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# Who Supports Donald J. Trump?: A narrative-based analysis of his supporters and of the candidate himself

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### **Who Supports Donald J. Trump?**

*A narrative-based analysis of his supporters and of the candidate himself*

#### **Introduction: The Voice of the People?**

“My opponent asks her supporters to recite a three-word loyalty pledge. It reads: ‘I’m With Her.’ I choose to recite a different pledge. My pledge reads: ‘I’m with you—the American people.’ I am your voice.” So said Donald J. Trump, Republican presidential nominee and billionaire real estate mogul, in his speech echoing Richard Nixon’s own convention speech centered on law-and-order in 1968.<sup>1 2</sup> Introduced by his daughter Ivanka, Trump claimed at the Republican National Convention in Cleveland, Ohio that he—and he alone—is the voice of the people. Pandering to his base, Trump made it clear in his speech that his pivot to the general election is in no way a traditional one, for he is no traditional presidential candidate.

The 2016 presidential election cycle has left pundits, scholars, and the general public in disbelief at the vast popularity of a former reality TV star, tabloid subject, and creator of a global luxury brand of products and hotels. After a truly stunning primary season, where nearly 16 qualified Republican candidates were easily defeated and the clear winner was a man with absolutely no experience in elected office, many in the so-called political and media “establishment” were left without answers, and were scared for the future of the United States.

I spent the majority of July and early August exhaustively interviewing supporters of the Republican presidential nominee, seeking to understand what accounts for mobilization behind

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<sup>1</sup> Politico Staff, “Full Text: Donald Trump 2016 RNC Draft Speech Transcript,” *POLITICO*, September 9, 2016, accessed September 3, 2016.

<sup>2</sup> Josh Zeitz, “How Trump Is Recycling Nixon’s ‘law and order’ Playbook,” *Politico Magazine*, July 18, 2016, accessed September 9, 2016.

Trump, to recognize the political identity of the Trump voter, and to challenge the media-driven notion that Trump supporters are “crazy,” racist, uneducated, or without reason. After conducting eight in-depth, hour-long interviews with Trump supporters, I was able to better understand why one would support a candidate of Trump’s nature.

These interviews were recorded and transcribed, and touch upon many topics, including personal and family history, personal political views, and thoughts on the candidate and his Democratic opponent. I was put in touch with supporters of many types, including reluctant moderates, people involved with the campaign and deeply proud of it, and some who simply see a shake-up in our government as vital to the success of our nation. While this was a small pool of individuals, the contrasts with common assumptions of Trump supporters were significant: the majority of my subjects had attended college or possessed a Bachelors’ degree, with three possessing graduate degrees; I interviewed a staunchly proud Hispanic campaign county coordinator; I interviewed a Millennial subject at the University of Puget Sound and briefly spoke over the phone to another. Each interview had a different significant theme, ranging from fears of Islamic terrorism to the candidate’s rhetorical and personal baggage.

In an age when political discourse frequently occurs in online-driven echo chambers, the chance to talk to people whom I consider my political enemy for over an hour brought me a fresh perspective on this particular moment in American political time. This may come as a shock to some: Trump voters are significant political actors within our democracy, with well thought-out rationale for supporting their candidate, as well as deep desire for change in our government.

I decided that this project needed to be conducted at the University of Puget Sound, as the debate surrounding Trump’s candidacy on left-leaning college campuses is both extremely polarized and driven by emotion, rather than by rational analysis. Ask a Millennial college

student you know about Donald Trump, and if they support him (which would be surprising), they will give you a brief answer on why he's the best, typically without much real explanation, and if they oppose him (which would be far more likely), they will give you a brief answer on why they so passionately hate him, typically for reasons relating to identity politics.<sup>3 4 5</sup> During a time when chalk markings with the name "Trump 2016" prompt students at Emory University to protest that they are "in pain!" and that mention of the Republican candidate for president be designated as "hate speech," I believed that rational, unbiased, in-depth discussions with Trump supporters were necessary to better understand this moment in political time.<sup>6</sup>

This is not to say, however, that assertions that Trump is racist, or that he is stoking nativist sentiment, or that he is just plain bad, are unfounded. Indeed, as I will argue later in this paper, I believe that Trump has brought a certain ugliness to our politics that has not been present since the failed presidential campaigns of Senator Barry Goldwater and former Alabama governor and segregationist George Wallace. Ranging from a proposal to "ban all Muslim immigration" into the United States to calling Mexican immigrants "criminals" and "rapists," Trump's undeniably racially-charged rhetoric has stoked a fire that has brought the supposed "alt-right" of modern American politics, a movement once on the fringe, into the forefront.

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<sup>3</sup> Josh Kraushaar, "Democrats Have an Identity-Politics Problem," *The Atlantic* April 7, 2015, accessed September 20, 2016.

<sup>4</sup> John Avlon, "The Year Identity Politics Failed," *The Daily Beast*, June 18, 2016, accessed September 20, 2016.

<sup>5</sup> "When that sort of thing happens—when experiential contradictions become acute—a window opens for people whom the legal theorist Cass R. Sunstein calls "norm entrepreneurs": those promulgating new standards that others can adopt and defend, redefining bad behavior (say, from homosexuality to homophobia), rewriting social models, and shifting the default settings of political culture." And "the cracks in the American left are likely to grow—with more campaign arguments about who is the "true" progressive, more shouting past one another, and more feelings that, for at least one generation, everything is lost." from Nathan Heller, "The Big Uneasy," *The New Yorker*, August 31, 2016, accessed September 20, 2016.

<sup>6</sup> Susan Svrluga, "Someone Wrote 'trump 2016' on Emory's Campus in Chalk. Some Students Said They No Longer Feel Safe," *The Washington Post*, March 24, 2016.

Trump's latest decision to shake up his campaign staff only solidifies this assertion; he hired Stephen K. Bannon, the editor of Breitbart News, a conservative website known for its fringe right-wing views, as his campaign chief.<sup>7</sup> Undoubtedly, Trump is a clear departure from the "compassionate conservatism" of George W. Bush, and is clearly a rejection of Barack Obama's historic presidency.<sup>8</sup>

Not only does this paper explore the Trump voter, but also the candidate himself. I spent almost every waking moment during the summer months exploring the candidate's personal history, his demeanor, his family, his business dealings, and his rhetoric. "Trumpism," the phenomenon that numerous political scientists are attempting to use to explain this moment in American politics, will surely endure far after his campaign, or possibly his presidency. In this paper, I shall argue that Trump's rise is due to two interrelated developments within our politics: anti-elitism, the age-old idea that political elites have ultimately failed voters; and race and immigration, or the demonization of immigrants to a point of borderline to full-on racism. From this, Trump's rhetoric could very well lead this great nation to a systemic crisis of governance, where polarization, disdain for elites, and a media-centered narrative divides the electorate to a point that the American people's faith in our vital governmental institutions will diminish on both the Right and the Left.

### ***Veni, Vidi, Vici: Trump, Anti-Elitism, and The Domination of the GOP***

"None. They're all scum. They're just money whores."  
—Joe, respondent on which politicians he looks up to

"Remember: all of the people telling you that you can't have  
the country you want, are the same people telling you that I

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<sup>7</sup> Michael M. Grynbaum and John Herrman, "Breitbart Rises from Outlier to Potent Voice in Campaign." *The New York Times*, August 27, 2016, accessed September 9, 2016.

<sup>8</sup> Nicholas Kristof, "Compassionate Conservatives, Hello?" *The Opinion Pages* (The New York Times), July 12, 2016, accessed September 2, 2016.

wouldn't be standing here tonight. No longer can we rely on those elites in media, and politics, who will say anything to keep a rigged system in place."

*-Donald J. Trump, addressing the Republican National Convention*

Why, one might ask, do I include a Latin phrase in the title of this section? However poetic, Donald J. Trump truly came, saw, and conquered the party of Lincoln, sweeping the primaries against thirteen determined and well-funded opponents, many of whom truly embody the idea of the conservative establishment. This is a point hardened by numbers: Trump earned 1,542 delegates, both pledged and unpledged, surpassing the 1,237 to win by over 300 delegates.<sup>9</sup> His claims that the primary could be "rigged" against him rang partially true; if Trump had his nomination contested, or if party elites staged a takeover, Trump could possibly not be the nominee. Thanks to the modern, seemingly "democratized" presidential primary process, however, Trump was all but guaranteed the nomination.

Beginning with the takeoff of his campaign, announced last June from the steps of his namesake skyscraper in Manhattan, Trump, a world-renowned figure with a household name, seized upon rhetoric that brilliantly allowed him to distinguish himself from the thirteen other candidates, stating that "I'm using my own money. I'm not using the lobbyists. I'm not using donors. I don't care. I'm really rich." This statement is both concise, forceful, and effective;<sup>10</sup> written in a simple, understandable, and elementary nature, it is signature Trump.

While many American gawk or worry at the rise of Trump, or are incredibly excited at the fact that he has gained such deep support, it is worth noting that this idea of an anti-establishment presidential candidate is almost certainly not a new one. Trump is a populist, and

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<sup>9</sup> Wilson Andrews, Kitty Bennett, and Alicia Parlapiano, "2016 Delegate Count and Primary Results." *The New York Times*, June 7, 2016.

<sup>10</sup> TIME Staff, "Here's Donald Trump's Presidential Announcement Speech," June 16, 2015, accessed September 9, 2016.

in American history there have been numerous examples of such figures. Michael Kazin, in his well-renowned work entitled *The Populist Persuasion*, argues that “in every campaign season, scores of politicians...vow to fight for ‘middle-class taxpayers’ against a variety of ‘bureaucrats,’ ‘fat cats,’ and ‘Big Men.’” Kazin defines populism as “a language whose speakers conceive of ordinary people as a noble assemblage not bounded narrowly by class, view their elite opponents as self-serving and undemocratic, and seek to mobilize the former against the latter.”<sup>11</sup> In many ways, Trump embodies this definition; he has deep respect for his supporters, who are largely considered “ordinary people,” and he views his opponent and large swaths of the political establishment as “self-serving and undemocratic,” as is so noted in his assertions that this election is “rigged” against him.

Indeed, Trump’s rise has notable historical parallels that should not be disregarded or undervalued. Consider the father of the world’s oldest political party, Andrew Jackson. While there are certainly notable differences between the politics of today and that of the 1820s, the parallels are quite real. A populist who “wielded language as a weapon to ‘save the republic from its enemies,’” the humble-born Old Hickory saw two distinctive parts of America: the “working” middle and lower classes, and those who were rich, proud, and privileged.<sup>12</sup> One can easily see a similar concept in Trump’s recent campaign advertisements released in swing states, each entitled “Two Americas,” with one ad relating to immigration and the other to the economy. Each one parallels the other, and their first lines carefully distinguish the difference between these two segments of American society that Trump seeks to identify and utilize to his political advantage. The first states, “In Hillary Clinton’s America, the system stays rigged against

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<sup>11</sup> Michael Kazin, *The Populist Persuasion: An American History*, Revised Edition ed. (United States: Cornell University Press, 1998), 1.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

Americans” and the second states, “In Hillary Clinton’s America, the middle class gets crushed.” This is a brilliant if polarizing strategy that is similar to Jackson’s own in the 1820s, and perfectly exemplifies the campaign’s disdain for a system controlled by elites, with Hillary Clinton as the face of that “rigged” system.

Notably, the parallels of Andrew Jackson’s political climate are too poetic and stark to miss: Andrew Jackson ran against both John Quincy Adams and Henry Clay, two career politicians who engaged in a supposed “corrupt bargain.” While Jackson won the popular vote in 1824, his margin of victory was not enough to win election, and because of this, the vote was sent to the House of Representatives, of which Clay was the Speaker. Because Clay hated Jackson, he formed a coalition that guaranteed Adams’ victory, much to the dismay of Jackson; Clay was, in turn, named John Quincy Adams’ Secretary of State. Hence, the “corrupt bargain.” In a sense, history is almost repeating itself.

Anti-establishment sentiment is something truly American in nature, and Trump’s distinction as such a figure was a running theme across the interviews I conducted, with all but one respondent citing this as one of the most significant of their many motivations for supporting the candidate. Chris, a respondent and small business owner from Ellensburg, Washington, met me at the restaurant of another respondent, Joe, in town to discuss the election and Trump. A quiet gentleman, Chris was a very kind man, one who was not vulgar, or rude, but rather principled and friendly. After I asked him what politicians he looked up to, he said:

I’ve got more faith in him than I’ve got in any other politician.

A former libertarian who voted for the legalization of marijuana in Washington, Chris traveled to Reno, Nevada with Joe to attend a Trump rally. In the opinions of these two men, both small-town businessmen with humble roots, the current liberal establishment has failed the American people.

A Trump presidency for these folks would be a rejection of what they consider to be the failed policies of Barack Obama and his Secretary of State Hillary Clinton. Trump is such a political outsider that he had not, up until 2012, been a registered member of the Republican Party. This outsider status was especially appealing for my respondents, who seem to have determined that the last three presidents have failed the American people in profound ways. For Barack Obama, each respondent certainly did not approve of the him from the time he ran, and for some mere mention of his name led to vulgarities.

Consider Nancy, a woman in her early-50s from Ellensburg, Washington, who has a Master's degree in Environmental Health from the University of Washington, and at one point was a candidate for a doctorate. Although currently unemployed, Nancy was once a state official who worked on Clean Water Act compliance in central Washington. A polite woman, she told me that she was uninterested in talking about Obama and Clinton so as to avoid getting upset. After much prompting Nancy told me what she thought of President Obama:

I'm not a birther. I just think there were questions that were never elucidated. I just had these horrible feelings—that this man wasn't who he said he was, or that he had ulterior motives, and I think right now with the Iran deal, the refugees, border, the whole thing...

All four respondents from Ellensburg felt that Obama was “not who he said he was” in 2008, and, to use Nancy's later terminology, that he was not “eligible” to be president. As she stated, Nancy never challenged Obama's citizenship, but she was certainly suspicious of Obama's motives. Joe, the respondent I discussed earlier, surprised me with his vulgarities:

Obama was always a certified piece of shit. The thing that scares me about Obama is that nobody even touched him, nobody cared. John McCain was afraid to go after his Muslim background. That's how we got Obama.

Joe, who told me that he does a lot of his political reading on the Drudge Report and Brietbart, but also NPR, believes that Obama was raised as a Muslim. According to his memoir, *Dreams*

*from My Father*, Obama in fact found his faith at the Trinity United Church of Christ, an African-American church in Washington Heights, Chicago, and is not a Muslim.<sup>13</sup> Joe's belief, however, is anything but unusual: 43% of Republicans believe that Obama is a Muslim, according to a 2015 CNN/ORC poll.<sup>14</sup> Doubts about Obama's faith and commitment to the country have existed since he first ran, and these doubts are more present in Trump supporters than in other Republicans.<sup>15</sup>

Rhetorically, Trump's status as an outsider puts him at somewhat of an advantage against his opponent, the policy wonk and career politician that is Hillary Rodham Clinton, a figure who has remained within the American political consciousness for over 30 years. While Clinton's political image has largely been hardened up to this point in time, and has recently been significantly tarnished due to her use of a private email server while serving as Secretary of State, Trump has mostly remained outside of the political world and within the business world, strategically donating to both Democrats and Republicans and changing his party affiliation five separate times.<sup>16 17</sup> The most notable political position Trump has taken in recent years was during the early days of Barack Obama's first term, as he led the "Birther" movement that eventually led the president to release a copy of his birth certificate to prove his American

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<sup>13</sup> Barack H. Obama, *Dreams from My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance*, New York, NY: Broadway Books, August 10, 2004.

<sup>14</sup> "According to a new CNN/ORC poll, 29 percent of Americans say they think that Obama is a Muslim, including 43 percent of Republicans." from Sarah Pulliam Bailey, "A Startling Number of Americans Still Believe President Obama Is a Muslim," *The Washington Post*, September 14, 2015.

<sup>15</sup> "65% [of Trump supporters] think President Obama is a Muslim, only 13% think he's a Christian. 59% [of Trump supporters] think President Obama was not born in the United States, only 23% think that he was." from Tom Jensen, *GOP Quickly Unifies Around Trump; Clinton Still Has Modest Lead*, (Public Policy Polling: Public Policy Polling, 2016).

<sup>16</sup> Dan Eggen and T. W. Farnam, "Trump's Donation History Shows Democratic Favoritism," *The Washington Post*, April 26, 2011.

<sup>17</sup> Steve Eder and Megan Twohey, "Donald Trump's Donation Is His Latest Brush with Campaign Fund Rules," *The New York Times*, September 7, 2016.

citizenship.<sup>18</sup> Because of Trump's bombastic nature and tabloid name, he was allowed to get away with this and still run the "Celebrity Apprentice."

2016 has brought to American politics anti-establishment candidates on the Right as well as the Left.<sup>19</sup> Undoubtedly, Trump's candidacy reflects a definitive desire by conservatives for fundamental change in government, complete with a rejection of the Obama presidency, an economic renaissance for working-class whites, and empowerment for the destitute. Indeed, this desire for change is backed up by the numbers as well: according to a June poll conducted by YouGov and the Huffington Post, nearly 56% of Americans desire a change in the direction of their government.<sup>20</sup>

But 2016 is, in many ways, quite unlike the "change year" of 2008. In that critical year, issues of the utmost time and importance were present within the American political consciousness: the global economy was near complete and utter collapse, millions of Americans were without health insurance, terrorism continued to threaten the lives of people around the globe, and anthropogenic climate change threatened to wreak havoc on our environment for years to come. While in 2016 the economy has largely recovered—although mainly for those at the top income tier—and with millions now insured under the Affordable Care Act, it is clear that the United States' is in a far more stable position than the last "change" election.<sup>21</sup> Instead, there is a much deeper force taking over American politics, that I argue is driven by both an

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<sup>18</sup> Ashley Parker and Steve Eder, "Inside the Six Weeks Donald Trump Was a Nonstop 'Birther,'" *The New York Times*, July 3, 2016, accessed September 7, 2016.

<sup>19</sup> Bernie Sanders, independent Senator from Vermont and self-proclaimed democratic socialist, staged an unsuccessful takeover of the Democratic Party and has fueled a different kind of populism that has pulled Hillary Clinton to the left on many issues, from trade to military intervention.

<sup>20</sup> YouGov, "Poll Result: Obama and Clinton," accessed September 9, 2016.

<sup>21</sup> Katherine Wells and Derek Thompson. *The U.S. Recovery Is Historically Good. Why Does It Feel Terrible?* (The Atlantic), May 3, 2016.

intense political polarization that has pervaded the American electorate since the 1970s and a general disgust with the way our government operates as a front for moneyed interests.<sup>22</sup>

The reason for this, I argue, stems from the presidency of the conservative icon Ronald Reagan, who had his movement begin with the failed presidential run of Arizona Senator Barry Goldwater.<sup>23</sup> <sup>24</sup> Presidential scholar Stephen Skowronek makes the argument that after the Reagan era, all following presidents will be forced into a category that is far from transformational, and instead is defined by centrist pragmatism and triangulation, such as that of Bill Clinton.<sup>25</sup> What has changed, one could argue, is that Reagan's presidency generated a vehement opposition to *governing* in general, stemming from an order-shattering declaration that was conceived during the administration and has continued to pervade American government and politics ever since.<sup>26</sup> The Gipper's famous declaration that "Government is not the solution to our problem; government is the problem," has transformed American government and politics in ways that we are still seeing today.<sup>27</sup> A small, exceptionally wealthy, and politically active class of people have, up until this point in time, wielded a tremendous amount of power over American governmental institutions and put our celebrated democratic life under siege.

The rise of this elite class of people has largely been a part of a stealth revolution, one defined by "shared sacrifice" and an acceptance of the economized state and the almost complete

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<sup>22</sup> Drew Desilver, "The Polarized Congress of Today Has Its Roots in the 1970s," *FactTank: News in the Numbers*, Pew Research Center, June 12, 2014, accessed September 2, 2016.

<sup>23</sup> Rick Perlstein, *Before the Storm: Barry Goldwater and the Unmaking of the American Consensus*, New York: Nation Books, 2009.

<sup>24</sup> William Kristol, review of *Barry Goldwater and the Unmaking of the American Consensus*, by Rick Perlstein, April 1, 2001, *The New York Times*.

<sup>25</sup> Stephen Skowronek, *The Politics Presidents Make: Leadership from John Adams to Bill Clinton* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1997), 442-446.

<sup>26</sup> Sarah A. Binder, *Polarized We Govern?*, (Strengthening American Democracy: Brookings, 2014).

<sup>27</sup> "Reagan's First Inaugural," *The Heritage Foundation*, January 20, 1981. Accessed September 2, 2016.

loss of the American democratic soul. The most blatant example of this is the Supreme Court's decision on *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission*, which essentially turned free speech into capital and monetized the political system in general.<sup>28</sup> *Citizens* is truly the exemplar of the legitimation and apparent permanence of unbound corporate political activity; it is easy to see why Americans are so sick of the political establishment.

Because the value of the separation of the economic and political realms has been so greatly diminished, the ability of everyday people to have an impact on their political institutions has become greatly diminished. Members of Congress, for example, are mostly millionaires.<sup>29</sup> This is a disturbing development in our politics, and is one that should surely not be ignored or brushed over. The impact of "Third Way" politics stemming from the years after the Reagan transformation has created an unanimity in governance that left the rise of this elite class unchecked, and has ultimately paved the way for a comprehensive perversion of the American political system into a near-oligarchy defined by capital.<sup>30</sup> Now, however, democratic sentiment is thriving.<sup>31</sup>

The Reagan rhetorical transformation led to a conservative renaissance in the United States that allowed moneyed elites to serve their own interests, while simultaneously fostering a deep distrust of government among the Republican Party's white working-class base that

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<sup>28</sup> Chicago-Kent College of Law at Illinois Tech. "Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission." Oyez.

<sup>29</sup> "The median net worth of a member of Congress was \$1,029,505 in 2013 — a 2.5 percent increase from 2012 — compared with an average American household's median net worth of \$56,355. Once again, the majority of members of Congress are millionaires — 271 of the 533 members currently in office, or 50.8 percent." from Russ Choma, "One Member of Congress = 18 American Households: Lawmakers' Personal Finances Far from Average," *OpenSecrets*, January 12, 2015.

<sup>30</sup> Wendy Brown, "Undoing Democracy: Neoliberalism's Remaking of State and Subject," in *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2015), 17-45.

<sup>31</sup> Francis Fukuyama, "American Political Decay or Renewal?," *Foreign Affairs* July 20, 2016, accessed September 1, 2016.

ultimately did not serve their best interests. An alarming study released in November of 2015 by two Princeton University economists showed that unlike their counterparts in other rich countries, and unlike every other age and ethnic group in the United States, white, middle-aged working-class Americans are dying at disturbingly high rates. This trend has shown that their deaths are not from typical diseases, such as heart disease or diabetes, but from suicide, opiate abuse, and alcoholism.<sup>32</sup> And there is only one parallel of equal destruction in modern times: the HIV/AIDS crisis.

Deep-seated worry about finances has left many white working class voters scrambling to try and make ends meet. This study reflects a shocking and disgraceful development for our modern era, one that can be explained by a number of factors, but most notably the wage stagnation and wealth inequality that has pervaded the American working class.<sup>33</sup> This has, in my view, further alienated this group of voters, whose economic distress is simultaneously juxtaposed with assertions by the Left that, because they are white, they are inherently privileged. For these people, this is hardly something they believe. Indeed, one of the authors of the Princeton study states that, “They may be privileged by the color of their skin, but that is the only way in their lives they’ve ever been privileged.”

Trump’s rhetoric has won over this group of American voters in a truly revolutionary way. In a piece for *The New Yorker*, George Packer argues that “white male privilege remains

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<sup>32</sup> “Analyzing health and mortality data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and from other sources, they concluded that rising annual death rates among this group are being driven not by the big killers like heart disease and diabetes but by an epidemic of suicides and afflictions stemming from substance abuse: alcoholic liver disease and overdoses of heroin and prescription opioids.” from Gina Kolata, “Death Rates Rising for Middle-Aged White Americans, Study Finds,” *Health* (The New York Times), November 4, 2015.

<sup>33</sup> Josh Bivens and Lawrence Mishel, *Understanding the Historic Divergence Between Productivity and a Typical Worker’s Pay: Why It Matters and Why It’s Real*, (Economic Policy Institute: Economic Policy Institute, 2015).

alive in America, but the phrase would seem odd, if not infuriating, to a sixty-year-old man working as a Walmart greeter in southern Ohio. The growing strain of identity politics on the left is pushing working-class whites, chastised for various types of bigotry (and sometimes justifiably), all the more decisively toward Trump.”<sup>34</sup> Trump openly detests this kind of “political correctness” or identity politics embraced by the Left, and his supporters detest it as well. Therefore, when the Democratic candidate for president rhetorically places “half” of Trump’s supporters in a “basket of deplorables” who are “racist, sexist, homophobic, xenophobic, Islamophobic—you name it,” all while in front of an audience of wealthy celebrities and donors at an “LGBT for Hillary” fundraiser at an elite New York club, it is no wonder they deeply resent her, the establishment, and the Democratic Party.<sup>35</sup>

### **Making America Great Again: George Wallace, Immigration, and Race**

“When Mexico sends its people, they’re not sending their best. They’re not sending you. They’re not sending you. They’re sending people that have lots of problems, and they’re bringing those problems with us. They’re bringing drugs. They’re bringing crime. They’re rapists. And some, I assume, are good people.”  
*-Donald J. Trump, from the June 2015 announcement of his run for president*

“They don’t know it yet, but they’re going to pay for it. And they’re great people and great leaders but they’re going to pay for the wall. On day one, we will begin working on an

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<sup>34</sup> “Trump also grasped what Republican élites are still struggling to fathom: the ideology that has gripped their Party since the late nineteen-seventies—anti-government, pro-business, nominally pious—has little appeal for millions of ordinary Republicans. The base of the Party, the middle-aged white working class, has suffered at least as much as any demographic group because of globalization, low-wage immigrant labor, and free trade. Trump sensed the rage that flared from this pain and made it the fuel of his campaign.” George Packer, “Head of the Class: How Donald Trump Is Winning over the White Working Class,” *The New Yorker*, May 16, 2016, accessed September 1, 2016.

<sup>35</sup> Abby Phillip, “Clinton: Half of Trump’s Supporters Fit in ‘basket of deplorables,’” *The Washington Post*, September 9, 2016.

impenetrable, physical, tall, powerful, beautiful southern  
border wall.”  
-Donald J. Trump, in an August 2016 speech on immigration  
in Phoenix, Arizona after returning from a visit with  
Mexican president Enrique Peña Nieto

The politics of immigration and race in this election cycle have been central to Donald Trump’s campaign, and were one of the main topics that my respondents found appealing. By far, the most central theme to these interviews involved Trump’s rhetoric on immigration. Certainly, this is not something new in American politics; nativism has had a long history in the United States, and the perception of what it means to be “American,” or who qualifies as a true American, has greatly changed over time. Mexican migration to the United States has slowed down in recent years, likely due to the Obama administration’s stricter implementation of immigration laws.<sup>36</sup> In general, however, the United States has seen a rapid increase in immigration from Mexico since the 1990s, and this has had profound effects on the electorate as well as the way we talk about immigration.<sup>37</sup>

While Trump’s assertion that Mexicans who came into the United States were “bringing crime,” “bringing drugs,” that they are “rapists,” and that he will “build a wall that Mexico will pay for” was surely political bait for the working-class whites of this country, it had another effect that was surely a part of Trump’s overall strategy: it sent the media into a frenzy that was blasted across all networks and topped headlines in all of the major newspapers. In total, Trump has received close to \$2 billion in free media coverage since he announced his candidacy, forcing

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<sup>36</sup> “The Obama administration has deported 2.5 million illegal immigrants. This record-setting pace of deportations holds up even when counting only those from the interior of the United States — 1.18 million of them under Obama’s watch. By contrast, the Bush administration deported 2 million people and a confirmed 555,164 from the interior of the United States.” from Alex Nowrasteh, “President Obama’s Mixed Legacy on Immigration,” The Cato Institute, June 6, 2016, accessed September 1, 2016.

<sup>37</sup> *U.S. Unauthorized Immigration Population Trends, 1990-2012*, (Pew Research Center’s Hispanic Trends Project: Pew Research Center, 2014).

the press to wonder if they have created the Trump phenomenon by merely covering it.<sup>38</sup> Trump is, in many ways, the incarnation of 24/7 news cycles and our media-centered culture, giving him far more screen time than any other candidate on the trail, and allowing his face to be blasted into the nation's political consciousness.

Again, while there are indeed differences between today's populist politics and that of the past, it should be noted that racially-charged presidential campaigns are not anything new in the United States. The Trump campaign, I argue, is similar to that of George Wallace, the Democratic governor of Alabama and segregationist who ran under the American Independent Party in the 1968 election and lost to Richard Nixon. Similar to other Southern populist orators, Wallace was able to simultaneously denounce political elites and stoke the racial fears of his constituents.<sup>39</sup> It should certainly be noted that Wallace's campaign was not centered on immigration, but he was indeed a populist and a known racist who ran on the idea of "law and order," similar to Trump.

In an article entitled "Race" from the May 1991 edition of *The Atlantic Monthly*, scholars Thomas and Mary Edsall argue that Wallace "capitalized on the huge defection of white Democrats" and openly demonized "an elite Democratic establishment" who he thought was bent on "imposing a liberal, authoritarian, statist agenda on an unwilling electorate."<sup>40</sup> A quote from Wallace's speech at a Milwaukee rally sums up the historical parallel of his campaign in a single sentence: "You know who the biggest bigots in the world are—they're the ones who call

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<sup>38</sup> Nicholas Confessore and Karen Yourish, "\$2 Billion Worth of Free Media for Donald Trump," *The New York Times* (The New York Times), May 17, 2016

<sup>39</sup> Michael Kazin, *The Populist Persuasion: An American History*, Revised ed. (United States: Cornell University Press, 1998), 228.

<sup>40</sup> Thomas Byrne Edsall and Mary D. Edsall, "Race," *The Atlantic Monthly*, May 1991.

others bigots.” Wallace’s sentiment parallels Trump’s and, in a sense, applies the same logic towards his liberal, “elitist” opponent.

While Trump’s “tough talk” on immigration is repulsive to many liberals, each of my respondents took the issue of immigration very seriously, and in often contradictory ways. Two of them were the children of immigrants—a supporter named Jim whose family immigrated legally from Croatia and settled in New York City, and a Trump campaign county coordinator named Jose whose parents were both born in Mexico and legally migrated to the U.S.—and one employed illegal immigrants on his vineyard in rural central Washington. A retired, blue-collar respondent I spoke to named Roger worked with illegal immigrants as a day laborer in the 1950s, and openly admired how hard they worked alongside him. In my discussions with these folks, I was struck by their own pride in the fact that they were “exceptions” to the immigration dilemma. Specifically, the two children of immigrants demonstrated the profound disconnect that comes with wealth: Jim, the Croatian man, is an investment banker, and Jose, the county coordinator, made a small fortune at a timeshare company before retiring in his early 40s.

The comforts of wealth and a profound disconnect from the daily lives of undocumented immigrants have certainly made it easy for these folks to see undocumented immigrants as almost immediately “ineligible” for citizenship, for their parents immigrated legally and therefore they as individuals are an exception to what they see as a vast illegal immigration problem. Although, for example, Jose is Hispanic, socioeconomically speaking he lives like an upper-middle class white American, living in a place where Trump support is huge and exposure to undocumented immigrants is little to none.

Disconnection and a failure to understand contradiction is something that spanned the breadth of these interviews. In an interview with the supporter named Joe, I asked him about his

thoughts on Trump’s rhetoric on immigration, and he responded by immediately connecting American decline with race:

Oh I mean when I graduated high school in 1996 you had to fill out a questionnaire about different things. One of them was, “in 10 years what is going to be the greatest strain on American society?” And I wrote “Mexicans.”

What is so astonishing from this interview—which was by far the most racially-charged of them all—is the immense contradiction he posed after saying this. When I asked him whether or not he had an experience with illegal immigrants in his daily life, he responded by saying,

I mean we employ them from time to time—on the farm, not here [his restaurant and bar]—

and continued by immediately connecting Mexican immigration with criminality, saying:

they just...every year in my hometown there’s a handful of people killed by them. Just because of drunk driving, or murders, or whatever. But for the most part it’s just a drain on society. Tax-wise, medical-wise, you know, a lot of these inner cities are getting the drugs in from it.

Clearly, Joe sees Mexican immigrants as a threat to the American way of life, even though he employs them on his farm. This is a significant contradiction that in many ways is unsurprising. White, conservative voters largely believe that Mexican immigrants are taking American jobs, even though they are jobs that white Americans would never want to do, such as working as a day laborer on a farm. Chris, a respondent I discussed before, made perhaps the most concise example of this logic out of all of my interviews:

“I think the problem we’ve had in the last 20 years with wages...I think it’s because we’ve had no control on immigration.”

Chris’ assertion that wage stagnation is due to the rise of immigrants is quite misguided, but is sentiment quite common among Trump’s supporters. The fact that Chris made this assertion was somewhat strange to me; as I said before, he was a principled fellow who was once a libertarian, and he cited various facts in our interview that I had not heard myself. This claim, however, is

fundamentally misguided: it is estimated that immigrant labor in the United States actually provides positive wage gains of 0.1 to 0.6 for native-born workers.<sup>41</sup>

In addition to Chris' linking of wage stagnation with an immigration influx, Joe's immediate connection with criminality was another contradiction present in my interview with Chad, a Millennial supporter, Puget Sound graduate student, and self-proclaimed moderate, who perfectly displayed the perception of specific anecdotes of criminal activity by undocumented immigrants as a means for judgement of them all:

"I think enforcing the law; that resonates with me. If you're legal, go through the system. This isn't Ellis Island anymore. I know people like to think that, "Oh, America is great, come on in" but there's 300 million people here already. You have to be sensible, and make the right decision, even if that means rejecting people. Now deportation; that's a different beast. That's a tough one; looking at Kate's Law, when that girl died in California. One instance of that is too many. At that point I am willing to get on board with enforcing national security. You have to do it."

Indeed, it is the perception of the Trump supporter that "one instance is too many," even though American citizens commit far more crimes on average than illegal immigrants.<sup>42 43 44</sup> His support for Kate's Law, a piece of mandatory-sentencing legislation that would force deported immigrants who return to the United States to be sentenced to five years in a federal penitentiary after conviction, is telling of the double-standard present within the politics of the Right in America. The Right sees Mexican immigrants as "criminals" merely because they are seeking a better life in a country that is known as the land of opportunity. While these specific supporters are, for the most part, not outwardly racist, they offer some insight onto questions of race and

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<sup>41</sup> Michael Greenstone and Adam Looney, *What Immigration Means for U.S. Employment and Wages*, (Brookings on Job Numbers: Brookings, 2012).

<sup>42</sup> Alex Nowrasteh, "Immigration and Crime – What the Research Says," The Cato Institute, July 14, 2015, accessed September 1, 2016.

<sup>43</sup> Philip Bump, "Surprise! Donald Trump Is Wrong about Immigrants and Crime," *The Washington Post*, July 2, 2015.

<sup>44</sup> Jason L. Riley, "The Mythical Connection Between Immigrants and Crime," *The Wall Street Journal* (WSJ), July 14, 2015.

how they coincide with the vast popularity of Trump's immigration rhetoric with Republican voters.

### **Conclusion: A Crisis of Legitimacy?**

Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow,  
 Creeps in this petty pace from day to day,  
 To the last syllable of recorded time;  
 And all our yesterdays have lighted fools  
 The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle!  
 Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player,  
 That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,  
 And then is heard no more. It is a tale  
 Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,  
 Signifying nothing.

-*Macbeth*, Act V Scene V, lines 17-28

The biggest obstacle, I think, is the general public's reflexive, unreasoning hostility to politicians and the process of politics. Neurotic hatred of the political class is the country's last universally acceptable form of bigotry. Because that problem is mental, not mechanical, it really is hard to remedy.

-Jonathan Rauch, *How American Politics Went Insane*, from the 2016 July/August issue of *The Atlantic*

While this race has certainly been driven by anti-elitism and the politics of immigration, I believe that there is a more significant issue driving this election, one that tells us fundamental things about our system of government and the state of our democracy. Trump's rise has displayed that, unlike the politics of the last thirty-or-so years, everyday Americans can now wield significant impact on their governmental institutions, as opposed to the neoliberal "consensus" that was conceived under the triangulating years of Bill Clinton, for example.<sup>45</sup> Both Trump and Sanders' rise shows that the everyday American voter has an increased ability

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<sup>45</sup> Martin Jacques, "The Death of Neoliberalism and the Crisis in Western Politics," *The Guardian* (The Guardian), August 26, 2016.

to affect their government, whether that voter is an idealistic young Millenials strapped by student loan debt or a somewhat conservative, laid off factory worker in rural Indiana whose community has been plagued by prescription opiate abuse and the effects of globalization.

Trump's rise, specifically, shows just how deep the level of disconnect is between political elites and their citizens. As I stated earlier, Trump's takeover of the Republican Party is partly due to the fact that the objectives of the Republican establishment are far from those of the average Republican voter; while the establishment wants to increase free trade and immigration, nearly privatize social security, and engage in costly wars, its working-class base wants absolutely none of these things. In a recent column in *The Wall Street Journal* entitled "How Political Elites Forsake Their Countrymen," former Reagan speech writer and pundit Peggy Noonan argues that elites of all types have become a global class, who openly disdain struggling working people and seek only to protect themselves:

On Wall Street, where they used to make statesmen, they now barely make citizens. CEOs are consumed with short-term thinking, stock prices, quarterly profits. They don't really believe that they have to be involved with "America" now; they see their job as thinking globally and meeting shareholder expectations.

In Silicon Valley the idea of "the national interest" is not much discussed. They adhere to higher, more abstract, more global values. They're not about America, they're about . . . well, I suppose they'd say the future.

In Hollywood the wealthy protect their own children from cultural decay, from the sick images they create for all the screens, but they don't mind if poor, unparented children from broken-up families get those messages and, in the way of things, act on them down the road. From what I've seen of those in power throughout business and politics now, the people of your country are not your countrymen, they're aliens whose bizarre emotions you must attempt occasionally to anticipate and manage.

This excerpt draws on declarations that Noonan made earlier in the race, connecting Trump's success with "the rise of the unprotected," or of the uprising of those on the bottom who do not

make the political decisions that affect their livelihoods.<sup>46</sup> One quote perfectly sums up the attitudes of elites in Noonan's view:

Now it seems the attitude of the top half is: You're on your own. Get with the program, little racist.

As I stated earlier, while there are certainly justifiable aspects of the Trump moment to criticize as racist, xenophobic, "crazy," or just plain bad, it is alarming that many on the Left immediately categorize the Trump voter as one or all of these things. This is not to say, however, that those on the Right do not do the same with liberals.

What is a more frightening development, and one that is much more present on the Right than on the Left, is the rhetoric of this election being "rigged" against everyday Americans, and specifically against Trump himself. As I included earlier, Trump's speech at the Republican National Convention shows just how deeply those within his movement see this election as already decided, for the system perpetuated by the political and media elites is corrupt and completely stacked against them. In the context of a likely Clinton victory in November, it is hard to see Trump backing down and following in the footsteps of his predecessors by acknowledging his defeat. If anything, this election will lead to what I refer to as a crisis of legitimacy, where our deeply polarized electorate, but especially those on the Right, will see the other side's elected officials as somehow illegitimate because the system is "rigged" against them. This phenomenon is an uncomfortable blend of various developments present within American politics of late: elite disconnect, declining faith in governmental institutions,<sup>47</sup> rampant

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<sup>46</sup> Peggy Noonan, "Trump and the Rise of the Unprotected," *The Wall Street Journal* (WSJ), February 26, 2016.

<sup>47</sup> *Trust in Government*, (In Depth: Gallup, 2015).

political polarization,<sup>48 49</sup> declining faith in democracy as a system of government,<sup>50</sup> and divisive rhetoric used by our political figures.

I conclude with a series of questions regarding this political moment in time for the reader to ponder. When will political elites start to listen to everyday people, and escape their realms of protection to hear the grievances of their own constituents, or even of their political opponents? When will so many American voters escape their online echo-chambers, to actually attempt to open their minds and understand beliefs other than their own, backed up by factual evidence? When will we as a nation wake up, and see that our politics cannot continue in its present state? How did we get here?

Until these questions are answered, our country will merely continue to see our politics descend into further madness, driven by shouting voices full of sound and fury, who signify nothing.

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<sup>48</sup> Drew DeSilver, *Electorally Competitive Counties Have Grown Scarcer in Recent Decades*, (FactTank: Pew Research Center, 2016).

<sup>49</sup> *Partisanship and Political Animosity in 2016*, (Pew Research Center: Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, 2016).

<sup>50</sup> Roberto Stefan Foa and Yascha Mounk, “The Democratic Disconnect,” *Journal of Democracy* 27, no. 3 (July 2016).