

Demagogues in America: From the Revolution to the Second World War*

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Abstract

We define demagogues as anti-establishment politicians who provide simplistic explanations and solutions for the people's problems. We identify two key forms of these simplistic solutions: those that ignore resource constraints and those that blame particular ethnic or cultural groups for resource shortfalls. There are two main results: (1) demagogues arise on the national stage in the form of presidential contenders in the aftermath of an economic crisis, or during the slow recovery that follows. (2) Established parties often adjust their positions toward demagogues to fend them off (e.g., FDR in the mid 1930s); and when they refuse (e.g., John Quincy Adams), demagogues win and implement far worse policies that destroy physical and social capital. We highlight how concerns for demagogues dominated the thinking of Americans in the Revolutionary Era and the Early Republic, and were a main factor behind the Constitutional Movement.

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1 Introduction

“General Jackson is the slave of the majority: he yields to its wishes, its propensities, and its demands; say rather, that he anticipates and forestalls them,” wrote Alexis de Tocqueville in *Democracy in America*. But the ever observant de Tocqueville knew all too well that Jackson was far from a humble servant of the people. So he continued: “General Jackson appears to me...to be a Federalist by taste, and a Republican by calculation. General Jackson stoops to gain the favor of the majority, but when he feels that his popularity is secure, he overthrows all obstacles in the pursuit of the objects which the community approves, or of those which it does not look upon with a jealous eye. He is supported by a power with which his predecessors were unacquainted; and he tramples on his personal enemies whenever they cross his path with a facility which no former President ever enjoyed” (p. 463-4). Hamilton would have summarized Jackson’s evolution as “commencing [as a] demagogue, and ending [as a] tyrant.”

We refer to politicians as demagogues, if they have the following two fundamental characteristics: (1) They claim to defend the people against the establishment. By the establishment, demagogues mean those people or entities who are persistently in power and intentionally impose their economic or ideological interests on the people. (2) They provide simplistic explanations and solutions for the people’s problems. These explanations and solutions take various forms, depending on specific circumstances and a demagogue’s creativity. But two categories stand out: (i) solutions that ignore resource constraints, for example, plans that call for less taxes and more spending with little concerns for budget constraints or deficit; (ii) explanations that attribute most problems to a particular ethnic, racial, or cultural group, and consequently, offer solutions based on those assertions. An extreme form in this category is proposing racial purification to cure the ills of society. Simplistic solutions often follow from the “defender of the people” stance of demagogues. As Kazin (1998) describes, they often claim that “the common sense, moral values, and toughness of white working people” are “superior to the supposed wisdom of urban sophisticates who seldom got their hands dirty” (p. 234).

This definition of a demagogue includes people like Andrew Jackson, William Jennings Bryan, and Huey Long, whose times we use to illustrate and make our points. It also includes

people like George Wallace and Donald Trump, whom we discuss briefly, but not politicians like Robert La Follette or Ross Perot, who exhibited some anti-establishment sentiments, but whose explanations and solutions were not simplistic. For example, in his official campaign program Perot told the American people that “The British aristocracy we drove out in our Revolution has been replaced with our own version: a political nobility that is immune to the people’s will. They have created through our campaign and lobbying laws a series of incentives that corrupt the intent of the Constitution.” But he blamed Americans for allowing this to happen, “if you want to know who’s to blame for our political system that encourages and rewards people who cash in on public service, look in the mirror.” But this political cleansing was just a necessary prologue to addressing economic problems, which he insisted would be hard. “Our first priority is to balance the budget,” and to do that he proposed cuts across the board including entitlement programs. Voting for Perot would amount to the admission of neglect on the part of the people, almost a complacency in the development of a dysfunctional, corrupt political establishment. It also implied that common Americans must tighten their belts, do more, and demand less; whereas demagogues more typically argue that common Americans can get more due to efficiency savings or reallocations from the undeserving to the deserving.

This paper provides a narrative of key American presidential contenders who fit our definition of demagogues from the Revolution to the Second World War. It also highlights the concerns for demagogues that ran through the Revolutionary era from independence to the early years of the republic. We focus on three key figures: Andrew Jackson, William Jennings Bryan, and Huey Long. We use them as organizing points to discuss their emergence, actions, and consequences. Thus, for example, we discuss the Farmer’s Alliance and the People’s (Populist) Party in the section on Bryan, and we discuss Father Coughlin and isolationists in the section on Long. We attempt to maintain a narrative throughout the paper, but we collect the lessons and regularities that emerge from that narrative in the next section, where we also briefly discuss the related literature. The following section discusses ethno-nationalistic demagogues in contemporary America, where we briefly discuss George Wallace and Donald Trump, but we also highlight that many demagogues do not fall into the category of ethno-nationalistic demagogues. The next three sections discuss Andrew Jackson, the People’s Party and William

Jennings Bryan, and Huey Long, respectively. We then discuss the concerns for demagogues and remedies to mitigate their dangers in the Revolutionary Era and the Early Republic. Finally, in a conclusion, we make links between equality, evangelicalism, and demagogues in America.

2 Patterns and Lessons

We organize the patterns and lessons of our analysis into three categories of emergence of demagogues, response of established parties, and the concerns for demagogues in the Revolutionary Era and the Early Republic.

2.1 Economic Crises and the Emergence of Demagogues

We show that demagogues (in the form of presidential contenders) often gained popular support after the onset of severe economic crisis or during the slow recovery. Jackson came after the Panic of 1819 and the recession that followed. The People's (Populist) Party formed in 1892 as the political consolidation of a broader populist movement, including the Farmers' Alliances, which began around the Panic of 1873 and expanded during the Long Depression that followed. Bryan came after the Panic of 1893 and the recession that followed. Long emerged in the midst of the Great Depression. In contemporary America, Donald Trump came in the slow recovery that followed the Great Recession. There are occasional exceptions such as George Wallace, where a demagogue emerges during fundamental social crisis rather than economic crisis. Wallace gained popularity during the Rights Movement of the 1960s that transformed America, and in the midst of the Vietnam War, which affected many American families. In good times, for example, in the 1910s, 1920s, or 1950s, demagogues did not arise. 1910s and 1920s featured third party candidates, Theodore Roosevelt in 1912 and Robert M. La Follette in 1928 under the banner of the Progressive Party. But neither satisfies the defining characteristics of demagogues. Similarly, Ross Perot ran as an independent in 1992 and as the Reform Party's candidate, but was not a demagogue.¹

¹Joseph McCarthy arose in the 1950s, but he did not rise to the level of presidential candidacy, and his Red Scare focused on the necessity and difficulty of routing out Communists who were seeking to undermine the United States.

A more systematic analysis requires the identification of what constitutes a severe economic crisis in a world where ebbs and flows of business cycles are standard features of an economy. Some cases are well-known: The Great Depression and the Great Recession are the two major economic crisis of the last 100 years. To identify older economic crises, one approach is to consider major bank panics. Jalil (2015) provides a comprehensive and methodologically transparent time-series of banks panics in America from 1825 to 1929. Combining multiple media sources, he identifies seven major banking panics from 1825 to 1929: November 1833 to April 1834, March to May 1837, October 1839, August-October 1857, September 1873, May-August 1893, and October-November 1907 (Jalil 2015, p. 305, Table 2). Using Davis's (2006) chronology of business cycles in America, he observes that each of these banking panics is associated with an economic recession (Jalil 2015, p. 323, Table 8). As one goes further back, data quality deteriorates. Still, historical records indicates that the Panic of 1819 was a major bank panic in American history (Rothbard 1962; Wilentz 2005)—some have called it “the first great depression” (Browning 2019).

As we will discuss, the Panic of 1819 and the recession that followed led to the emergence of Andrew Jackson as the candidate with the plurality of votes in the election of 1824 (the “corrupt bargain” made John Quincy Adams the president) and his victory in 1828. The Panic of 1833-34 occurred during the Jackson's Bank War, and the panics of 1837 and 1839 occurred in the recession that followed—a recession to which Jackson's irresponsible policies heartily contributed.

The Panic of 1857² occurred in a peculiar time in American history when the question of the expansion of slavery and its consequences had disintegrated the Whig Party, about to split the Democratic Party, and lead to the creation of the Republican Party in 1854. The salience of slavery predominated, and indeed, the recession was interpreted as the evidence for or against slavery. Republicans called for internal improvement legislatures (an updated version of Clay's American Program), which the Democrats blocked with the help of Buchanan. On the other side, slaveholders boasted in the cotton economy and their slavery system because their cotton

²The Panic of 1857 occurred in the same year as the shocking supreme court's Dred Scott decision, where chief justice Roger Taney (who got Jackson's nomination in return for him role as attorney general to execute Jackson's Bank War) ruled that African Americans are not citizens and cannot bring suit in federal courts, and that the Congress cannot regulate slavery in territories because slaves are property.

economy had remained immune to the crisis—manifested in James Hammond’s 1858 cotton-king Senate speech (McPherson 2003, Ch. 6).

The panics of 1873 and 1893 are associated with the Long Depression that witnessed the emergence of the Farmers’ Alliance and its evolution into the People’s Party, and the candidacy of James Weaver in the presidential election of 1892, and William Jennings Bryan in 1896 and 1900. After the Panic of 1907 and its subsequent recession, Bryan again became a presidential candidate under the Democratic banner in 1908.

The next significant economic crisis was the Great Depression. The 1930s witnessed a slew of demagogues with Huey Long being the most notorious one. Since the Second World War, there have been multiple recessions (e.g., in mid 1970s, early 1980s, early 1990s, and early 2000s), reflecting the usual pattern of business cycles and shocks such as the oil shock of the mid 1970s due to OPEC behavior and war demobilization. The main economic crisis after the Great Depression was the Great Recession that began in 2007. Donald Trump announced his candidacy in June 2015 when the economy was slowly recovering after its collapse in 2007-2009.

In sum, all severe economic crises since the Early Republic were followed by the emergence of demagogues on the national stage. Conversely, this list covers the main demagogues who rose on the national stage to become presidential contenders (Andrew Jackson, James Weaver, William Jennings Bryan, Huey Long, and Donald Trump). This suggests a correlation between major economic crises and the rise of demagogues in the form of presidential candidates.

An anomaly to this correlation is George Wallace in the 1960s, where there was no recession. But the social, cultural, and legal changes around the Rights Movement and the Vietnam War make the 1960s the most turbulent post-war decade—even the Democratic Convention of 1968 became notorious after the televised clashes between the Chicago police and anti-war protesters outside the convention. The source of the people’s problems in 1960s was not mainly economic; they were social and cultural (Patterson 1997). Just as severe economic downturns generate deep dissatisfaction with the status quo and require reliefs, so can dramatic social and cultural changes, although they seem more rare. Our analysis suggests that there is a regularity between the occurrence of severe economic crises and the rise of demagogues. However, as the 1960s indicates, non-economic factors can also lead to the emergence of demagogues

even absent significant economic distress. Perhaps a key is that severe economic crisis are more frequent than dramatic social and cultural changes.

A particular form of cultural displacements can arise from large waves of immigration. For example, the huge immigration wave of the antebellum, especially, from Ireland, is associated with the rise of the anti-Catholic American Party (Know-Nothings) in the 1840s and 1850s. But the cultural changes that accompany large waves of immigration alone rarely seem to have been a sufficient stimulus to push demagogues to the national stage. When immigration becomes an issue for presidential elections, it often happens in relation to economic hardship. The emergence of the American Party in 1850s is closely related to the disintegration of the two-party system along the issue of slavery, where economic concerns played a key role. More broadly, increasing crime and reduced wages were key concerns in the rise of the American Party (McPherson 2003, Ch. 4). Like all real world events, no simple explanation captures the complicated network of causes that generate an outcome. Still, there seems to be a regularity between severe economic crisis and the rise of demagogues.

2.2 The Establishment's Response: Inching Toward Demagogues

Our second observation is that established parties and politicians often adjust their platforms in response to popular demagogues, seeking to forestall them, albeit at the cost of implementing bad policy. The policies of the Second New Deal and FDR's combative, anti-business tone in the mid-1930s were partly designed to steal the thunder from the platforms of Huey Long, Father Charles Coughlin, Francis Townsend, and others. Some of these policies slowed down economic recovery, hurting millions of Americans. FDR pushed for these policies despite warnings from his advisors that they may not be economically sound. His justification reflected the threat of far worse policies should demagogues get their way, "I am fighting Communism, Huey Longism, Coughlinism, Townsendism." In the late Nineteenth century, the Democratic Party adopted the silver platform and the "commonwealth" approach of the People's (Populist) Party and selected Bryan as its candidate for 1896 and 1900 presidential elections. This broke the ranks of the People's Party, after which the party fizzled. Then, the rise of Progressives in both parties and the consecutive presidencies of Theodore Roosevelt, Taft and Wilson brought

into practice the key idea of government intervention—the anathema in classical American political thought and a radical ingredient of the Populist Movement in the late Nineteenth century. At the other extreme, when established politicians remain stubbornly inflexible, they lose to demagogues whose policies end up hurting the republic. Facing Andrew Jackson in the 1820s, John Quincy Adams refused to adjust his platform, and lost to Jackson. Jackson’s policies hurt the Republic and his supporters. For example, Jackson’s ill-informed “bank war” materially contributed to the Panic of 1837 and the ensuing recession that endured well into the 1840s.

2.3 Demagogues and their Discontents in the Early Republic

Finally, we highlight that concerns about the dangers of demagogues with an ill-informed populace dominated the thinking of the Americans even in the early days of independence. All of the elite revolutionary leaders, including John Adams, Hamilton, Jefferson, and Madison, contemplated the suitability of the American people for a republican government and proposed various institutional arrangements to protect the republic and the people from their own bad decision-making and demagogues who may mislead them. The prevalence of demagogues in state legislatures was the key driving force behind the Constitutional Movement. As Madison later described, it “contributed more to that uneasiness which produced the [Constitutional] Convention, and prepared the public mind for a general reform than those which accrued to our national character and interest from the inadequacy of the Confederation to its immediate objects” (Wood 2009, p. 16).

Those concerns and worries continued into the early republic. They divided old friends and revolutionaries, with John Adams representing the more conservative side, fearing the people and demagogues; and Jefferson representing the more radical side, trusting the people and cherishing their decisions whatever they may be. Those sentiments clashed head-to-head between 1798 and 1800, and came close to a civil war. But the republic survived and a moderated Jeffersonian vision triumphed within the boundaries of the Constitution. “The revolution of 1800,” Jefferson stated many years later, “was as real a revolution in the principles of our government as that of 76 was in its form; not effected indeed by the sword, as that, but by the rational and peaceable instrument of reform, the suffrage of the people.” Still, Jefferson, himself, did not

like the logical consequence of his unabating faith in the people and their choices: he did not like Jackson and did not support him in the election of 1824. The essence of those old debates and contradictions, how much should a people trust themselves in making decisions as a whole and how far should they go to restrict and filter their demands, remains as relevant today as it was in the uncertain days of the Revolutionary era.

2.4 Literature

Bernhardt, Krasa and Shadmehr (2019) provide theoretical foundations for the historical patterns and lessons that we draw. Within an infinite horizon framework, they study the tension between guarding the long-run interests of voters and catering to their short-run desires by far-sighted, benevolent parties who are challenged by office-seeking demagogues, characterizing long-run outcomes of democracy in a country populated by a short-sighted majority. Each period, a benevolent party/candidate and demagogue propose investments (and hence consumption) for that period. A short-sighted median voter ignores the future consequences of policies (e.g., of tax cuts or generous pension plans), focusing only on the current utility derived from the policies and the valences of the candidates, choosing his preferred candidate. The winner's platform is implemented, period payoffs are realized, and the capital stock evolves reflecting the depreciated capital plus any renewed investment.

The model predicts that demagogues will sharply under-invest, prepared to sacrifice future physical and social capital to cater to short-sighted voters: demagogues propose the simplistic strategy of increasing current consumption without regard for the complex future consequences. The model also predicts that demagogues become more popular following downturns that reduce capital and hence magnify the utility differences in platforms. The model predicts that even when demagogues are likely to have very low valences, they still influence the benevolent party's policy proposals, reflecting that the benevolent party understands that it must win election in order to implement its policy, and that a failure to adjust to the demagogue would raise the probability that the benevolent party loses.

There is a large literature that uses the term populism, delineating its different meanings and studying the emergence of populists. A branch of the literature essentially considers populism

as a “mode of expression” (Hofstadter 1964). Kazin (1998) categorizes populism as a “mode of persuasion.” 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” (p. 1). Similarly, Bonikowski and Gidron (2016) categorize populism as “discursive strategy that juxtaposes the virtuous populace with a corrupt elite and views the former as the sole legitimate source of political power” (p. 1593). In the same vein, Müller (2016) views anti-pluralism as the key feature of populism, and defines populists as those who “claim that they, and they alone, represent the people” (p. 3).

Another branch of the literature focuses on policy positions. For example, Boix (2019) considers populists as politicians who introduce the new policy dimension of globalism that specifies the degree of trade and immigration liberalism. While traditional parties remain committed to high degree of globalism, populists demand lower globalism. Depending on where they locate themselves on the traditional left-right, compensation dimension, they can be characterized as left-wing or right-wing populists. Rodrik (2017), too, focuses on the role of globalization. He argues that free trade creates economic losers, and hence grievances (“demand side of populism”). Then, politicians provide a narrative of “what is happening, this is why, and these are the people who are doing it to you” (p. 24)—“supply side of populism.” When these economic dislocations are caused mainly by capital movements, left-wing populism emerges; When dislocations are due to cheap labor entry, right-wing populism emerges.

Our definition of populism has elements from both these branches of the literature. The anti-establishment aspect of our definition captures the key element of the first branch, and reduction in globalism is a particular form of simplistic explanations and solutions, which constitute the second part of our definition. Moreover, our focus on the role of economic crisis and the response of established parties is largely absent in the literature—as well as our discussion of the prevalence of concerns with demagogues in the Revolutionary Era and the Early Republic.

Trump’s ascent to presidency has generated a specialized body of literature that aims to analyze the causes and consequences of his presidency. Here, we focus on Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018) who provide examples from various countries to draw lessons about *How Democra-*

cies Die. They argue that institutional filters (e.g., unpledged electoral colleges) and democratic norms (e.g., tolerance and institutional forbearance) have historically protected American democracy. One such democratic norm is the refusal to support extremists in one's own party—e.g., powerful party men did not support Henry Ford's candidacy for president in 1920s, OVP kept FPO out in the 2016 Austrian presidential election, and Fillon supported Macron in 2017 to keep Le Pen out of power. They argue that demagogues get to power when institutional barriers to filter public opinion are lowered and democratic norms are weakened, so that parties do not function properly to keep demagogues out of power. Their focus is on how demagogues in power dismantle democracy. Demagogues, they argue, damage democratic norms and slowly dismantle formal institutions (with some short-term justification), killing democracy by a thousand cuts.³ Interpreted in the context of Bernhardt et al. (2019), damaging democratic norms represents the sacrifice of social capital with high future costs in return for immediate short-term gains. Our discussion of Andrew Jackson, the demagogue who managed to ascend to presidency, shows the variety of ways that he disregarded democratic norms—many of which anticipated Trump's behavior.

Our focus is on the emergence of demagogues. We show that crises (in particular, acute economic crises) lead to the emergence of demagogue as presidential contenders, and that established parties and politicians adjust their positions toward the demagogues—not towards their traditional competitors as Levitsky and Ziblatt argue—to fend them off. Moreover, while Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018) worry about the slow dismantling of democracy by demagogues, we also highlight the less dramatic, yet profoundly damaging consequences of demagogues when they win (e.g., Jackson in the 1820s and 1830s) and when established parties adjust to fend them off—e.g., FDR in the mid 1930s.

We also highlight the prevalence of concerns for the dangerous combination of a short-sighted electorate and cunning demagogues in the Revolutionary Era and the Early Republic.

³By democratic norms, they refer to a set of informal rules and expectations, including tolerance for opposition and the forbearance of institutions, e.g., to use executive orders or filibustering only sparingly. Democratic norms have been considered critical for democracy by many scholars ranging from Lipset (1959) to Carey et al. (2019). Levitsky and Ziblatt attribute the breakdown of democratic norms (which they argue has been on the rise in the last three decades) to the re-alignment that followed racial equality and immigration legislation of the 1960s as well as the issue of abortion and Evangelicals.

In large part, the Constitutional Movement emerged to address those concerns. American statesmen were truly concerned with the tradeoff inherent between representing the immediate preferences of the population versus protecting the longevity of representative institutions and the public good.

Jackson's ascent to presidency was a failure in that design—even Jefferson did not support Jackson's candidacy in 1824—with long-term consequences for the democratic culture of America. Israel (2017) points to a subtle long-term consequences of Jacksonian style of democracy. “Where Jefferson, Madison, and Paine conceived democracy and the principles of 1776 to be rooted in enlightened, highly motivated debate, reasoned argument, persuasion on the basis of evidence, and judgment of facts, most new electors, it transpired, had little time for any of this and were content to cheer the triumph of ordinary notions and Jackson” (p. 524). It was “a real turning point,” which James Fenimore Cooper fictionalized in *The American Democrat*. The long-run consequence of Jacksonian politics “was the growing identification of ‘democracy’ with uninformed popular opinion, empty speeches, crass chauvinism, and simplistic cliches about individualism and self-reliance” (Israel 2017, p. 525). Indeed, some autocratic tendencies emerged by the late 19th century in the Populist Movement as some craved “a Napoleon in the industrial world” (Postel 2007, p. 165). Regardless of these assessments, concerns for the character of the American people to value republican norms were dominant in the Early Republic. Madison, primarily known as the architect of American institutions, made this clear in his speeches in the Constitutional Convention:

I go on this great republican principle, that the people will have virtue and intelligence to select men of virtue and wisdom. Is there no virtue among us? If there be not, we are in a wretched situation. No theoretical checks—no form of government can render us secure. To suppose that any form of government will secure liberty or happiness without any virtue in the people, is a chimerical idea.

What constellation of institutional filters best build on and reinforce the “virtue and intelligence” of the people to create enduring democratic remains a contested question.

3 Ethno-nationalistic Demagogues in Contemporary America

One may be tempted to consider the incitement of racial, ethnic, or nationalistic resentments as an indispensable element of demagogues. However, such “ethno-nationalistic populism” (Bonikowski 2017) is better understood as one manifestation of the two defining characteristics of demagogues that we identify. They appear as key rallying points for some demagogues, but not others. Only some argue that the cure of the ills of the majority lies in expelling, confining, or eliminating a racial or ethnic minority. For others, the powerful minority who exploit the majority are of the same race, ethnicity, and religion, and what makes the minority dangerous is not the color of their skin but rather the nature of their conniving and conspiring character.

Thus, while Father Coughlin drew heavily on antisemitism, and racism played a key role in George Wallace’s program, race was not a defining element in the campaigns of Jackson, Bryan, or Long. All demagogues defend the people against a detached, self-centered, powerful establishment who does not care for the majority. But only in some instances, demagogues claim that this establishment is controlled by or unduly cares for a particular race, ethnicity, or religion at the expense of the majority. For example, for George Wallace in the 1960s, that minority consisted of “liberals, intellectuals, and long-hairs” who “have controlled the country for too long”. Those “over-educated, ivory-tower folks with pointed head looking down their noses at us,” throw money at people who, he asserted, were “breeding children as a cash crop.” Wallace wanted to go to Washington and “throw all these phonies and their briefcases into the Potomac” (Paterson 1997, p. 698-9). Wallace’s brand belonged to that “persistent strain in the populist tradition,” as Kazin (1998) argues, which charged that “a haughty elite and a rabble of black or yellow hue were ganging up on the industrious Caucasian middle” (p. 227).

Wallace tapped not only into racial tensions, but also into resentments and fears of common Americans who felt unrepresented because they believed that politicians did not care about them and because they believed their voices were lost in loud, unruly protests of a minority (white and black) who pushed for changes they didn’t care for (e.g., busing or some entitlements). Even when they agreed with the demands of the protesters, as in ending the war, they saw the manner

in which those demands were made as unpatriotic and selfish. As the wife of a steamfitter complained: “There are times when I wonder who really runs this country.... It’s not people like us, that I know... There are some big people in Washington I guess, and they make all the decisions; and then it’s left for us to go and send our boys to fight, and try to pay the high prices that the politicians have caused us to have” (Kazin 1998, p. 223). Another who had felt the calamities of the Vietnam war put it simply, but powerfully: “I’m against this war, too—the way a mother is, whose sons are in the army, who has lost a son fighting in it. The world hears those demonstrators making noise. The world doesn’t hear me.” (Patterson 1997, p. 670). It was in this context that Wallace’s speeches resonated with Americans: “When you and I start marching and demonstrating and carrying signs, we will close every highway in this country!” (Kazin 1998, p. 223). As for charges of bigotry, Wallace dismissed them “as a smokescreen for prejudice, the concerns of the ordinary whites about job security and safe streets” (Kazin 1998, p. 233).

Five decades later, Donald Trump tapped into similar worries and resentments. In his candidacy announcement, Trump emphasized that America had become a loser, and had been exploited by many foreign countries, ranging from China and Japan to Iran and Saudi Arabia to Mexico and Canada. The reasons were two-fold. One was that our politicians make bad deals because they were simply incompetent. “How stupid are our leaders?” he exclaimed. The second was that the politicians were “controlled fully—they’re controlled fully by the lobbyists, by the donors, and by the special interests, fully.... it’s destroying our country. We have to stop, and it has to stop now.... 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.” Using the example of Ford building a factory in Mexico, thereby bringing jobs to Mexico instead of America, Trump explained how he would threaten Ford with a 35% tariff for any import to the U.S., and refuse to budge to its CEO or the lobbyists who would try to change his mind. Then, he contrasted his future action with those of other politicians: “They’re not so stupid. They know it’s not a good thing [that Ford plans to build a large plant in Mexico instead of America], and they may even be upset by it. But then they’re going to get a call from the donors or probably from the lobbyist for Ford and say, ‘You can’t do that to Ford, because Ford takes care of me and I take care of you, and you can’t do that to Ford.’ And guess what? No problem. They’re going to build in Mexico. They’re going to take

away thousands of jobs.”

A cornerstone of Trump’s campaign was the corruption of career politicians: “We are fighting for every citizen that believes that government should serve the people, not the donors and not the special interests,” poeticized in the slogan, “Drain that swamp.” His radical platforms on trade, immigration, and foreign policy were squarely built on it—Trump’s other views on the Second Amendment, abortion, and taxes fell into the mainstream Republican Party. The reason America has become a loser, Trump argued, is that her politicians have become incompetent and stupid; on occasions when they, themselves, were not incompetent and stupid, they appointed incompetent people to negotiate trade and foreign policy deals because they were political cronies of donors and lobbyists. Quoting FDR, he said in a rally in Phoenix, Arizona: “Government by organized money is just as dangerous as government by organized mob.”

Trump’s plan for the economy, security, and foreign policy were inter-twined. He used tax cuts and trickle down economics—staples of conservative platforms. However, he diverged by emphasizing that, due to bad trade deals made by corrupt and incompetent politicians, countries like China and Mexico were exploiting America by setting high tariffs on American imports, manipulating their currencies, and dumping their products in American markets, thereby depriving American companies to compete in a fair market. As a remedy, Trump either would make better trade deals that help American companies, or he would retaliate with high tariffs that would eliminate the incentives from moving the operations to foreign countries. In addition, he argued that rich countries like Germany or Saudi Arabia who benefit from expensive U.S. military protection did not pay their fair share, again, due to bad deals. Correcting those deals would save America billions, reducing the ballooning national debt. These job-creating, debt-crushing policies would be supplemented by much stricter immigration and border policies that simultaneously would “make America safe again” and “make America wealthy again” by preventing “criminals and drugs” from “pouring in” and “radical Islamic terrorism” from sneaking in and by protecting American jobs. As Trump said in Dimondale, Michigan:

Hillary Clinton supports open borders, which means many things, but it means people pour in and they take your jobs. Whether you like it or don’t like it, they take your jobs.... Hillary Clinton would rather provide a job to a refugee from overseas

than to give that job to unemployed African American youth in cities like Detroit who have become refugees in their own country.

In the last primary debate, when asked whether he referred to all 1.2 billion Muslims when he said “Islam hates us,” Trump responded: “I mean a lot of them.” His incendiary comments about Muslims were almost indiscriminate. When the issue came up in the second presidential debate, Clinton, pointedly highlighted the short-sightedness of alienating Muslims in general, and American Muslims in particular:

It’s also very short-sighted and even dangerous to be engaging in the kind of demagogic rhetoric that Donald has about Muslims. We need American Muslims to be part of our eyes and ears on our front lawns.

But as the cases of Jackson, Bryan, and Long will illustrate, short-sighted solutions have long been central to the simplistic policy repertoires of demagogues.

4 Andrew Jackson

When talks of Jackson’s candidacy first circulated, “Few, including Jackson, took his presidential aspirations seriously, given his small experience in elective office” (Wilentz 2005, p. 244). His unexpected ascendancy as the most popular candidate in the 1824 election owed a lot to the Panic of 1819 and its surrounding economic downturn, the Missouri Compromise, and expansion of democracy following the War of 1812. His campaign presented him “as a virtuous keeper of the Revolutionary heritage against corrupt privilege, and as a genuinely national candidate in a field of sectional favorites” (Wilentz 2005, p. 247). Jackson platform was anti-BUS (the Second Bank of the United States), and in favor of a “judicious tariff” and Missouri Compromise. On tariffs, which divided his potential supporters, he remained vague, cleverly linking it “to the cause of Jeffersonian simplicity” by arguing that it was necessary to pay national debt, a pillar of Hamiltonian influence and aristocracy since the early Republic. Jackson’s unorthodox melding of ideas, his reputation for a volcanic temperament, and his inconsistent respect for the law made many miss what Adams recognized as “profound calculation” (Wilentz 2005, p.

248)—vote-maximizing calculations that Adams himself refused to take into account. The final race was between Jackson, the outsider, and highly experienced, well-known, polished politicians, Adams, Clay, and Crawford—Jackson had knocked out Calhoun early on as a viable candidate. In the 18 states where voters directly chose presidential electors, Jackson won 42% of the popular vote, about 10% more than his main rival, Adams. “The Giant Augean Stable at Washington needs cleaning,” his supporters argued, “and we know of no other Hercules” (Wilentz 2005, p. 251). In a final analysis, as Wilentz (2005, p. 251-2) argues:

The panic [of 1819], as Adams perceived, was pivotal. Not only did the hard times of 1819 and the early 1820s revive, in new forms, the city and country democracies, they also raised fundamental questions about the nationalist economic policies of the new-style Republican under Madison and Monroe, and focused inchoate popular resentments on the banks, especially the Second BUS.

Jackson won a plurality of votes in Electoral College in 1824, but because no candidate won a majority, the race was thrown to the House. In what Jacksonians came to call a “corrupt bargain,” the House chose John Quincy Adams over Jackson with the support of Henry Clay, who then became the Secretary of State. Jackson ran again in 1828 against Adams. The campaign of 1828 was cast by many as “a great contest between the aristocracy and democracy of America” (Wilentz 2005, p. 308). Jackson “defined himself as defender of the people against special interests” (Howe 2009, p. 330). As Jackson put it himself, “the present is a contest between the virtue of the people, & the influence of patronage” (Wilentz 2005, p. 308), “[S]hall the government or the people rule?” (Wilentz 2005, p. 302). As in 1824, so in 1828, “The Panic of 1819 had galvanized the popular movements that led to Jackson’s victory” (Wilentz 2005, p. 311). For example, “Kentucky, once the richest state west of the Alleghenies, had been hit hard by the panic and rendered a virtual creditors’ protectorate.” (Wilentz 2005, p. 311). The consequence was forceful demands for pro-debtor reforms and anti-banking and anti-establishment sentiments strong enough to effectively bring the court system to a halt. Similar grievances and sentiments arose everywhere in the South and West. Even in New England, “Old School Democracy” and “Working Men’s Party” of Jeffersonian character emerged full-force, fortified with a “poor man’s press” to organize and educate the poor, the “productive many” who had

been exploited by “the unproductive few” landlords and moneylenders.

Adams, being a man of principle, barely adjusted his behavior to fend off Jackson. Jackson won with 56% of the popular vote, carrying 178 of 261 votes in the electoral college, and so began “Jackson and reform.” As we now detail, Jackson’s victory had adverse consequences for the well-being of his supporters. Jackson’s obsession with his personal authority disproportionately influenced national politics, and his economic policies were ruinous.

In his first annual message to the Congress, Jackson asked for limitations on office holdings to promote “that rotation [in office] which constitutes a leading principle in the republican creed” even at the cost of experience and skills:

Corruption in some and in others a perversion of correct feelings and principles divert government from its legitimate ends and make it an engine for the support of the few at the expense of the many. The duties of all public officers are... so plain and simple that men of intelligence may readily qualify themselves for their performance; and I can not but believe that more is lost by the long continuance of men in office than is generally to be gained by their experience.

In his first year in office, Jackson removed about 10% of all government employees, replacing “treasury rats” of the previous administration, aiming “to prevent the formation of a permanent government in the executive branch,” (Wilentz 2005, p. 315). But many new appointees were “spoilsmen.” “Corruption that came to light in the Land Office, the Post Office, and Indian affairs under his administration dwarfed that under his predecessors.... Over the long term the spoils system diminished both the competence and the prestige of public service” (Howe 2009, p. 334). The US administrative efficiency was an example favorably looked upon by the British at the time. Jackson and his followers so damaged the system that by the late 19th century American civil service reformers had to look to the British system for guidance.

Jackson fired administrators who would not blindly obey him—e.g., Thomas McKenney, the superintendent of Indian affairs. In what came to be known as the Eaton Affair, Jackson dismissed his entire cabinet over the refusal of cabinet members’ wives to accept within their social circles, Peggy O’Neill, the promiscuous mistress and then wife of the Secretary of War,

John Eaton. On the eve of the Civil War, James Parton captured the absurdity of the whole affair and its effect on the rise of Martin Van Buren (the exceptional cabinet member who happily socialized with Peggy) and the Democratic Party's spoils system: "the political history of the United States, for the last thirty years, dates from the moment when the soft hand of Mr. Van Buren touched Mrs. Eaton's knocker" (Howe 2009, p. 339).

Anticipating a future era in U.S. politics, Jackson's authority leaked into the very nature of truth. Jackson had his own "alternative facts," in matters trivial and complex. He would insist on the chastity of Mrs. Eaton and assertions that Alexander Hamilton "was not in favor of the Bank of the United States" (Howe 2009, p. 338). "Opposition to his will could only derive from a conspiracy against him" (Howe 2009, p. 340). Although Jacksonians had their own lubricated media machine, when Jackson found the abolitionist media inconvenient, he had the Post Office cease delivering their material: "The refusal of the Post Office to deliver abolitionist mail to the South may well represent the largest peacetime violation of civil liberty in U.S. history" (Howe 2009, p. 430).

One cannot even argue that Jackson's abhorrent behavior reflected a desire to help poor whites at any cost. For example, just one day after the House voted for the Indian Removal Act, Jackson vetoed the Maysville Road Bill, which was to improve internal transportation, to the dismay of many representatives who had supported the distasteful Indian Removal Act only in return for other actions. "The one unambiguous consequence of the Maysville Road Veto was the doom of any comprehensive national transportation program. In the absence of such an overall plan, the Jackson administration felt free to distribute its favors where they would do the most political good" (Howe 2009, p. 360). Jackson also pocket vetoed Clay's Distribution Bill, which aimed to distribute federal revenues for internal improvements to the states. Lack of internal improvements and transportation in the South made poor farmers and Southern yeomanry dependent on the rich planters who had the means to store, transform, and transport agricultural products from the distant inland areas to the ports. Jackson's subsequent Bank War and monetary policy, the economic downturn and the Panic of 1837 that followed, all helped bankrupt many small farmers who had purchased Indian lands on credit. Their lands were then re-possessioned by large planters (Williams 2005, p. 15-6). These planters then exploited poor

white farmers, and prevented reform that would have benefitted the poor (Hahn 2006).

“Jackson’s greatest legacy to posterity was the Democratic Party” (Howe 2009, p. 488). The combination of Jackson’s forceful personality and spoils system and Martin Van Buren’s organizational skills and strategic mind (tried and true practices of the Albany Regency political machine in New York) laid the foundation of the Democratic Party. The party was a nation-wide political machine, which in John Quincy Adams words, merged “the Southern interest in domestic Slavery with the Northern riotous Democracy” (Howe 2009, p. 509). “Capitalizing on the long-term resentments from the Panic of 1819, and insisting on adherence to the Missouri Compromise, they had resolved much confusion by consolidating a popular base that merged the urban mechanics and small farmers of the North with the yeomanry and much of the planters of the South” (Wilentz 2005, p. 310).

The 1832 Democratic National Convention’s rule that no candidate could receive presidential nomination without a two-thirds vote effectively guaranteed a veto power to Southern planters. “In shaping the Democratic Party the way they did, Andrew Jackson and Martin Van Buren forged the instrument that would transform the minority proslavery interest into a majority that would dominate American politics until 1861” (Howe 2009, p. 512). “Jackson’s loyal follower, the prominent Pennsylvania Democrat James Buchanan, future president, spoke for the next generation of his party. ‘All Christendom is leagued against the South upon this question of domestic slavery,’ he acknowledged; slave holders ‘have no other allies to sustain their constitutional rights, except the Democracy of the North.’ Democrats from the North, Buchanan proclaimed, ‘inscribe upon our banners hostility to abolition. It is there one of the cardinal principles of the Democratic Party’ ” (Howe 2009, p. 524). This “cardinal principle” combined with selective assertions of Federal authority (to give in to Georgia’s demand for Indian lands, but threaten South Carolina in the Nullification Crisis over tariffs) set the stage for the Civil War by consolidating the Southern planters’ political and economic power.

If these somber events were far into the future, Jackson’s action also had more immediate, adverse economic consequences for his supporters. Perhaps none of Jackson’s actions had clearer consequence for his supporters than his actions regarding the Second Bank of the United States (BUS). Jackson vetoed the Congress’s rechartering of BUS, arguing that such “exclusive

privileges” given to the Bank is unjust to “the humble members of the society”:

the rich and powerful too often bend the acts of government to their selfish purposes.... when the laws undertake to add to these natural and just advantages artificial distinctions, to grant titles, gratuities, and exclusive privileges, to make the rich richer and the potent more powerful, the humble members of society—the farmers, mechanics, and laborers—who have neither the time nor the means of securing like favors to themselves, have a right to complain of the injustice of their Government.... Many of our rich men...have besought us to make them richer by act of Congress. By attempting to gratify their desires we have in the results of our legislation arrayed section against section, interest against interest, and man against man, in a fearful commotion which threatens to shake the foundations of our Union.... we can at least take a stand against all new grants of monopolies and exclusive privileges, against any prostitution of our Government to the advancement of the few at the expense of the many.

As for the high court’s opinion on this matter:

The Congress, the Executive, and the Court must each for itself be guided by its own opinion of the Constitution. Each public officer who takes an oath to support the Constitution swears that he will support it as he understands it, and not as it is understood by others.... The opinion of the judges has no more authority over Congress than the opinion of Congress has over the judges, and on that point the President is independent of both. The authority of the Supreme Court must not, therefore, be permitted to control the Congress or the Executive when acting in their legislative capacities.

As Howe argues, “the Bank War was not a class war of labor against capital or the propertyless against the propertied. Jackson gave voice to the feelings of farmers and planters who resented their creditors as much as they needed their financial services.” Alexis de Tocqueville observed that Jackson “roused the local passions and the blind democratic instinct of the country” to oppose the Bank (Wilentz 2005, p. 364). Webster argued that Jackson “attacked the

whole classes of the people, for the purposes of turning against them the prejudices and resentments of other classes” (Wilentz 2005, p. 371). In his opposition to the BUS, Jackson was supported by New York bankers seeking to move the banking center to Wall Street, “wildcat” bankers in the West who resented the Bank’s monitoring of their risky behavior, and soft-money entrepreneurs who wanted access to easier credit. With no BUS to monitor banks, local banks acted more irresponsibly, and with no BUS bank notes, the currency problem was amplified (Howe 2009, p. 381-2). Jackson argued that the Bank had too much power, enabling “a few monied capitalists” to interfere in politics and overturn majority rule. “The attack on BUS captured the public’s imagination as proof that Jackson was the intrepid defender of ‘the humble members of the society’—a phrase Jackson’s managers repeated endlessly—against the rich and privileged” (Wilentz 2005, p. 373). To the chagrin and surprise of his opponents who expected the Bank veto to cost Jackson re-election, Jackson received 219 voted against 49 for Clay in the Electoral College, doing even better than in 1828.

Jackson did not stop at this veto. He sought to remove federal government money from the BUS immediately. It was illegal to withdraw these deposits unless the Secretary of Treasury found that the deposits were unsafe and communicated this to the Congress. However, the investigations surrounding the Congressional decision to recharter the bank provided no evidence that the deposits were unsafe, nor was an alternative venue for the money available; Jackson was simply seeking revenge on the Bank and its president, Biddle, over attempts to prevent his election in 1832. Even Jackson’s trusted friends could not swallow such measures. This led Jackson to remove the Secretary of Treasury, McLane, giving the office to Duane. When Duane refused, fearing impeachment for the illegal act, Jackson replaced him with Roger Taney. The Federal government then paid its bills from its account in BUS, but made all new deposits in local banks, spread throughout the country, effectively removing Federal money from BUS in a year. These “pet banks,” as they came to be called, expanded loans, and helped create a speculative boom. Pet banks became a new vehicle of Democratic Party patronage next to the Post Office. “It was impossible not to compromise standards of financial integrity in bringing so many banks into the fold, especially when almost all banks run by Whigs were kept off the list” (Howe 2009, p. 393).

A perfect storm was created. Land speculations in the West, fueled by the Indian removal,

went to a frenzy with the poorly-controlled bank notes—pet banks took deposits and ran with them. Additional tariffs, as Jackson had promised, generated a Federal government surplus, which was deposited in the banks and pumped into the economy. Land speculation further raised “federal deposits by 50 percent between February and November 1836. The federal land office turned into a gigantic government-sponsored confidence scheme, whereby speculators borrowed large amounts of paper money, used it to buy federal land, then used the land as collateral on further loans” (Wilentz 2005, p. 444). Recognizing the problem, the government attempted to reduce bank notes in circulations. Jackson, out of the blue, issued the Specie Circular executive order, which stipulated that the government would not accept notes from these banks as payment for land. This exacerbated the conflict between Jackson and the opposition in Congress, rendering effective management of the economy even more difficult. Congress passed a bill, rescinding the order, with only five senators supporting Jackson’s hard-money position. Jackson pocket-vetoed the bill. Demand for species depleted the reserves of eastern banks. Matters came together in 1837: “British demands for payments in metal from depleted New York banks, accompanied with northern crop failures and a sudden drop in cotton prices due to a glut on the world market, sparked the bank failures of early 1837 that were the harbingers of doom” (Wilentz 2005, p. 445). No one person can be held responsible for the financial crisis of the magnitude that arose in 1837. But by destroying BUS, by distributing federal money to pet banks, and by creating a hostile relationship with the Congress Jackson set the stage for disaster.

“The Jackson cause is the cause of democracy and the people, against a corrupt and abandoned aristocracy,” wrote one of the many newspapers supporting Jackson (Howe 2009, p. 381). Jackson believed that “in the American republic, the majority governs” (Wilentz 2005, p. 387). He “believed in the sovereignty of the American people and in himself as the embodiment of that sovereignty” (Howe 2009, p. 367). Yet, he contributed dearly to the financial ruins of the very people who he claimed to embody.

5 The People's Party and William Jennings Bryan

In the six decades between the end of Jackson's presidency in the 1830s and the People's Party and William Jennings Bryan in the 1890s, America went through fundamental transformations, including an industrial revolution and a civil war that consumed about 2% of its population. This eventful era is not the focus of this paper, but before we discuss the origins of the People's Party, we briefly touch on some consequences of Jacksonian politics.

The recession of 1837 generated its own demagogues, reflected in the animated election of 1840. Luthin (1951) summarized the state of politics in the late 1830s: "Behind all the demagoguery and showmanship of the 1840, what were the real issues? 'Hard Times,' as aftermath of the panic of 1837, to be sure. But the Whig orators and editors made no attempt to discuss the policies of the respective candidates or the principles of government. With their cider barrels and coonskin caps and log cabins and noise they overrode all issues" (p. 30). Having been schooled by Jacksonians, Whigs went on to present their presidential candidate of 1840 as "a humble dweller in a log cabin who drank the poor man's drink, hard cider." Daniel Webster even "apologized that the house of his birth had not been made of logs" (Luthin 1951, p. 28-9). The recession hit poor southerners hard (Williams 2005), and what little land and livestock that they accumulated in the next 25 years were sunk in the Civil War. If the war, "the great leveler" of all (Scheidel 2017), could have benefitted poor white southerners in any way, it would have been to remove the grip of southern planters on politics and mitigate their huge economic advantage. The possibility was there. As a rich Southern planter lamented: "seven-tenths of the people of the South would vote for...confiscation of Southern property" (Hahn 2006, p. 204).

Thanks to Andrew Johnson, the great admirer of Jackson, that silver lining did not obtain. Johnson routinely returned land to planters, and the south emerged almost as unequal in the postbellum as it was in antebellum. In the decades after the war, small farmers lost their land, increasingly to new merchants, becoming sharecroppers and debtors. Summarizing the economy in rural Georgia, Hahn (2006) writes: "The antebellum Upcountry was haunted by the specter of a bad harvest and possible starvation; the postbellum Upcountry was haunted by the fluctuations of worldwide supply and demand, the problem of overproduction, and collapsing prices.

The hard-money men of the Jacksonian era spoke for petty producers who feared the market's encroachments; the soft-money men of the Populist era spoke for petty producers who lived under the market's hegemony" (Hahn 2006, p. 192). "By the 1880s, an elite deriving surpluses from both land and commerce held the economic reins in the Upcountry" (Hahn 2006, p. 203).

Fed up with this process and disappointed with both parties, farmers in the South and West began supporting reformers and voting for Independents in the 1870s. At first, they emphasized business aspects of farming. Farm reformers believed that the agricultural sector must organize just as industry had. They argued that the railroads' discriminatory freight rates, corrupt legislators, and the bankers' control of money supply and credit were the key sources of their poverty and agricultural backwardness. They sought new scientific methods to run farms and organize their interests and forces. Their goal was to improve government and society. Indeed, many had progressive views on gender equality, and they pushed for schools, universities and lecture circles, publishing pamphlets and newspapers. They wanted, and in some areas built, "farmers' trusts" and "alliance exchanges," where they could coordinate actions (as a monopoly) and pool savings to invest in machinery. They viewed such business-like cooperatives as substitutes for government actions, necessary until such time as the government performed its duty. Thus, the Populist Movement began largely as a non-political movement with economic, social and cultural elements in the midst of the economic downturn of the 1870s. But as the depression continued and non-political efforts failed, the movement turned increasingly political (Postel 2007).

Reformers maintained their scientific outlook when they turned to politics. Leonidas L. Polk, the founder of *Progressive Farmer* and president of the Farmers' Alliance, summarized their beliefs about politics, government, and parties: "Politics is the science of government: partyism is a little collar with a chain on it" (Postel 2007, p. 139). It was a naive and idealistic view, starkly opposed to the prevalent practice of politics, described by one Republican boss, as "the art of taking money from the few and votes from the many under the pretext of protecting them from each other" (White 2017, p. 837).

This politicization led to the founding of the People's Party, also known as the Populist Party. In its founding convention on July 4, 1892, the party adapted the Omaha Platform, with a preamble that was meant to be a second Declaration of Independence.

We meet in the midst of a nation brought to the verge of moral, political, and material ruin. Corruption dominates the ballot-box, the Legislatures, the Congress, and touches even the ermine of the bench.... The fruits of the toil of millions are boldly stolen to build up colossal fortunes for a few.... From the same prolific womb of governmental injustice we breed the two great classes—tramps and millionaires.... A vast conspiracy against mankind has been organized on two continents, and it is rapidly taking possession of the world. If not met and overthrown at once it forebodes terrible social convulsions, the destruction of civilization, or the establishment of an absolute despotism. We have witnessed for more than a quarter of a century the struggles of the two great political parties for power and plunder, while grievous wrongs have been inflicted upon the suffering people.... we seek to restore the government of the Republic to the hands of “the plain people,” with which class it originated.

Populists revered the Jeffersonian and Jacksonian principles of empowering the majority, but they took a sharp turn from Jeffersonian and Jacksonian Democracy by demanding direct and bold government intervention: “We believe that the power of government—in other words, of the people—should be expanded...to the end that oppression, injustice, and poverty shall eventually cease in the land.” Believing that “corporations will either own the people or the people must own the railroads,” the Populist platform demanded government ownership of the railroads, telegraph and telephone, a graduated income tax, and government-run “postal saving banks” to safely deposit money. They demanded reclaiming of lands owned by aliens as well as the land unused by the railroads. The convention supported and sympathized with the labor movement, defended the rights of unions, condemned “the Pinkerton system” and repression of labor as well as the admission of “the pauper and criminal classes of the world and crowds out our wage-earners,” and demanded “further restriction of undesirable immigration.” To make the country more democratic, they demanded a one-term limit for the president and vice-president, direct election of senators, and “a free ballot and a fair count in all elections.” Most practical of all, their platform demanded bimetallism, combining silver with gold to increase money supply and end the gold standard, designed “to fatten usurers, bankrupt enterprise, and enslave indus-

try.” Thus, the Populist platform demanded “free and unlimited coinage of silver and gold at the present legal ratio of 16 to 1” and that “the amount of circulating medium be speedily increased to not less than \$50 per capita.”

Postel (2007) argues that “The first Declaration of Independence located the danger of tyranny in the extension of the powers of government. Its 1892 version recognized despotism in economic oppression and looked to the extension of government to secure liberty” (p. 159). Indeed, populists argued in the tradition of American Revolution. For example, James Davis argued that “Every plank in the People’s Party Platform that came from Thomas Jefferson was true Democracy.... The crowd that takes their politics from Alexander Hamilton is the crowd that we have to beat” (Postel 2007, p. 160). Thus, they sought to use Hamiltonian means to obtain Jeffersonian ends. In this, they were happy with a Napoleon-like figure (Postel 2007, p. 165):

We need a Napoleon in the industrial world...[to] fulfill the hopes of humanity and the promise of the ages.

These authoritarian traits showed up in directives. “The will of the majority is the law of the order,” a directive of the Alliance stated, and if one “cannot acquiesce in the decision of the majority...he should first divest himself of his alliance uniform” (Postel 2007, p. 168). An opposition emerged, e.g., one member accused the chair of his state’s committee, stating that “a dictator, whose power is absolute; who in practice of corrupt and disreputable political methods has outdone all other political managers that have ever risen” (Postel 2007, p. 169). These authoritarian traits were in parallel with utopian visions, which aimed to create a giant cooperative in the republic, a “Cooperative Commonwealth.” For a time, even Eugene Debs worked “on a plan to colonize an unspecified western state with unemployed workers and land-hungry farmers....His guiding idea was that if enough displaced railway workers settled in a sparsely populated state it would be possible to forge a farmer-labor Populist majority that would take control of the elected offices and thereby create a model of the cooperative commonwealth for the rest of the nation to follow” (Postel 2007, p. 241). The Populist Party’s principle that “if any will not work, neither shall he eat” was a tenet that brought together farmers and workers under the familiar idea that society was divided between the many “producers” (tramps) and the few (millionaires) who exploit the fruits of their labor. The party was perceived as a “confederation

of industrial orders.” Despite these efforts, in the 1892 presidential election, the Populist candidate, Weaver, only received 8.5% of the popular vote and 22 electoral votes. The Democrat, Grover Cleveland won with 46% of the popular vote and 277 electoral votes. Although a major achievement for the Populist party, it fell short of competing effectively with the Democratic or Republican parties. In turn, this created a force for initiating change via the established parties.

The depression of 1890s unfolded soon after the election of 1892. Chronic unemployment, “15-20 percent of workers in industrial states lacked work at some time during the year” in 1890 and 1900, gave way to acute numbers. For example, annual unemployment rates exceeded 21 percent (White 2017, p. 802). As in the 1930s, immigrants stopped coming, and many returned home (White 2017, p. 808). Goldbugs blamed the 1890 Sherman Silver Act, which had raised money supply by requiring the U.S. Treasury to almost double its purchases of silver. Conversely, Silverites, Bimetallists, and Greenbacks blamed the gold standard. “In the so-called battle of the standards, silver stood for equality and fraternity; gold stood for liberty in the old liberal sense of sanctity of property” (White 2017, p. 831). Silver would ease debts by its inflationary consequences, and would constitute a key element in the broader program of reforming the banking system, which had “concentrated money and credit in the Northeast, leaving the West and the South starved for funds” (White 2017, p. 833).

Foreshadowing his Republican counterpart in the 1930s (Herbert Hoover), Cleveland barely tried to combat the depression, incurring the wrath of the people against the Democratic Party. Cleveland was not alone. Roswell Fowler, the Democratic governor of New Jersey, vetoed the legislature’s relief measure, stating that in “America, the people support the government, it is not the province of the government to support the people” (White 2017, p. 804). The damage was so severe that Mark Hanna, the Republican capitalist who managed William McKinley’s campaign for the 1896 presidential election, planned a vacation before the election—just as Thurlow Weed, William Seward’s manager, sent him off to a European tour prior to the newly-formed Republican convention of 1860. But then, unexpectedly, a young Nebraskan congressman, William Jennings Bryan, won the Democratic Party’s nomination. In the last part of his speech at the Democratic Convention in 1896, Bryan spread his arms as if he was on a cross, and delivered his answer to goldbugs (2017, p. 842):

we will answer their demand for a gold standard by saying to them: You shall not press down upon the brow of labor this crown of thorns, you shall not crucify mankind upon a cross of gold.

Bryan delineated two opposing views. “There are two ideas of government. There are those who believe that if you just legislate to make the well-to-do prosperous, their prosperity will leak through on those below. The Democratic idea has been that if you legislate to make the masses prosperous, their prosperity will find its way up and through every class that rests upon it” (White 2017, p. 845-6). He argued, “the poor man is called a socialist if he believes that the wealth of the rich should be divided among the poor, but the rich is called a financier if he devises a plan by which the pittance of the poorest can be converted to his use” (White 2017, p. 801-2). His goal was to reorient the Democratic Party: “the Democratic Party cannot serve God and Mammon; it cannot serve plutocracy and at the same time defend the rights of the masses” (White 2017, p. 841). Although Bryan did not fully adopt the Omaha Platform of the People’s Party, he was close. Populists were divided between “middle-of-the-roaders,” who wanted to nominate their own candidate, and “fusionists,” who recognized they must support the Democrats to have a chance of implementing some of their policies. Middle-roaders caused trouble in the South, where Bourbon Democrats “had repeatedly resorted to fraud to count them out” (White 2017, p. 844). Their head, Tom Watson argued that Democrats “say we must fuse, but their idea of fusion is that we play minnow while they play trout; we play June bug while they play duck; we play Jonah while they play the whale” (White 2017, p. 844).

Bryan came to be despised by some for his lack of reasoning and his subordination to what he perceived as the immediate demands of the people. He states once: “It is a poor head that cannot find plausible reason for doing what the heart wants to do” (Hofstadter 1989, p. 246). When advocating for free silver in his 1892 congressional campaign in Nebraska, Bryan said (Hofstadter 1989, p. 245):

I don’t know anything about free silver. The people of Nebraska are for free silver and I am for free silver. I will look up the arguments later.

Later, Bryan gave his modified version of the Jacksonian vision (Hofstadter 1989, p. 247):

The great political questions are in their final analysis great moral questions, and it requires no extended experience in the handling of money to enable a man to tell right from wrong.

Hofstadter (1989, p. 247) aptly summarized the implication: “It was inconceivable that the hard-working, Bible-reading citizenry should be inferior in moral insight to the cynical financiers of Eastern cities. Because they were, as Bryan saw it, better people, they were better moralists, and hence better economists.” Describing Bryan, Hofstadter (1989, p. 246) stated:

Presumably he would have lost his political effectiveness if he had learned to look at his supporters with a critical eye, but his capacity for identifying himself with them was costly, for it gave them not so much leadership as expression. He spoke for them so perfectly that he never spoke to them. In his lifelong stream of impassioned rhetoric he communicated only what they already believed.

Bryan’s appeal to the public was not just a matter of principle; it also reflected his ambitions: “from the time I was fifteen years old, I had but one ambition in life, and that is to come to Congress. I studied for it. I worked for it, and everything I did had that object in view” (Hofstadter 1989, p. 253).

Republicans had their own anti-monopolist wing. McKinley ran on a moderate platform of a default gold standard unless there was an international agreement on bimetallism. His focus was tariffs. Bryan carried the South and the plains, but lost the Midwest and the election to McKinley in 1896. In the campaign of 1900, when prosperity had returned and the peace treaty with Spain had passed the Senate, Bryan’s appeals to the people on accounts of free-silver or anti-imperialism failed. The People’s Party never recovered from Bryan’s loss in 1896, and its internal division.

Parties co-opted much of the Populist platform and messages, squeezing the life out of the People’s Party. Moderated versions of these impulses combined with a moral awakening that swept the middle class in the early 20th century gave rise to the Progressive era (McGerr 2005). Reform outside the main parties was organized mainly under the banner of socialism or communism. The war and Russian Revolution, the dramatic increase in immigration and the minor

recession that followed the war created nativist pressures and legislations that restricted immigration. However, the riches of the “roaring twenties” largely silenced grieving voices. Those hibernating voices had to wait until the Great Depression to unleash a “rumble of discontent” that shook the foundations of the republic and helped redraw the contours of American life.

6 Huey Long

The Great Depression fed a sweeping wave of discontent throughout the country. Hoover, the great engineer and manager, acted with little more vigor than Cleveland had done in the 1890s. As with Cleveland and his Democratic Party, it took a long time for the Republican Party to recover from Hoover’s stubborn rigidity in the face of the people’s manifest destitution. Roosevelt won over 57% of the popular vote in 1932, and his New Deal garnered extensive initial support. But when recovery seemed illusive, radical elements of the coalition began to run their separate ways. FDR’s first 100 days and the mushrooming of federal aid agencies notwithstanding, Harold Ickes, Interior Secretary, believed that “The country is much more radical than the Administration.... [Roosevelt] would have to move to the left in order to hold the country.... If Roosevelt can’t hold the county within reasonable safe limits, no one else can possibly hope to do so.... Breakdown on the part of the Administration would result in an extreme radical movement, the extent of which no one could foresee” (Kennedy 1999, p. 223).

The Farmers’ Holiday Association revived a version of the Farmers’ Alliance in the Midwest, and turned violent, e.g., in Iowa, and the Communist Party began recruiting in discontented rural areas. Still, FDR’s problem was not the agitation of communists or socialists: In the midst of depression and despite Hoover’s inaction, the Communist Party gathered just above one hundred thousand votes in the election of 1932, and the Socialist Part collected south of 900,000 votes, while FDR received almost 23 million votes. The radical left remained largely the arena of novelists, literary critiques, and philosophers.

Some politicians began proposing violent ideas. In Minnesota, governor Floyd Olson told Lorena Hickok, “You go back to Washington and tell’em that Olson is taking recruits form the Minnesota National Guard, and he isn’t taking anybody who doesn’t carry a red card” (p. 220).

Olson, like the populists, wanted government ownership of important industries as part of his vision of a “cooperative commonwealth.” He was prepared to threaten the legislature if they refused to go his way: “I shall invoke the powers I hold and shall declare martial law.... A lot of people who are now fighting measures because they happen to possess considerable wealth will be brought in by provost guard and be obliged to give up more than they would now.”

In California, a 66 year old physician, Francis Townsend, devised a plan to have all those above 60 years old retire and receive 200 dollars every month if they promise to spend it. “A national 2 percent value-added tax, assessed at every transaction as a product made its way from raw material to final market, was to finance the scheme” (Kennedy 1999, p. 224). The consequences of the plan, the good doctor advertised, included justice for the deserving elderly, raising wages due to an smaller labor supply, and fast recovery from depression caused by the expenditure of those 200\$ checks. The program was an absurd as it sounds. Still, Townsend Clubs mushroomed throughout the country. According to some estimates, some 25 million signed Townsend’s petition. Upton Sinclair was another Californian with a plan to end poverty, running for governor on a simple program, EPIC (End Poverty in California): the state would take over unused land and factories, and give them to farmers and workers. These state-owned enterprises, in turn, would drive private ones out, culminating in a “cooperative commonwealth.” Sinclair won the Democratic primary in 1934, but lost the gubernatorial race. Although it was unlikely that these sparks could cause a prairie fire, “the possibility loomed that a leader might arise, someone more worldly than the moonstruck Sinclair, more broad-gauged than the single-issue Townsend, more focused and disciplined than the sometimes feckless Olson, more earthy than the cerebral crowd around *Common Sense*, more in the American grain than the Socialists or the Communists—someone who could piece together a new political vessel to hold all the boiling discontents of a people increasingly confounded by the Depression” Kennedy (1999, p. 227).

One such leader, Father Coughlin, was the unlikeliest of all, a Canadian Catholic priest who used radio to broadcast sermons in Michigan. As his audience expanded, his messages turn more political. Taking a social justice orientation of the church, he began “hurling invective at Herbert Hoover, denouncing international bankers, railing at gold standard, demanding inflation—above all inflation through the monetization of silver—and declaiming on the virtues

of nationalizing the entire American banking system” (Kennedy 1999, p. 230). Coughlin “exhibited a wicked genius for unsealing some of the darkest chambers of the national soul. He played guilefully on his followers’ worst instincts: their suspicious provincialism, their unworldly ignorance, their yearning for simple explanations and extravagant remedies for their undeniable problems, their readiness to believe in conspiracies, their sulky resentments, and their all too human capacity for hatred” (Kennedy 1999, p. 234). In 1934, he established the National Union for Social Justice. It was, in effect, a political party. “It resurrected the Populist movement of the 1890s, complete with monetary obsessions, conspiracy theories, cranky anti-internationalism, and innuendoes of anti-Semitism” (p. 232). It was a powerful organization. When in 1935, FDR asked Congress to approve a treaty for American affiliation with the World Court at Hague, Coughlin encouraged his followers to stop their representatives. The overwhelming response cost the country the two-thirds majority needed in the Senate to approve. It could not have escaped Hitler that if America would not bear even such a nominal affiliation in the world affairs, it surely would not intervene in any effective manner should a conflict arise.

Indeed, isolationists passed Neutrality Acts of 1935, 1936, 1937, and 1939 to ensure that the U.S. stayed out of wars in Europe. Demagogues like Coughlin as well as many senators and newspaper editors were adamant in their denunciations of FDR’s attempts to amend the statutes in order to help Allies. These forces reflected ideologies as well as interests to spend American resources on American citizens. However, they also reflected short-sighted views that failed to consider long-term consequences of their withdrawal from the world affairs. As Churchill put it aptly in 1939, were Britain conquered, “all will be enslaved and the United States will be left single-handed to guard the rights of man,” cleverly invoking Thomas Paine’s *Rights of Man*. Over a year later Roosevelt brought the logic to American homes in his Fireside Chat: “If Great Britain goes down, the Axis powers will control the continents of Europe, Asia, Africa, Australasia, and the high seas—and they will be in a position to bring enormous military and naval resources against this hemisphere. It is not exaggeration to say that all of us, in all the Americas, would be living at the point of a gun” (Kennedy 1999, p. 468-9). American neutrality was a factor in Hitler’s war calculations.

There is no saying what catastrophes would have been averted had the isolationists been far-

sighted enough to respond to FDR's repeated requests to signal U.S. support for Europe in the late 1930s (Kennedy 1999, Ch. 13-15). Chamberlain's sorry appeasement foreign policy was built on the premise that the U.S. would not help Britain should a conflict arise. Chamberlain noted in his diary that, because the isolationists were "so strong & so vocal," Britain could not count on the United States for help (Kennedy 1999, p. 407-8). In Churchill's words: "no event could have been more likely to stave off, or even prevent war, than the arrival of the United States in the circle of European hates and fears (Kennedy 1999, p. 408). "As Hitler was to put it in an expose for his military leaders: 'Because of its neutrality laws, America is not dangerous to us.'" (Weinberg 1964, p. 1013).

While Father Coughlin's country of birth and Catholic religion made him an unsuitable presidential candidate to lead the "extreme radical movement," Huey Long of Louisiana was a more potent American version from Protestant stock. Long epitomized a distinctly American product, both in religion and politics, long in the making since the Revolution, molded and re-molded, painted and polished through the Jeffersonian Republic and Jacksonian Democracy, in Joe Brown's shop in the Civil War, and on the Bryan's golden cross, worked by the People's Party. Pragmatic in politics and skillful in the rough-and-ready speech-making of the back country, Long was, by far, the most successful of all demagogues in the Great Depression. Born and raised in rural Louisiana, Long first became the state railroad commissioner, where his reputation ran as "a champion of the people and the scourge of big corporations" that had operated in the state with "baronial sway." Long won governorship in 1928 with a slogan: "every man a king, but no one wears a crown." He told followers, "We'll show 'em who's boss.... You fellers stick by me.... We're just getting started." Long raised taxes on oil and gas producers, improved the highway system, built new hospitals and gave free textbooks to school children. But then, exemplifying Hamilton's theoretical "commencing demagogues, and ending tyrants," Long turned on democratic institutions, making "Louisiana the closest thing to a dictatorship that America has ever known" (Kennedy 1999, p. 236). Once he told a legislator: "I'm the constitution around here now." When Long was elected to Senate in 1930, he stayed as governor for about two years, keeping both posts. Articles and books could not capture the essence of his mysterious character and the magnanimity of his mixed achievements; it needed the poetic talent

of Robert Penn Warren and a Best Picture Hollywood film noir to depict the king and his men.

In Washington, Long sneered at establishment politicians, living up to his statement that “All I care is what the boys at the forks of the creek think of me” (Kennedy 1999, p. 237). In 1934, he established the Share Our Wealth Society. Its platform included a high progressive tax whose revenue would give every American family 5,000 dollars, supposedly enough to buy a home and a car. Moreover, each family would be guaranteed an annual income of 2,500 dollars. On top of this, the platform promised shorter working hours, better veterans’ benefits, education subsidies for the young, and pensions for the old. The numbers did not add up, but “Long cared little for such arithmetic. He knew that though the Share Our Wealth scheme, like many other ‘crackpot ideas’ of the 1930s, might be the stuff of shoddy economic fantasy, it was shiny, twenty-four-carat political gold” (Kennedy 1999, p. 239). He predicted and averted critiques: “Let no one tell you that it is difficult to redistribute the wealth of this land. It is simple.” Long elaborated (Kennedy 1999, p. 238):

God invited us all to eat and drink all we wanted. He smiled on our land and we grew crops of plenty to eat and wear. He showed us in the earth the iron and other things to make everything we wanted. He unfolded to us the secrets of science so that our work might be easy. God called: “come to my feast!” [But then] Rockefeller, Morgan and their crowd stepped up and took enough for 120,000,000 people and left only enough for 5,000,000 for all the other 125,000,000 to eat. And so many millions must go hungry and without those good things God gave us unless we call on them to put some of it back.

Long supported FDR at the outset, but returned to his equilibrium point of criticizing whoever stood in the way of what he believed to be his rightful destiny, the presidency. “When I saw his [FDR’s] spending all his time of ease and recreation with the big partners of Mr. John D. Rockefeller, Jr., with such men as Astors and company, maybe I ought to have had better sense than to have believed he would ever break down their big fortunes to give enough to the masses to end poverty” (Kennedy 1999, p. 239).

Long mustered huge support. When he was assassinated in 1935, an estimated 100,000 folks came from all over to Baton Rouge to pay their respect. Long got more people to travel

long hours for his funeral than the Communist Party could muster to vote for them in the entire country. Until his sudden death, Long's national power lay in how many votes he could get nationwide in the incoming 1936 presidential election. It was estimated that Long would win 10 percent of the votes, enough possibly to swing the result to a Republican president. FDR and other Democrats feared the consequences. Roosevelt summarized the danger in a penetrating analysis (Kennedy 1999, p. 241):

He [that is, Long] thinks he will have a hundred votes in the Democratic convention. Then he will set up as an independent with Southern and mid-western Progressives.... Thus he hopes to defeat Democratic party and put in a reactionary Republican. That would bring the country to such a state by 1940 that Long thinks he would be made dictator. There are in fact some Southerners looking that way, and some Progressives drifting that way.... Thus it is an ominous situation.

FDR responded by moving to the left in the mid-1930s. If many of his program elements, like the Social Security Act or Wagner Act, were long in making, the Revenue Act, which was known as the Wealth Tax Act or the Soak-the-Rich Act, was a direct response to demagogic platforms, designed, in FDR's words, "to save our system" from "crackpot ideas" (Kennedy 1999, p. 242). The president stated: "I am fighting Communism, Huey Longism, Coughlinism, Townsendism." The response was the "intervention of that organized control we call government" to perform, quoting Lincoln, "to do for a community of people whatever they need to have done but cannot do at all or cannot do so well for themselves in their separate and individual capacities" (Kennedy 1999, p. 246-7) and to fight "economic royalists." FDR's response was a cautious government intervention to provide security for those who had lost all sense of economic stability and to fend off economic fantasies and a whip-the-rich fetishism spurred out of poverty-ridden regions.

7 Demagogic Vices and Their Remedies in the Early Republic

Jackson, Bryan, and Long were manifestations of the kinds of politicians that worried American revolutionary leaders and statesmen of the early Republic. These statesmen had predicted their emergence, attempted to stop them, and experienced mild versions of them in the form of William Findley, Jedediah Peck and Matthew Lyon; Wood (2009, Ch. 6) provides a concise biography of each. A bird's-eye view of American political history in the last quarter of the 18th century can be summarized in two broad-strokes. First, the Revolution took power away from appointed royal executives, and put it squarely in the people's hands. Then, in a returning swing of the pendulum, the revolutionaries filtered the people's direct and immediate influence by giving some power back to elected governors, creating powerful senates, enlarging electoral districts, creating independent judiciaries, and crucially, attempting to tame state legislatures by a national government. Many elements of American government, which today are viewed as checks and balances aimed at restricting the power of one branch of the government over another, were largely designed to filter the people's direct and immediate influence on the government by taming their representatives in legislatures.

The question of the exact nature and form of the people's influence in government arose before the Declaration of Independence when colonies began to design their new constitutions. When Jefferson was writing the Declaration in 1776, Virginia Convention was drafting the state's new constitution. Jefferson drafted multiple versions of a constitution. In his first two drafts, he proposed that a Senate be elected by the House, and its members serve for life. His goal was "to get the wisest men chosen, and to make them perfectly independent when chosen." Even Jefferson believed that "a choice by the people themselves is not generally distinguished for its wisdom." The result of their first choice is "usually crude and heterogenous. But give to those so chosen by the people a second choice themselves, and they generally will chuse wise men." If Jefferson, the idealist and the champion of the people, was cautious to filter the influence of the people, it is not surprising that more conservative revolutionaries wanted to tame the people's direct influence even further. For example, Jefferson's two-stage process to elect

state senators was not purifying enough for his friend, Edmund Pendleton (the president of the Virginia Convention), who wanted the Senate to consist of those with “great property,” so that they would not become “the mere creature of that body [the House] and of course wholly unfit to correct their Errors” (Middlekauff 2005, p. 629).

In fact, the designs of virtually all state constitutions reflected concerns that the people, if left solely to their own devices, would make poor political decisions. Thus, as the executive power of governors was checked, so was the power of the popular branch of the legislature—the lower house. “Revolutionary state-builders hedged in the democratic element by establishing bicameral legislature (except in Pennsylvania and Georgia); by approving property requirements, sometimes quite severe, for office holdings; by retaining powerful appointive state and local office not elected by the people; and by continuing malapportionment of the legislatures to favor the wealthier and more settled districts” (Wilentz 2005, p. 28). A range of solutions emerged in the quest for a “balanced government,” ranging from the most democratic Pennsylvania, where power was concentrated in a unicameral legislature, to Massachusetts, where the governor retained veto power and the Senate checked the House in a bicameral legislature. The Senate in Massachusetts consisted of forty members “proportioned to districts in accord with the amount of public taxes paid by the inhabitants.... the House of Representatives, the Senate, and the governor, were qualified by an ascending scale of property holding and residence” (Wood 1969, p. 434). The Massachusetts Constitution was adopted in 1780, far later than most other constitutions, which were adopted as early as 1776. It took note of, and attempted to correct for, the problems in other state constitutions by giving more power to the executive and filtering the people’s direct influence. John Adams, whose *Thoughts on Government* played a critical role in structuring state constitutions, was a central drafter of the Massachusetts Constitution. New York fell between Pennsylvania and Massachusetts in terms of the governor’s power and the people’s direct influence in government affairs. The New York Constitutional Convention gave a veto power to a Council of Revision, consisting of the governor chancellor, and Supreme Court judges, and gave the power of appointing officials to a Council of Appointment, consisting of the governor and four senators chosen by the Assembly.

Despite the deliberations and compromises that went into the making of state constitutions,

demands for their reforms almost immediately followed their adoption. In Virginia, Madison argued for longer terms and more qualifications for senators to enable the senate “to withstand the occasional impetuosities of the more numerous branch” (Wood 1969, p. 436). Even Jefferson, in 1783, wanted “an indirect method of electing senators and the elimination of all restrictions on the senate’s power to originate or amend any bill” (Wood 1969, p. 436). “The New Hampshire Convention of 1781 went so far as to propose a system of indirect election for a fifty-member House of Representatives. The mode of ‘being twice-sifted,’ the Convention declared, would result in a higher proportion of suitable legislators” (Wood 1969, p. 437). In Pennsylvania, the 1783-4 Council of Censors, which was designed to review the government performance and make recommendations, wanted to remove all popular aspects.

Revolutionary leaders worried that the government was falling “into the Hands of those whose ability or situation in Life does not entitle them to it.” It was said repeatedly that “a set of unprincipled men, who sacrifice everything to their popularity and private views, seem to have acquired too much influence in all our Assemblies” (Wood 1969, p. 477). “Narrow-minded men, suspicious of government power and fiercely protective of their local interests—lacking what James Madison called ‘liberality or light’—started pressing for punitive legislation against former Loyalists, as well as for stay laws and other forms of debtor relief that would soon destroy the new governments’ finances” (Wilentz 2005, p. 31). “Public faith and private confidence were being destroyed by paper money and *ex post facto* legislation. Who would lend money, it was repeatedly asked, ‘if an omnipotent legislature can set aside contracts ratified by the sanction of law?’” (Wood 1969, p. 406). According to a printer in Baltimore in 1777, the situation was “Whiggism run mad. When a man, who is only fit ‘to patch a shoe,’ attempts ‘to patch the state’ fancies himself a *Solon* or *Lycurgus*,...he cannot fail to meet with contempt” (Wood 1969, p. 477).

Extended franchise and yearly, contested elections for state legislatures brought to fore many conflicting local interests, especially, economic. “All this political scrambling among contending interest made lawmaking in the states seem chaotic. Laws, as the Vermont Council of Censors said in 1786 in a common complaint, were ‘altered—realtored—made better—made worse; and kept in such fluctuating position, that persons in civil common scarce know what

law is” (Wood 2009, p. 18). The legislature had become “a court of chancery in all cases over 4,000, interfering in causes between parties, reversing court judgments, staying executions after judgments, and even prohibiting court actions in matters pertaining to land titles or private contracts involving bond or debt, consequently stopping nine-tenth of all causes in the state” (Wood 1969, p. 407). The North Carolina laws of 1780 were to Attorney-General James Iredell ‘the vilest collection of trash ever formed by a legislative body.’ ” (Wood 1969, p. 406).

Food shortage and inflation during the war led to price control measures by the legislatures. When they could not be enforced, the people took matters in their own hands, on occasion threatening the rich and confiscating the goods of “price-gougers and crypto-Loyalists.” In October 1779, no less public figures than Robert Morris and James Wilson had to defend “Fort Wilson” (Wilson’s mansion) against radical militia in a fight that killed men from both sides (Taylor 2016, p. 363). Noah Webster was alarmed: “So many legal infractions of sacred rights—so many public invasion of private property—so many wanton abuses of legislative power!” (Wood 1969, p. 411).

In 1787, Benjamin Rush stated in unsubtle language that the lower classes should stay out of officeholding due to their lack of knowledge, arguing that the job of officeholders was more than representing the people or persuading them: “in matters that related to liberty, the mechanics and the philosopher, the farmer and the scholar, are all upon a footing. But the case is widely different with respect to *government*. It is a complicated science, and requires abilities and knowledge of a variety of other subjects, to understand it” (Wood 2009, p. 21). John Adams argued against extending franchise to free male population without property because they had bad judgment and were dependent on others like children (Rakove 1997, p. 214-5). Wealth, it was argued, would afford independence from influence allowing one to study at leisure the complicated matters of government, which would allow the virtue and disinterestedness that accompany the lack of a profession. “Adam Smith in *Wealth of Nations* (1776) claimed that businessmen could not be good political leaders. Smith thought that businessmen in a modern complicated commercial society were too engaged in their occupations and the making of money to be able to make impartial judgments about the varied interests of their society. Only ‘those few...attached to no particular occupation themselves’—by which Smith meant the

English landed gentry—“have leisure and inclination to examine the occupations of other people” (Wood 2009, p. 24), “undisturbed by worldly hopes and fears” as John Dickinson wanted his readers of “Pennsylvania Farmer” to know (Wood 2009, p. 26).

There was a sense of acute crisis among the educated elite, a crisis that went beyond war and independence, threatening the very assumption that the American people can sustain any republican form of government. George Washington was so disappointed in early 1786 as to say: “From the high ground we stood upon, the plain path which invited our footsteps, to be so fallen! So lost! It is really mortifying” (Wood 2009, p. 14). The alarming sense of crisis appeared everywhere from private letters and newspapers to sermons and jeremiads. Gouverneur Morris of New York warned that “the mob begin to think and reason! Poor reptiles! It is with them a vernal morning; they are struggling to cast off their winter’s slough, they bank in the sunshine, and ere noon they will bite, depend upon it” (Wood 2009, p. 21). “The stress on the circulation of talent and on the ability of common people to elect those who had integrity and merit presumed a certain moral capacity in the populace as a whole. In the 1780s James Madison had his doubts about this moral capacity of the people stretched to the limit, but even he admitted that ordinary people had to have sufficient ‘virtue and intelligence to select men of virtue and wisdom’ or ‘no theoretical checks, no form of government, can render us secure” (Wood 2009, p. 9). “Looking around at aggressive debtor farmers, engrossing merchants, and factious legislators, many could only conclude that private interest ruled most social relationships. The American people, wrote Governor William Livingston of New Jersey in a common reckoning of 1788, ‘do not exhibit the virtue that is necessary to support a republican government’ ” (Wood, p. 20).

By the 1780s, “It has become all too evident that ‘in times of public confusion, and in the demolition of ancient institutions, blustering, haughty, licentious, self-seeking men’ were gaining ‘the ear of the people,’ exploiting republican ideology and disrupting social fabric.... What do ‘those who are continually claiming about *the people, the people*...mean by the people?’.... The republican emphasis on talent and merit in place of connection and favor now seemed perverted, becoming identified simply with the ability to garner votes, this enabling ‘the most unfit men to shove themselves into stations of influence, where they soon gave way to the unrestrained inclination of bad habits’ ” (Wood 1969, p. 397-8).

7.1 The Constitutional Movement

The source of this republican “political pathology” seemed to be “democratic despotism,” or as David Ramsay later called it, “elected despotism” (Taylor 2016, p. 373). Doctor Benjamin Rush called it a disease, and dubbed it *Anarchia* (Taylor 2016, p. 370). The constitutional movement emerged largely to remedy such “excesses of democracy,” manifested in the “multiplicity, mutability, and injustice” of state legislation, as Madison later put it. Such volatile legislation, Madison wrote to Jefferson “contributed more to that uneasiness which produced the [Constitutional] Convention, and prepared the public mind for a general reform than those which accrued to our national character and interest from the inadequacy of the Confederation to its immediate objects” (Wood 2009, p. 16). The democratization of state legislatures brought in representative with humble backgrounds, those whom the elite considered, in Robert Livingston of New York, “unimproved by education and unreformed by honor” (Wood 2009, p. 17). “The Federal Constitution of 1787 was designed in part to solve the problems created by the presence in the state legislatures of these middling men. In addition to correcting the deficiencies of the Articles of Confederation, the Constitution was intended to restrain the excesses of democracy and protect the minority rights from overbearing majorities in the state legislatures” (Wood 2009, p.31).

Filtering the people’s immediate demands and their direct control on policy-making was a key feature of constitutional debate, and a key element of Madison’s Virginia Plan—Madison’s sketch of the structure of national government presented at the Convention. In the Constitutional Convention of 1787, Roger Sherman of Connecticut stated that people “should have as little to do as may be about the Government. They want information and are constantly liable to be misled,” said (Middlekauff 2005, p. 652). Gouverneur Morris of New York, argued that “The time is not distant when this Country will abound with mechanics and manufacturers who will receive their bread from their employers,” who will control the votes of their employees (Middlekauff 2005, p. 664). He wanted to restrict suffrage to men of property. Hamilton was even more direct: “All communities, divide themselves into the few and the many. The first are rich and well-born, the other the mass of the people.” “Because the latter, Hamilton claimed, were ‘turbulent and changing’ and ‘seldom judge or determine right,’ it was vital to give the former—the rich—‘a distinct permanent share in the government’” (Wilnetz 2005, p. 32). The

delegates, of course, did not go that far, but instead, “the convention favored strong institutional filters on the powers of the ordinary citizenry. The executive would not be elected directly by the voters but in the Electoral College, by electors chosen by the states” (Wilnetz 2005, p. 32). Senate, too, would play a similar role, checking “the precipitation and inadvertence of the people” (Wilnetz 2005, p. 33). Had it been up to Hamilton, “only the House of Representatives would be popularly elected,” while electoral colleges would elect both the president and senators who all would serve for life (Taylor 2016, p. 377).

In an over-simplified interpretation, one may attribute the views of those like Hamilton to their desires for riches. In this view, the primary motivation of the relatively affluent revolutionary leaders was to maintain or increase their income and status. Although some, like Gouverneur Morris, may fit into this category, it is difficult to place key revolutionaries from Hamilton and Jefferson in this category. Hamilton resigned his post as the Secretary of Treasury in the Washington Administration to earn more income to support his family. His friend Robert Troup asked him to get involved in business and land speculation. “Why should you object to making a little money in a way that cannot be reproachful?” Troup asked. Hamilton scrupulously refused: “there must be some public fools who sacrifice private to public interest at the certainty of ingratitude and obloquy—because my vanity whispers I ought to be one of these fools and ought to keep myself in a situation the best calculated to render service.” If he does as Troup suggested, he argued, he would be denounced by Republicans as just another “speculator” and “peculator” (Wood 2009, p. 232-3). Jefferson had similar views, although his were backed by a large fortune and slaves: “public offices are, what they should be, burthens to those appointed to them, which it would be wrong to decline, though foreseen to bring with them intense labor and great private loss” (Wood 2017, p. 199). People like Robert Morris may have become even richer in the revolutionary war while contributing to the cause. But key revolutionary leaders whose actions and ideas were most pivotal in the revolution, people like Washington, Adams, Madison, and many other, did not.

Madison struggled with similar questions long before formulating his Virginia Plan. In a letter to Caleb Wallace of Kentucky, who had asked for advice about the Kentucky government, Madison argued for a Senate to “give *wisdom* and steadiness to legislation,” as well as some

combination of executive and judiciary council with veto power “as a further security against fluctuating & undigested laws” (Rakove 1997, p. 41). Writing to Monroe in 1786, he distinguished between “ultimate happiness” and “immediate augmentation of property and wealth” by which he meant to unjustly take away the property of others (Rakove 1997, p. 44): “There is no maxim in my opinion which is more liable to be misapplied, and which therefore more needs elucidation than the current one that the interest of the majority is the political standard of right and wrong.” This was a mistake not only because it would be unjust to minorities, but, critically, because it would hurt the long-term welfare of the majority: “Taking the word ‘interest’ as synonymous with ‘Ultimate happiness,’ in which sense it is qualified with every necessary moral ingredient, the proposition is no doubt true. But taking it in the popular sense, as referring to immediate augmentation of property and wealth, nothing can be more false.” As with Hamilton and Jefferson, Madison’s arguments should not be viewed as ex-post justifications by a rich elite to protect his wealth. “In Madison’s thinking, the right of western settlers to enjoy navigation of the Mississippi [which propelled the Annapolis convention (Rakove, p. 43)] was as essential as the right of property holders to be secured from the injustice of paper money” (Rakove, p. 45).

Madison’s notes, *Vices of the Political System of the United States*, warned of the “Courtiers of popularity” in state legislatures:

Every general act of the Union must necessarily bear unequally hard on some particular member or members of it.... the partiality of the members to their own interests and rights, a partiality which will be fostered by the Courtiers of popularity, will naturally exaggerate the inequality where it exists, and even suspect it where it has no existence.

Later, he added:

How frequently too will the honest but unenlightened representative be the dupe of a favorite leader, veiling his selfish views under the professions of public good, and varnishing his sophistical arguments with the glowing colours of popular eloquence?

In sum the questions of minority rights, the tyranny of the majority, property rights, the suc-

cess of the American experiment in republicanism were all inter-related, and in a large part, stemmed from the short-sighted, volatile legislation of the states. Madison's theory of representation would stabilize and rationalize law-making at the Federal level, giving the Federal government veto power to overrule state legislatures—a part of his plan which did not pass, causing him great disappointment. Factional interests and local interests were tantamount in his view to short-term gains at the cost of the long-term prosperity of the nation.

At the Constitutional Convention, Madison proposed “Republican Remedies” for these “Republican Pathologies,” institutional means to counter the republican vices that he had identified. Standard political theory claimed that republican government fit only for homogeneous (and hence small) communities. Madison reversed all that. He, essentially, argued that larger electoral districts served the dual purpose of increasing voter heterogeneity and expanding the pool of talented and virtuous politicians. More heterogeneity was good because it would reduce the chances of lasting majorities. Moreover, larger districts meant fewer representatives, which, in turn, would raise the chances of educated, talented, and virtuous men against demagogues. Thus, a national government with its vast constituencies would be a much better fit for republican government. A critical part of Madison's theory, and his Virginia Plan, was to give the national legislature a negative (veto power) over state legislatures, thereby taming their “multiplicity, mutability, and injustice.” In effect, a strong national government was Madison's republican remedy to the republican pathologies of small governments of the states. Madison's theory and the Federalists' in general cleverly based their arguments not on reducing the people's power, but on reducing the abuses of their representatives, while giving the power back to the people.

The nature of representation and accountability were debated both in the Constitution Convention and especially during the ratification debates that followed, creating the division between the Federalists and Antifederalists—that later transformed in both name and views into Federalists and Democratic-Republicans or Jeffersonian Republicans. “Adequate representation in Antifederalist minds implies the existence of representatives who shared fully their constituents' interests, passions, and opinions. The representative in an ideal situation would relay the desired of local interests. He would not reason or act independently; his commission simply called for him to register the judgment of the people” (Middlekauff 2005, p. 677).

The Federalists' views were delineated in a series of essays, by Hamilton, Madison, and Jay, and were later published as the *Federalist Papers*. The dual issues of the people's sometimes rash judgments and the preying demagogues appeared throughout the book. In Federalist No. 3, John Jay, presented a watered down version of Madison's republican remedies:

although town or country, or other contracted influence, may place men in State assemblies, or senates, or courts of justice, or executive departments, yet more general and extensive reputation for talents and other qualifications will be necessary to recommend men to offices under the national government,—especially as it will have the widest field for choice, and never experience that want of proper persons which is not uncommon in some of the States. Hence, it will result that the administration, the political counsels, and the judicial decisions of the national government will be more wise, systematical, and judicious than those of individual States, and consequently more satisfactory with respect to other nations, as well as more SAFE with respect to us.

In Federalist No. 10, Madison took up the issue in more detail. What came to be known as Madison's "theory of faction" is, in fact, his genius republican remedy for the people's short-sightedness and the danger of demagogues.

By a faction I understand a number of citizens, whether amounting to a majority or a minority of the whole, who are united and actuated by some common impulse of passion, or of interest, adverse to the rights of other citizens, or to the permanent and aggregate interests of the community.

A prime example of faction in Madison's terminology is a short-sighted majority who have been taken "by some common impulse" adverse to their long-term and "permanent interests." In Madison's view, a key advantage of representative institutions in contrast to direct democracy was to filter these dangerous passions:

to refine and enlarge the public views by passing them through the medium of a chosen body of citizens, whose wisdom may best discern the true interests of their

country and whose patriotism and love of justice will be least likely to sacrifice it to temporary or partial considerations.

Middlekauff's (2005, p. 678) analysis of Madison's theory is revealing. He argues that, in Madison's view, "democracy lent itself to flux through its direct expression of the passions of the people. Democracy was the people governing themselves without the benefit of confining, or limiting, institutions. Madison's assumption about democracy was based on still another about human beings: man, by nature, preferred to follow his passion rather than his reason; he invariably chose short-term over long-term interests."

Hamilton got to the heart of the issue in Federalist 71:

The republican principle...does not require an unqualified complaisance to every sudden breeze of passion, or to every transient impulse which the people may receive from the arts of men, who flatter their prejudices to betray their interests. It is a just observation, that the people commonly INTEND the PUBLIC GOOD. This often applies to their very errors. But their good sense would despise the adulator who should pretend that they always REASON RIGHT about the MEANS of promoting it. They know from experience that they sometimes err; and the wonder is that they so seldom err as they do, beset, as they continually are, by the wiles of parasites and sycophants, by the snares of the ambitious, the avaricious, the desperate, by the artifices of men who possess their confidence more than they deserve it, and of those who seek to possess rather than to deserve it. When occasions present themselves, in which the interests of the people are at variance with their inclinations, it is the duty of the persons whom they have appointed to be the guardians of those interests, to withstand the temporary delusion, in order to give them time and opportunity for more cool and sedate reflection. Instances might be cited in which a conduct of this kind has saved the people from very fatal consequences of their own mistakes, and has procured lasting monuments of their gratitude to the men who had courage and magnanimity enough to serve them at the peril of their displeasure.

Madison, Hamilton, and Jay were just a few in a sea of written debaters with similar views.

“The ambition of the poor, and the avarice of the rich demagogue, can never be restrained upon the narrow scale of a state government” said Harrington of Pennsylvania in 1787. “ ‘The rich,’ declared Robert R. Livingston in the New York ratifying convention, possessed ‘a more disinterested emotion’ than ordinary people, who tended to be ‘more occupied by their cares and distresses’ ” (Wood 2009, p. 34). “Election by the people in large districts would temper demagoguery and crass electioneering and would thus, said James Wilson, ‘be most likely to obtain men of intelligence and uprightness’ ” (Wood 1969, p. 512). Debates continued in the First Congress. The Constitution left the mode of election for the House to the state legislatures. A debate then arose in the states as to whether representative should be elected state-wide or in districts. Once again, the worry for demagogues erupted: “Some warned that district election were apt to keep our ‘the man of abilities.’ Instead of getting a liberally educated and cosmopolitan congressman, district elections would likely result in narrow-minded demagogues. He would be, wrote one sarcastic Marylander, someone who would ‘have nothing to recommend him but his supposed humility, who will not be too proud to court what are generally called the *poor folks*, shake them by the hand, ask them for their cote and interest, and, when an opportunity serves, treat them to a can of grog, and whilst drinking of it, join heartily in abusing what are called the *great people*’ ”(Wood 2009, p. 57).

These views may seem self-serving, and they also reflected the old hierarchical views that some were born to command and rule, while others were born to obey and serve. But they also reflected genuine worries about the nature of the citizenry in the new republic. Shay’s Rebellion of the 1780s and its aftermath, the Whiskey Rebellion of the 1790s, and the violence and military dictatorship that followed the French Revolution as well as many smaller incidents spoke to many of the educated gentlemen as the evidence that democracy, defined as unfiltered rule of the people, generates bad results: either people make bad decisions themselves, or they are deceived by demagogues. Of course, the cause of the problems was in the eye of the beholder. In the eyes of the ever-optimistic Jefferson, Napoleon’s coup was a nuance in the course of the French Revolution; were he to try claiming royalty “the enthusiasm of that nation would furnish a million of Brutus’s who would devote themselves to death to destroy him” (Wood 2017, p. 340). But even Jefferson, the “rallying point” of the Democratic-Republican movement of

the 1790s, believed that most people are “unqualified for the management of affairs requiring intelligence above the common level” (Wilentz 2005, p. 102).

Thus, American revolutionary elite and the statesmen of the early republic searched for solutions to save the people and the republic from republican vices. Some, like Thomas Jefferson, were so optimistic about the people’s abilities and goodness that they hardly worried about the long-term prospects of the American republic. Some, like John Adams, became so pessimistic about the people that they awkwardly resorted to grandiose titles and royal rituals to inject monarchical elements of superiority to re-instill in the people a deference toward the virtuous and knowledgeable elite, the “natural aristocracy” of America. Still others, like Benjamin Rush, focused on educating the public “to convert men into republican machines.” Most thoughtful of all, individuals like James Madison and John Adams at the outset, turned to elaborate institutional designs to find republican remedies for republican vices.

8 Conclusion: Demagogues, Evangelicalism, and Equality

Analyzing *Democracy in America*, Alexis de Tocqueville identified the love of equality as a fundamental characteristic of the people in democratic communities in general and in America in particular:

for equality, their passion is ardent, insatiable, incessant, invincible: they call for equality in freedom; and if they cannot obtain that, they still call for equality in slavery. They will endure poverty, servitude, barbarism—but they will not endure aristocracy.

By equality, de Tocqueville meant equality in social status, before the law, and in the right to participate in government affairs. This was a key legacy of the American Revolution. Before the Revolution, society was divided into two groups: the multitude, the “herd,” the rabble, the ordinary folks, and the better sorts, “the gentlemen of polite education.” The Revolution destroyed much of that old division. No longer did the many in the first group have to show deference to the few in the second (Wood 1993). This did not mean equality in wealth—most Americans never believed in that—neither at the time of the Revolution, nor at the time of Jack-

son or Bryan; not even Long advocated for anything approaching complete redistribution of wealth. Long advocated sharing enough wealth to remove abject poverty: “We do not propose to say that there shall be no rich men. We do not ask to divide the wealth. We only propose that, when one man gets more than he and his children and children’s children can spend or use in their lifetimes, that then we shall say that such person has his share.” Socialism, let alone communism was more of an intellectual movement in America rather than a social movement.

Evangelical movements in the 17th and 18th century America contributed to this equality (Wood 1993; Taylor 2016). In the 1830s, de Tocqueville (2002) observed that “Americans combine the notions of Christianity and of liberty so intimately in their minds, that it is impossible to make them conceive the one without the other” (p. 337). But the connection dated back to the revolutionary era. In colonial times, “established churches insisted that well-educated ministers could best prepare and guide common people to cultivate morality and seek salvation. Evangelicals countered that spiritual truth came spontaneously, emotionally, and directly from God to individuals who sought his grace” (Taylor 2016, p. 445). The religious fervor that swept the continent had a critical feature: “Evangelicals argued that that common people could find religious truth through free inquiry and should dispense with the inevitable distortions of elite guidance” (Taylor 2016, p. 445), insisting that “divinely inspired feelings, dreams, and visions provided a better spiritual mandate than any college degree,” (p. 448) required for ministers of established churches. “Evangelical preachers exhorted people to reject their traditional, well-educated ministers as clerical aristocrats” (p. 448). Thus, “a public synergy developed between revolutionary republicanism and evangelical religion” (p. 446). Individual choice and religious understanding in evangelicalism had a symbiotic relationship with individual consent and political persuasion in republicanism. Religious freedom acts, pioneered by Virginia in 1786, were supported both by evangelicals and by enlightened secular republicans like Jefferson and Madison. If common people could reason and understand religious truth, it axiomatically followed that they could reason and understand political truth.

Educated, polished, and respectable ministers were unhappy to lose ground to common preachers just as their counterparts in political arena were unhappy that the common people chose uneducated representatives whose behavior approached vulgarity by the elite’s standards.

One lamented about evangelical preachers (Taylor 2016, p. 448-9):

Liberty is a great cant word with them.... Hence to use their own language, they say, “Break all these yokes and trammels from off you, and come out of prison; and dare to think, and speak, and act for yourselves.

Anglicans and Congregationalists were no match for the evangelical “populist rhetoric” with its offering of “individual self-respect.” Evangelicalism was America’s “Republican Religion.” As Wood (2009) describes, evangelicalism and the democracy emerged together in the early republic: “as America became democratized, it became evangelized” (p. 594). Whatever the complex inter-related causes of this simultaneous emergence and symbiotic relationship, a consequence was that they both re-enforced a culture of equality, equality in social status and a premised ability to reason and comprehend both worldly and heavenly matters at some fundamental level.

Demagogues tap into this American creed. With a people that feels qualified or entitled to be the arbiter of government policy in a confusing and complex arena of opposing arguments and contradictory claims, a man of Jackson’s or Huey Long’s background can convince the people that their short-sighted plans may work. Then, if the wiser politicians are willing to both pander some and to use wiser arguments, but avoid condescension, they can fend off demagogues, like Franklin Delano Roosevelt. If, instead, they exude an air of superiority and expect the people to defer to their better judgments, like John Quincy Adams, they lose to demagogues. Kings and queens may call their subjects “deplorable” or “irredeemable” in a monarchy. Democracy in America, however, “will endure poverty, servitude, barbarism—but they will not endure” aristocratic scoldings. At the 1788 Virginia ratifying convention, when governor Randolph referred to the people as common herd, Patrick Henry charged that “respectable independent citizens” could not be “levelled and degraded” like that, forcing Randolph to backtrack and assert that he was misunderstood (Wood 2009, p. 35-6). It was as true then as it is now that condescension cannot win back the people from demagogues. A down-to-earth logic and a kind and friendly voice in a fireside chat, on the other hand, can.

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