence of populism on political parties and democracy in the United States, within the framework of political science. The aim is to gain a deeper understanding of the current state of American populism and potential vulnerabilities in the American democratic system. At the same time, it provides theoretical support for the challenges that populism may bring in the future.

In terms of practical significance, in-depth research on the impact of American populism on politics is conducive to further analyzing the direction of future democratic system development and the challenges that political parties may face in the future. Sorting out the development process of American populism from a historical perspective is conducive to a rational understanding of the domestic political trends and the appearance of American society in the United States, and better seeking the relationship between the democratic system and political parties.

2. The History of American Populism

2.1. Populism in 20th Century America

At the end of the 19th century, the American agricultural society faced huge challenges. The People's Party, which represented the interests of farmers, rose to prominence. In order to cope with the monopoly of large enterprises and banks, it mainly began to implement policies such as the silver standard, low-interest loans, and direct elections of members of parliament. Then, around 1929, the US stock market crash led to the Great Depression. The unemployment rate in the United States soared rapidly. At the same time, populists called on the government to tax financial institutions and the rich and demanded that the government expand its intervention in the economy. President Franklin Roosevelt implemented the "New Deal" and Huey Long launched the "Share the Wealth" movement in Louisiana. The two were committed to minimizing the damage caused by the "Great Depression" to economic growth, employment and social welfare at the national and state levels, and quickly healing the adverse effects of economic and social inequality [2].

After World War II, the US economic development was in a relatively prosperous stage. During this period, American populism was relatively calm, and populists focused on issues such as ethnicity, gender, and faith. The aftermath of the anti-communist and xenophobic movements triggered by McCarthyism had not yet subsided, and the black civil rights movement was surging. Radical groups seeking equal rights, such as the Black Panther Party, were extremely active. Some white southerners were opposed to the Civil Rights Act and racial integration, and the populism of the "Southern Strategy" represented by George Wallace emerged [2].

The economic stagflation and oil crisis in the United States in the 1970s led to a serious crisis of trust, and the public became seriously dissatisfied with the government. Ronald Reagan attracted a considerable number of middle- and lower-class white supporters by emphasizing concepts such as small government, free markets, and traditional values.

In the 20th century, American populism mainly experienced various changes from the early agricultural and progressive movements to the New Deal reforms during the Great Depression and the post-war civil rights movement. The form and content of populism have undergone various changes, but the core of populism has not changed. It has always reflected the people's dissatisfaction with society and elite power, and their desire for fairness and equality.

2.2. Populism in 21th Century America

In 2009, the Obama administration launched an economic stimulus plan and health care reform (the Affordable Care Act), which sparked dissatisfaction among conservatives. With the various consequences of the economic crisis, the "Tea Party" movement came onto the stage of American history. The Tea Party movement advocates reducing government spending and lowering taxes. Tea Party members highly respect the U.S. Constitution and advocate constitutional originalism; they oppose big government. They believe that the government has excessively interfered with individuals and advocate limited government, but they also hope to use the government to promote their ideas. After several years of development, the "Tea Party" has become a force that cannot be underestimated in American politics, and even affects American elections. However, the extremely conservative "Tea Party" is unlikely to develop further in the existing political system of the United States [3].

The 2016 U.S. presidential election brought Trump into the public eye. For a long time, the unbalanced economic recovery, the loss of manufacturing jobs, and the increase in immigration and cultural diversity have led to dissatisfaction among some white middle and lower classes. Donald Trump has successfully attracted a large number of American white voters, especially blue-collar workers and residents in rural areas, with his anti-establishment, anti-immigration and trade protectionist stance. After being elected president, Trump has continued to mobilize his core supporters through policies and rhetoric, strengthen the concept of "America First", promote trade wars, restrict immigration and challenge the mainstream media, in order to focus on protecting the interests of the American people.

With the advancement of science and technology, economic uncertainty and social diversity, populism may continue to exist and evolve into new forms and contents. To cope with the social division and political polarization brought about by populism, the government and all sectors of society need to work together to promote the inclusive development of society and strengthen the resilience of the democratic system. In the 21st century, American populism has shown obvious characteristics such as anti-globalization, anti-establishment and cultural conservatism. In the future, populism will continue to be an important part of American politics and society, and systematic countermeasures are urgently needed to alleviate the challenges it brings.

3. Changes in American Political Parties under the Influence of Populism

3.1. Specific Impact on the Democratic and Republican Parties

The impact of populism on the Republican Party is mainly reflected in the rise of the Tea Party movement in 2009, which mainly targeted the Obama administration's economic stimulus plan and health care reform. This movement mainly pushed the Republican Party to move further to the right, emphasizing small government, low taxes and cutting public spending. Tea Party candidates performed well in the mid-term elections in 2010 and 2014, successfully influencing the subsequent policy direction of the Republican Party. Then Trump won the 2016 presidential election with anti-establishment, anti-immigration and trade protectionist positions. In order to protect its own trade from infringement, the Trump administration has imposed tariffs and launched trade wars, especially against the Chinese market, and has launched a series of restrictions and access rules. In terms of immigration policy, it has completely blocked the national border, strengthened border security, and implemented a "zero tolerance" policy and travel ban. In terms of diplomacy, it pursues the principle of "America First", puts American interests first, and always questions traditional alliances and international organizations. At the same time, Trump has reshaped the Republican voter base, attracted a large number of blue-collar workers and rural voters, and further strengthened the populist tendency within the party. In order to expand his political support, Trump uses social media to directly interact with voters, spread populist information, and mobilize grassroots supporters. The spread of numerous fake news and conspiracy theories has also exacerbated the turmoil within the party to a certain extent.

The financial crisis and economic inequality triggered the Occupy Wall Street movement, which called for stricter regulation of the rich and large companies. In the eyes of many Americans, the greed and irresponsible behavior of Wall Street bankers were the source of the 2008 financial crisis. However, in 2009, when the financial crisis was at its worst, when millions of Americans lost their homes and jobs, were trapped in debt, and were struggling for work, Wall Street bankers, who were the culprits of the financial crisis, were paying huge bonuses, which aroused widespread public anger [4]. More seriously, the big entrepreneurs and bankers in the United States have a strong political influence on the policy-making of the US government. Against this background, the Democratic Party proposed to promote an increase in the minimum wage and expand health insurance coverage. In terms of taxation, it advocates raising taxes on the rich and increasing investment in public services. In addition, the development of domestic industry in the United States has caused serious ecological damage for a long time. The Democratic Party proposed to pay attention to environmental protection and advocate a green new deal.

During this period, there were certain differences within the Democratic Party, and it was divided into two factions, namely progressives (such as Bernie Sanders and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez) and centrists (such as Joe Biden and Nancy Pelosi). There were differences in policies and strategies, but they were often united in the face of Republican populism. The Democratic Party also took advantage of the wave of populism at this time to strengthen the mobilization of grassroots voters, especially gaining a lot of support among ethnic minorities and young voters.

Populism has a significant and far-reaching impact on the Republican and Democratic parties. Driven by the Tea Party Movement and Trumpism, the Republican Party has become more conservative and nationalist, while the Democratic Party has become more progressive and inclusive driven by economic inequality and social justice. In response to the challenges brought by populism, both parties are readjusting their policies and strategies to adapt to the needs of voters and changes in the political environment.

3.2. Impact on Political Party Institutions

Under the influence of populism for a long time, the power structure within the Republican Party has been reorganized, and the grassroots power in the United States has been greatly enhanced. The rise of grassroots voters driven by the Tea Party movement and Trumpism has been critical of the traditional party elites and the establishment, forcing the power within the party to tilt towards the grassroots. At the same time, the influence of the traditional elites in the party on candidate selection and policy making has weakened, which is mainly reflected in Trump's successful election as the US president in 2016 and his defeat of a series of establishment candidates.

The rise of populism has made it easier for anti-establishment candidates to gain voter support. They usually use social media to promote by directly interacting with voters. Many voters are more inclined to choose candidates who come from the grassroots. Moreover, populists often perform well in primaries because they can mobilize enthusiastic grassroots supporters, which makes it easier for extreme and non-traditional candidates to emerge within the party.

Due to the promotion of populism, the priorities of many policies have also changed. Populism has promoted the Republican Party's policy shifts in trade protectionism, immigration restrictions, and anti-globalization, and these issues were not originally the core concerns of the traditional Republican Party. In addition, nationalist tendencies continue to strengthen, and populists are very concerned about national sovereignty and border security. They advocate the promotion of the "America First" policy and weaken support for international cooperation and multilateralism.

Under the influence of populism, the power structure within the party shows a trend of diversification. The progressives represented by Bernie Sanders and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez have gained significant influence within the party. They advocate issues such as economic equality, social justice and environmental protection. In the face of pressure from progressives, representatives of traditionalists such as Joe Biden and Nancy Pelosi have absorbed and compromised the progressives' propositions to a certain extent to maintain party unity.

In summary, the impact of populism on American party institutions is reflected in power structure, candidate selection, policy agenda and intra-party divisions. The Republican Party is more obviously affected by populism, resulting in the power within the party leaning towards grassroots forces and the policy agenda turning to nationalism and anti-globalization. Under the promotion of progressives, the Democratic Party's policies are more radical and diversified, and the power structure within the party is more diverse. Although the two parties have different ways of dealing with the challenges brought by populism, they are both readjusting themselves to adapt to the new political environment.

4. The Impact of Populism on Democracy

4.1. Positive Influence

If populism is the rebellion of the disenfranchised against monopoly capital and political oligarchs, and the people are mobilized in pursuit of hope and equality, then populism can also be seen as "a reflection and product of democratic politics, running through American political life like a decorative pattern" [5]. Although populism is often seen as a threat to the democratic system, in some cases it can also have a certain positive impact on democracy.

First, populism can increase the public's political participation to a certain extent. Populism often stimulates the public's interest in and desire to participate in politics through concise, powerful rhetoric and straightforward policy proposals. Populists are often able to mobilize those voters who are usually indifferent to politics or feel neglected, and enhance their awareness of political participation. Secondly, it can promote policy changes. Populists usually emphasize listening to and responding to the needs of ordinary people, and push the government to solve long-ignored social and economic problems. By emphasizing the shortcomings of existing systems and policies, populists can further promote political and social reforms and improve public policies and governance. In addition, populism can also enhance the representativeness of democracy. The rise of populism is often accompanied by the emergence of non-traditional politicians and grassroots leaders, which increases the diversity of political representation and allows more groups from different backgrounds to speak out in politics. In addition, populism is also a good way to achieve direct democracy. Populists usually advocate more direct forms of democratic participation, such as referendums, referendums, and citizen parliaments, to enhance the participation and influence of ordinary people in the decision-making process. By advocating direct democracy and community participation, populism can shorten the distance between citizens and the government and bring the political process closer to the people.

4.2. Negative Impacts

Populism undermines the existing democratic norms and institutions in the United States. Because populist leaders often try to concentrate power, weaken judicial independence and the power of the legislature, thus undermining the rule of law. They regard independent media as enemies, crack down on press freedom, and limit the media's supervision and criticism of the government. Populists usually mobilize supporters by creating and strengthening the opposition between "us" (ordinary people) and "them" (elites, ethnic minorities, immigrants, etc.) in society. Such opposition of views has exacerbated the division of American society. On racial issues, populism often uses the exclusion of minority groups as a means to stimulate tensions between races, religions or ethnic groups, constantly weaken social unity and inclusiveness, and cause a series of social contradictions.

Populists incite the public's distrust of public institutions such as the government, media, and judiciary by constantly criticizing and attacking existing systems and institutions, resulting in an unstable stage of domestic politics. In addition, the extreme rhetoric and actions of populism have seriously undermined the public's trust in democratic procedures and election results, endangering the legitimacy and stability of the democratic system.

American populism advocates opposition to globalization and free trade. This is mainly because globalization has not only failed to solve the problem of the gap between the rich and the poor, but

has also widened the gap between the rich and the poor in the country. Under the conditions of globalization, the profit-seeking nature of capital has led to the rich getting richer and the poor getting poorer [6]. They overemphasize national sovereignty and independence, oppose globalization and multilateral cooperation, and such serious trade protectionism has triggered international trade disputes and economic conflicts, seriously damaging the stability of the global economy.

Centralization is also a principle adhered to by populist leaders. Populist leaders often try to concentrate power, weaken the checks and balances mechanism, and weaken the accountability mechanism and transparency in the democratic system. Some populist leaders will extend their terms of office by amending the constitution or laws, weakening the mechanism of democratic rotation and power change.

5. Analysis of Populism Challenges to Political Parties and Democracy

5.1. Challenges for American Political Parties

In the context of populism, parties need to change their current voter base. Populism often appeals to voters who have traditionally been less engaged in politics, such as those with lower incomes and lower education levels, but it also requires parties to adjust their strategies to attract and retain the support of these voters. However, if the color of populism is too strong, it will also lead to the loss of some traditional voters, especially those centrist voters who are uneasy about extreme policies and speeches. Therefore, American political parties need to grasp the development of populism within the party. Excessive promotion of populism is likely to be counterproductive.

Splits and factional struggles within the party are also the result of the excessive development of populism. Populism often has significant ideological conflicts with traditional factions within the party, leading to splits and factional struggles within the party. For example, there are a series of conflicts between the establishment wing of the Republican Party and the Trump faction. Populists often promote some extreme or radical irrational policies, leading to differences of opinion within the party on these issues and affecting the party's unity and unified actions. For example, Democratic radicals advocate increasing the federal minimum hourly wage to \$15, which is more than double the current \$7.25. This plan is extremely unlikely to be passed [7].

The extreme positions promoted by populism have intensified the confrontation between the two parties in the United States, making cross-party cooperation more difficult and policy formulation and adoption more complicated. Extreme populist positions have led to deadlocks in Congress and other legislative bodies, affecting the normal operation and decision-making efficiency of the government. The negative impact will ultimately fall on the people. Such a situation will further intensify the antagonism between various social groups. Political parties will therefore need to deal with a more divided voter base and deal with more complex social issues, leading to an even more chaotic political situation in the country. Therefore, political parties need to maintain flexibility and ability to respond to these challenges, ensuring their own unity and policy coherence, while maintaining the stability and healthy development of the democratic system.

5.2. Challenges to American Democracy

Populism creates confrontations between different social classes, exacerbating political polarization and social division. Populist leaders create social divisions and hostility by emphasizing "the people" versus "the elites". After Trump came to power, he signed executive orders with a clear xenophobic color, such as "building a wall on the US-Mexico border" and "restricting the entry of Muslims". This will inevitably increase the contradictions between ethnic minorities and white groups, and the intensification of ethnic conflicts is inevitable [8]. Such acts of excluding and attacking ethnic minorities, immigrants and other marginalized groups and intensifying racial, ethnic and cultural tensions have greatly impacted the democratic policies that the United States has long adhered to.

Populists often criticize and attack traditional democratic systems and institutions, including legislatures, judicial systems and news media, believing that they are controlled by the elite and

cannot represent the true will of the people. In the long run, this attitude will lead to a decline in trust in the democratic system. No longer trusting government policies will make people doubt the existing democratic system and lose confidence in supporting political parties.

Populist leaders tend to concentrate power and weaken checks and balances, such as reducing judicial independence, restricting media freedom, and suppressing the opposition, which greatly threatens the rule of law and constitutional system. They often propose some radical and short-term policies to quickly meet the needs of voters and gain their support. However, these policies often lack long-term considerations and sustainability, leading to policy instability and governance difficulties, and ultimately it is difficult to achieve the desired goals, which is not guaranteed for the interests of most people.

The challenges of populism to American democracy mainly include weakening democratic institutions and norms, exacerbating political polarization and social division, and undermining public trust and legitimacy. The American democratic system also requires the government to respond by strengthening the rule of law, maintaining independent institutions, promoting social inclusion and rational discussion, enhancing international cooperation, and safeguarding democratic accountability mechanisms to ensure the stability and healthy development of democracy.

6. Conclusion

After a long period of development and change, American populism has become an indispensable part of American politics. Populism has played a great role in promoting the historical development of the United States and has a profound impact on the transformation of political parties and the democratic system. This article mainly introduces the historical development process of populism in the United States in the 20th century, focusing on the historical roots of populism. Secondly, it explores the impact of populism on American political parties and democratic systems, and analyzes the challenges that populism faces for the American party system and democracy.

There is no absolute good or bad difference in the impact of populism on the United States. Populism is not only the people's desire for democracy and the pursuit of their own interests, but also a political means that is very beneficial for party candidates to participate in the election. The key to the problem is how much the leaders who insist on populism can fulfill their promises to the people. American populist leaders try to regard populism as a "supplement and correction to the democratic system" and further create a self-deceiving "liberal democracy" by strengthening the control of public opinion, but are unwilling to make any concessions to the lower classes of society in terms of actual interests. The result is further aggravation of economic contradictions. Replacing economic differences with cultural differences can only exacerbate the deep divisions in society and bring about more serious economic and political crises.

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