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Introduction to Populism in the US

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George Wallace and Richard Nixon; Populism in the 1960s

The American political landscape has recently been dominated by a conservative, right-wing, populist backlash, which found its pinnacle in the election of Donald J. Trump as the 45th President of the United States. Trump is known for his explicit racism and deeply conservative views on issues such as abortion and immigration. However, Trump's political views have shifted throughout the years - from being liberal and moderate (Trump was at times even a registered Democrat) to right-wing populist.¹ This shift of political record from a moderate to a more right-wing, populist one could be observed prior in the United States, especially in the 1960s, when Civil Rights were a salient issue. George Wallace and Richard Nixon, who would later be known for their arch-segregationist stance and the latter for his use of 'dog whistling' are prime examples for a shift towards right-wing and conservative populism. I argue that right-wing populism in the 1960s was a deliberate electoral strategy in which opportunists such as George Wallace and Richard Nixon exploited a political racist ideology in order to pander to a larger voter base.

First, one has to define what populism is, which is a complicated endeavour since many scholars agree that the concept is defined very broadly and potentially includes all political actors and movements.² According to Mudde and Kaltwasser, populism is "a thin-centred ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic camps 'the

¹ Jackie Calmes, "Donald Trump: Campaigns and Elections," Miller Center, last modified October 18, 2017, <https://millercenter.org/president/trump/campaigns-and-elections>.

² Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Kaltwasser, *Populism a Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 7.

pure people' versus 'the corrupt elite,' [...] which argues that politics should be an expression of the [...] (general will) of the people."³ In fact, 'the people' is an essential but flexible concept within a populist framework. First and foremost, 'the people' can be seen as sovereign and as the source of political power and therefore as the rulers, since politicians in a democracy derive their political power from 'the people'. Thus, when the political will of 'the people' is not satisfied it can lead to mobilisation against the current political movement.⁴ Furthermore, 'the people' are also seen as the nation. Additionally, 'the people' often refers to the common people and therefore, 'the people' are natural antagonists of 'the elite.'⁵ 'The elite' is "portrayed as one homogeneous corrupt group that works against the 'general will' of the people."⁶ The elite refers to the establishment and those who possess political power and are thus an integral part within populism, since populists argue that the elite ignores the 'general will' of 'the people.'

“[T]he general will is based on the unity of the people and on a clear demarcation of those who do not belong to the demos and, consequently, are not treated as equals. In short, because populism implies that the general will is not only transparent but also absolute, it can legitimise authoritarianism and illiberal attacks on anyone who (allegedly) threatens the homogeneity of the people.”⁷

Since the 'general will' of 'the people' is absolute, populism is by its very nature anti-pluralistic. Moreover, populists position themselves as the sole representative of that will.⁸ Hence the minimalist definition entails three major requirements; the idea that the sovereignty lies within

³ Mudde and Kaltwasser, *Populism*, 6.

⁴ Ibid, 9-10.

⁵ Ibid, 9.

⁶ Ibid, 12.

⁷ Ibid, 18.

⁸ Jan-Werner Müller, *What Is Populism?* (Pennsylvania: Penguin Books, 2017), 101.

the people, that populism is a contestation of the elites by the people and the idea that there is one conceivable general will of the people. Other than the minimalist definition, which describes populism as an ideology the maximalist definition is more inclusive and states that populism is the legitimate means of using emotional rhetoric and language of persuasion by a group of people, who share the same political ideals and do not feel democratically represented to “finally, win the majority and use the state to repress, exploit, or contain its adversaries,”⁹ Therefore, the maximalist definition describes populism as a legitimate political strategy.

Overall, populism is dangerous because it divides society into two distinctive group; an ‘us’- the ordinary, overlooked citizens and a ‘them’- the self-serving elites. Furthermore, populism is a political ideology with many different facets from left-wing populism to right wing populism. This paper will focus on right-wing populism. According to Joseph Lowndes for right leaning populist the common enemy of the people are “non-white others and by extension the state itself.”¹⁰ Hence, right-wing populism sees whites as the true people, who belong to the demos, and non whites as the others, which threaten specific cultural traditions and popular values as well as the homogeneity of the people itself.

George Wallace became Governor of Alabama as a Southern Democrat in 1962 and was infamous for his passionate defence of segregation in the South. He was among the first politicians to react to the cultural changes in America and feed into white backlash.¹¹ White backlash is a term for the negative response of whites to racial progressivism.¹² But before Wallace ran as a

⁹ Nadia Urbinati, “Political Theory of Populism,” *Annual Review of Political Science* 22 (May 2019): 117-118, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-polisci-050317-070753>.

¹⁰ Joseph Lowndes, “Populism in the United States,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Populism* (Oxford University Press, 2017), 233.

¹¹ Dan Carter, *George Wallace, Richard Nixon and the Transformation of American Politics* (Texas: Markham Press Fund, 1992), 5.

¹² Dan Carter, *The Politics of Rage: George Wallace, the Origins of the New Conservatism, and the Transformation of American Politics* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995), 349.

segregationist hard-liner in 1962, who exploited the white backlash of many Americans and emerged as a right-wing populist, he “began his career as a protégé of one of the most liberal Southern politicians in modern history, James [...] Folsom.”¹³ Before morphing into a hard-line segregationist Wallace, who was a delegate at the 1948 national Democratic Convention, even refused to join the walkout of Strom Thurmond after a dispute about Civil Rights.¹⁴ During his time in the House of Representatives of Alabama he worked eagerly to advance his moderate agenda, was especially invested in education and introduced a bill, which taxed liquor sales in order to create community-based, state-funded trade schools. Wallace even requested to be appointed to the board of trustees of the all-black Tuskegee University.¹⁵ Concurrently, Wallace’s gubernatorial campaign in 1958 was based on a moderate platform that focussed on his record, the advancement of education, improving roads and industrial improvement.¹⁶ During his campaign Wallace proclaimed:

“During the next four years, many problems will arise in the matter of segregation and civil rights, as a result of judicial decisions. Having served as judge of the third judicial circuit of Alabama, I feel, my friends, that this judicial experience, will be invaluable to me as your governor. [...] And I want to tell the good people of this state, as a judge of the third judicial circuit, if I didn’t have what it took to treat a man fair, regardless of his colour, then I don’t have what it takes to be the governor of your great state.”¹⁷

¹³ Carter, *Transformation of American Politics*, 10.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Dan Carter, *The Politics of Rage*, 76.

¹⁶ Ibid, 95.

¹⁷ “Wallace Quotes”, PBS, accessed March 24, 2021, <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/wallace-quotes/>.

Wallace even ran with the support of the *NAACP*, while his opponent John Patterson ran with the endorsement of the *Ku Klux Klan*.¹⁸ Looking back on the race Patterson remarked: “I ran against George Wallace in ’58 and beat him. And the primary reason I beat him was because he was considered soft on the race question at that time. That’s the primary reason”¹⁹

After losing the gubernatorial race in 1958 Wallace allegedly said that he “was out-n***ered, and [that he] will never be out-n***ered again.”²⁰ Whether or not he actually said this phrase is disputed as it was said in private and there is no written record of it. Nonetheless, after his loss he swiftly abandoned his previously moderate platform in favour of a deeply racist platform, which advocated for segregation. One could infer that Wallace had suddenly shifted his political ideology from a moderate to extremely right-wing. However, it is clear that Wallace was aware that in order to garner enough political momentum he needed to adopt a more radical stance. According to Dan Carter, when Wallace was asked about his aggressive pro-segregation stance he responded “You know, I tried to talk about good roads and good schools and all these things that have been part of my career, and nobody listened.”²¹

By 1962 Wallace had adopted a right-wing populist platform, which vilified the federal government and championed states’ rights, criticising the federal government’s involvement in Alabaman affairs concerning Civil Rights or the lack thereof. He emerged as a leading opponent to the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s and his inaugural speech in 1963 is notorious for his support of segregation and advocating for a limited federal government that would not impede on

¹⁸Ian Haney-López, *Dog Whistle Politics: How Coded Racial Appeals Have Reinvented Racism and Wrecked the Middle Class* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 14.

¹⁹John Patterson, interview by Jack Bass and Walter De Vries, July 12, 1974. Transcript and Audio. <https://dcr.lib.unc.edu/record/uuid:f6d09343-2287-4d44-bf7c-93079a4c39be>.

²⁰PBS, “Wallace Quotes.”

²¹“George Wallace: Settin' the Woods on Fire,” PBS, accessed March 27, 2021, https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/films/wallace/#film_description.

individual states' rights. "Let us rise to the call of freedom-loving blood that is in us and send our answer to the tyranny that clanks its chain upon the South"²² Here Wallace establishes the people of the South as the 'true people,' who are worthy of rights and denotes the anti-segregation laws of the federal government as 'tyranny,' subsequently establishing the federal government as the elite that works against the general will of the 'true people.' Wallace proclaimed that

"[t]his nation was never meant to be a unit of one [...] but a united of the many [...] that is the exact reason our freedom loving forefathers established the states, so as to divide the rights and powers among the states, insuring that no central power could gain master government control."²³

While this part of his inaugural speech could simply be interpreted as supporting a limited government in which local state governments are the most significant institutions, it is in fact coded language. Promoting states' rights and a limited federal government equates to upholding segregation and voter suppression laws, such as a literacy test or the grandfather clause, which were widely spread throughout the South. It seeks to impede Washington's abilities to support the Civil Rights movement and end segregation in the South. Wallace champions for and thereby tries to maintain the cultural traditions and values of the South.

"It is very appropriate then that from this Cradle of the Confederacy, this very Heart of the Great Anglo-Saxon Southland, that today we sound the drum for freedom as have our generations of forebears before us done, time and time again through history. Hear me, Southerners! You sons and daughters who have moved north and west throughout this nation we call on you from your native soil to join with us in national support and vote and we know wherever you are away from the hearths of the Southland that you will respond, for though you may live in the farthest reaches of this vast country your heart has never left Dixieland.

²² George C. Wallace, "Inaugural Address of Governor George Wallace, Which Was Delivered at the Capitol in Montgomery, Alabama," January 14, 1963, in *Alabama Department of Archives & History*, <https://digital.archives.alabama.gov/digital/collection/voices/id/2952>.

²³ Wallace, "Inaugural Address."

[..] And you native sons and daughters of old New England's rock-ribbed patriotism and you sturdy natives of the great Mid-West and you descendants of the far West flaming spirit of pioneer freedom we invite you to come and be with us for you are of the Southern spirit and the Southern philosophy you are Southerners too and brothers with us in our fight."²⁴

Not only is Wallace asserting the people of the South as the 'true people,' but he establishes the South, 'the Cradle of Confederacy' or 'Dixieland' as a nation, a nation of Southerners which is directly opposed to the rest of the country. Yet, the nationality of a Southerner is not exclusive to the geographical south, but applies to those who share the southern cultural traditions and 'values' and he invites them to join the 'fight.' In addition, Wallace reminds the crowd in Montgomery that a multitude of Founding Fathers were Southerners, establishing that the ideas of freedom and liberty upon which the United States were founded, were in fact Southern ideas. Wallace asserts that segregation is a freedom;

"And so it was meant in our racial lives each race, within its own framework has the freedom to teach, to instruct, to develop to ask for and receive deserved help from others of separate racial stations. This is the great freedom of our American founding fathers."²⁵

Wallace managed to position himself as a champion for the people of Alabama and the South, by declaring a centralised government as tyranny and trying to preserve the Southern way of life; " In the name of the greatest people that have ever trod this earth, I draw the line in the dust and toss the gauntlet before the feet of tyranny and I say segregation today, segregation tomorrow, segregation forever."²⁶

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

Wallace discovered a winning strategy by making race-relations the key issue of his campaign. Losing against Patterson in 1958 led Wallace to realign his platform with a racially motivated populist one. He exploited the populist backlash against the Civil Rights movement and made it clear where he stood on the issue of segregation. He morphed from a once moderate politician to one of the foremost defenders of segregation. His opportunism and racial demagoguery panned out in the end, as he never lost a political race in Alabama again, after 1958.²⁷

While Wallace never made it to the White House, although not for a lack of trying, Republican Richard Nixon did. Nixon won the White House in 1968 running against Democrat Hubert Humphrey and Independent George Wallace. Before Nixon won in 1968 by utilising racial appeals, he ran on a moderate platform in 1960 and very narrowly lost against John F. Kennedy.²⁸ Then incumbent Vice President Nixon ran on his record of being part of the Eisenhower administration and the idea that he was an experienced politician who would make an experienced leader. In addition, he ran on a platform that was mostly concerned with foreign policy and the Cold War as he clarified in a campaign advertisement. “We must continue to deal with Communism and the Soviet leaders, not belligerently, but firmly, and always with vigilance.”²⁹ Simultaneously, he reassured voters that with him as president, economic growth would continue, linking it as a prerequisite of peace. “But under our administration, we have been careful with your money. Your wage increases have been real. That's what I call honest economic growth. We must keep growing to stay strong and free. Only by staying strong can we keep peace.”³⁰ During his campaign in

²⁷ Carter, *Transformation of American Politics*, 11.

²⁸ Haney-López, *Dog Whistle Politics*, 18.

²⁹ “The Living Room Candidate - Commercials - 1960 - Peace,” The Living Room Candidate - Commercials - 1960 - Peace, accessed March 29, 2021, <http://www.livingroomcandidate.org/commercials/1960/peace>.

³⁰ “The Living Room Candidate - Commercials - 1960 - Economic Strength,” The Living Room Candidate - Commercials - 1960 - Economic Strength, accessed March 27, 2021, <http://www.livingroomcandidate.org/commercials/1960/economic-strength>.

1960 Nixon clarified as well that he supported Civil Rights, as made apparent in one of his TV advertisements.

“ I want to talk to you for a moment about Civil Rights. Equal Rights for all our citizens. Why must we vigorously defend them? First, because it is right and just [...] and third the whole world is watching us. When we fail to grant equality to all that makes news bad news for America. Now, the record shows there’s been more progress in Civil Rights in the past eight years than in the preceding 80 years. Because this administration has insisted on making progress and I want to continue and speed up that progress. I want to help build a better America for all Americans.”³¹

By 1968 Nixon’s moderate stance was - although not officially - history. The Vietnam war and many summers of civil disorder had created a deeply divided nation. In the wake of this division Nixon chose to exploit the grievances of middle- and working-class Americans.³² Desegregation policies of the federal government incited whites in the South to resistance. Nixon was aware that this was a voter base which he could exploit as Wallace had done before him. Only appealing to southern voters, in favour of segregation, however was an unreliable strategy. Explicitly catering to racial appeals would have alienated moderates in the border and northern states.³³ Hence, in order to implement the ‘Southern Strategy’, an electoral strategy that targeted white voters by appealing to racist notions that were already popular in the South (the ‘Southern Strategy’ was not solely confined to the regional South), Nixon had to use coded language as to not alienate less racist voters.³⁴ In his acceptance speech for the Republican nomination in 1968 Nixon demanded “that after a period of forty years when power has gone from the cities and the

³¹ PoliticalHistory, “1960 - Nixon on Civil Rights,” YouTube Video, 0:58, June 29, 2008, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dAlZHFaksQM>.

³² Carter, *The Politics of Rage*, 326.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Haney-López, *Dog Whistle Politics*, 27.

states to the government in Washington, D.C., it's time to have power go back from Washington to the states and to the cities of this country all over America.”³⁵ However, talking about states’ rights and a limited government has dark undercurrents which relate to the South’s opposition of segregation, alluding to the notion that southern states would be allowed to resist desegregation. Thus, Nixon employed a strategy of coded language, which he had perceived as successfully working for Wallace. Haney-López coins this use of coded language ‘Blowing a Dog Whistle.’ According to Haney-López “racial entreaties operate like a dog whistle - a metaphor that pushes us to recognise that modern racial pandering always operates on two levels: inaudible and easily dried in one range, yet stimulating strong reactions in another.”³⁶ Nixon, without explicitly renouncing his past support for Civil Rights, imparted to voters that as President he would do “the absolute minimum required to carry out mandates of the federal courts.”³⁷ Thus, he indicated that his priorities had shifted more towards the right on issues concerning race. Moreover, Nixon targeted ‘forgotten Americans’, who are white, non-progressive members of the middle- and working-class who opposed the deconstruction of their way of life.

“It is the voice of the great majority of Americans, the forgotten Americans—the non-shouters; the non-demonstrators. [...] They give drive to the spirit of America. They give lift to the American Dream. [...] They are good people, they are decent people; they work, and they save, and they pay their taxes, and they care. America is in trouble today not because her people have failed but because her leaders have failed.”³⁸

³⁵ Richard Nixon, “Address Accepting the Presidential Nomination at the Republican National Convention” (speech, Miami Beach, Florida, August 08, 1968. The American Presidency Project. <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/address-accepting-the-presidential-nomination-the-republican-national-convention-miami#docmedia>).

³⁶ Haney-López, *Dog Whistle Politics*, 3.

³⁷ Carter, *The Politics of Rage*, 329.

³⁸ Nixon, “Accepting the Presidential Nomination.”

Hereby, Nixon positions himself as the only leader of the ‘forgotten people’ or the ‘silent majority,’ which within the populist ideology are the ‘true people.’ Hence, he infers that the ‘true people’ are not yet represented within the establishment, but that he will represent them. In addition, he denounces Civil Rights protesters and excludes them from being part of the ‘true people.’ Furthermore, the narrative of law and order, which Nixon utilises, is coded language for a populist backlash against the Civil Rights movement and its protests, since they challenged cultural norms and values of the white middle-class. “Our goal is justice for every American. If we are to have respect for law in America, we must have laws that deserve respect.”³⁹

Nixon seems to have undergone a similar transformation as Wallace did. He started out as a moderate politician, who did not oppose desegregation and the Civil Rights movement. He even pointed out the progress that was made during his time as Vice President. Having lost the election in 1960 though, his political strategy shifted towards right-wing populism. Like Wallace Nixon exploited the populist backlash against the Civil Rights movement. He did so however in a less explicit way, as to not alienate non-southern voters. He assumed a ‘silent majority’ whose will was neither heard nor executed, positioning himself as their champion, which is inherently populist.

While many historians agree that Wallace was a right-wing populist (he is regularly cited as a prime example within literature defining populism), historians’ opinion on Nixon differs. Some see him as a populist, others do not. Historian Hugh Graham considers Nixon an enigma.⁴⁰ Graham states that Nixon can be considered a racial conservative, however he admits that his actions were too contradictory to title him a racial reactionary.⁴¹ According to Graham, Nixon had a passion for reelection, which led him to employ the southern strategy, yet he signed affirmative

³⁹ Nixon, “Accepting the Presidential Nomination.”

⁴⁰ Hugh Davis Graham, “Richard Nixon and Civil Rights: Explaining an Enigma,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 26, no. 1 (1996): 98, https://www.jstor.org/stable/27551552?seq=1#metadata_info_tab_contents.

⁴¹ Graham, “Richard Nixon and Civil Rights,” 93-95.

action policies which advanced the Civil Rights' cause. However, while Nixon also signed progressive legislation it needs to be said that in the 91st and 92nd congress Democrats controlled both houses, consequently forcing Nixon's hand in major Civil Rights legislation.⁴² Therefore I conclude that although Nixon's record is somewhat of an amalgam his primary focus was on re-election. Seeking power led Nixon to employ implicit rhetoric and exploit white backlash that was focused on pandering to the 'Silent majority'. Graham omits Nixon's political strategy leading him to the conclusion that he is an enigma. Yet, Nixon's lust for ambition paired with some racially conservative policies mark him as a populist under the maximalist definition.

Wallace and Nixon both started out as considerably moderate candidates seeking political office. Subsequently, their first respective runs for Governor and President failed to mobilise enough voters. Especially Wallace recognised that the populist backlash against segregation could be exploited, leading him to adopt right-wing populism and to position himself as the true representative of the Southern way of life in order to foster his political ambitions. Nixon as well as Wallace observed that he could tap into white backlash. Hence, when he ran for President in 1968, he abandoned his previous moderate platform in favour of racial appeals to the 'silent majority.' However, unlike Wallace, he did so in an implicit way utilising 'dog whistle politics.' He positioned himself as the champion of the 'silent majority', consequently declaring non-whites as others and inferring that the 'true people' were in fact not represented by the establishment. Since they divided the nation into two groups; the 'true people' and the others, and positioned themselves as the advocates of the 'general will' of the 'true people' and criticised the establishment - only after their unsuccessful moderate campaigns, they fit into the maximalist definition of populism. Wallace and Nixon both rode the wave of right-wing populism and the white backlash of the 1960s as an electoral strategy.

⁴² Ibid, 97.

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