

# Dueling Populisms

By Victor Davis Hanson

HOOVER INSTITUTION  
STANFORD UNIVERSITY





# Dueling Populisms

*Trump has revived the ancient tension between urban radicals who seek equality and rural conservatives who seek liberty.*

---

**By Victor Davis Hanson**

Populism is seen as both bad and good because people disagree about what it represents and intends. In the present age, there are two different sorts of populism. Both strains originated in classical times and persist today.

In antiquity, one type was known by elite writers of that time to be the “bad” populism. It appealed to the volatile, landless urban “mob,” or what the Athenians dubbed pejoratively the *ochlos* and the Romans disparagingly called the *turba*. Their popular unrest was spearheaded by the so-called *demagogoi* (“leaders of the people”) or, in Roman times, the popular tribunes. These largely urban protest movements

---

*Victor Davis Hanson is the Martin and Illie Anderson Senior Fellow at the Hoover Institution and chairman of Hoover’s Working Group on the Role of Military History in Contemporary Conflict. His focus is classics and military history.*

focused on the redistribution of property, higher liturgies or taxes on the wealthy, the cancellation of debts, support for greater public employment and entitlements, and sometimes imperialism abroad. Centuries later, the French Revolution and many of the European upheavals of 1848 reflected some of these same ancient tensions. Those modern mobs wanted government-mandated equality of result rather than that of opportunity, and they believed egalitarianism should encompass nearly all facets of life.

---

**In the present age, there are two different sorts of populism. Both strains originated in classical times and persist today.**

This populism operated via redistribution and it was the antecedent of today's progressive movement. Contemporary progressive populists favor higher taxes on the rich, more entitlements for the poor, identity politics reparations, and relief from debts such as

the cancellation of student loans. Various grassroots movements like Occupy Wall Street, Antifa, Black Lives Matter, and the Bernie Sanders phenomenon have all promoted such policies.

But there was always another populism—and in the ancient world, it was considered a “good” form of grassroots activism even though its contemporary version is disparaged by the liberal press: this political movement stemmed from the conservative and often rural quarters of the middle classes. The agrarian agendas of the Gracchi brothers, Roman politicians from the second century BC, were quite different from that of the later bread-and-circus urban underclass, in the same way that the American revolutionaries emphasized liberty while their French counterparts championed egalitarianism. More recently, the populism of the Tea Party is antithetical to that of Occupy Wall Street.

In ancient Greece, these agrarian populists were known as “*mesoi*” or “middle guys”—those who were mostly responsible for the rise of the Greek city-state and constitutional government.

Their signature ideas were preserving ownership of a family plot, seeing property as the nexus of all civic, political, and military life, and passing on farms through codified inheritance laws and property rights. The *mesoi* felt their approach offered stability to the otherwise volatile political order.

Similarly, the complaints of the later Roman agrarians against *latifundia*—the emergence of vast estates—today seems like a proto-Trumpian rant that rural Romans fought endless wars abroad for imperial expansion throughout the Mediterranean world without personally benefitting from these campaigns. Yet the benefits were, in a Roman context, an endless supply of cheap foreign slave laborers, influxes of disruptive global wealth, and corporate consolation of property at home. These profits went mostly to a Roman deep state of well-connected senators, imperial functionaries, magistrates, legates, provincial governors, and a permanent and expeditionary military force.

The rise of Donald Trump and those like him reflect some of these same age-old trends. Among contemporary conservatives, there was a growing complaint that the Republican Party had often forgotten the reminders of Edmund Burke and Alexis de Tocqueville that small property-owners were the stewards of conservatism, and of traditional norms and customs. They were seen as essential in stabilizing Western consensual systems, due to the pragmatism of their own lives and the stability of rural communities. In the eighteenth and nineteenth

centuries, such centrism in the American context set these agrarian property owners against both the absolutism of British monarchy and the recklessness of mass revolutionary movements like those in France.

---

**The Republican Party had often forgotten the reminders of Edmund Burke and Alexis de Tocqueville that small property-owners were the stewards of conservatism, and of traditional norms and customs.**

Obviously America is no longer a nation largely of yeomen farmers. But the ownership of a house, or a business, or a retirement savings plan, along with static populations centered around small businesses and well-paying manufacturing jobs, is perhaps the modern equivalent—as are traditional and hereditary rural communities in between the two coasts. Yet the trajectory of modern Republicanism had been to largely ignore such communities of small property owners and the effects that globalization and deindustrialization has had upon them—a neglect that led to startling political repercussions in 2016.

Before 2016, both Republican and Democratic political elites and establishmentarians in the media, Wall Street, the universities, and entertainment largely agreed, albeit for different reasons, on a number of issues that had combined to enervate the middle class of the interior.

In the context of ancient and modern parallels, recent complaints about misspent time, money, and lives in wars abroad recall the lamentations of an Everyman character who appears in Livy's Roman history, Spurius Ligustinus. Ligustinus was an impoverished small farmer in the

Italian countryside who in his fifties recites in anguish to the Roman senate his 22-year career of overseas military service as a legionary and centurion. The battle-scarred Spurius's personal tenure was a roadmap of overseas expansion—and a window into both the winners and losers of Roman globalization.

Illegal immigration and open borders have also been accepted as an almost natural expression of global labor and consumer markets—with largely positive results for both left and right. Liberals and ethnic activists championed those arriving, often illegally and unvetted, from Latin America and Mexico in expectation of their permanent political

---

**Political elites and establishmentarians . . . agreed, albeit for different reasons, on a number of issues that had combined to enervate the middle class of the interior.**

support. Identity politics has transformed the Democratic Party and, in theory, empowered its electoral opportunities in the American Southwest. Republicans, for their part, welcomed the cheap labor and/or deluded themselves into thinking that amnestied impoverished illegal immigrants would vote for family-values conservatives.

---

**Immigration was paradoxically seen as a boon to the economic interests of the elite Right and the social justice agendas of the Left.**

Neither party worried so much about the insidious erosion of immigration law, much less how laws that were otherwise applicable to most Americans could be arbitrarily ignored by a select few. That illegal immigration led to overburdened

social services and schools and drove down the wages of entry-level American workers was written off as the whines of those who did not understand the rules of free-market capitalism and the obsolescence of physical borders. In truth, open borders were unstable and did not promote the interests of the American middle classes. Illegal immigration reflected more the aristocratic/revolutionary binaries of the French Revolution, as immigration was paradoxically seen as a boon to the economic interests of the elite Right and the social justice agendas of the Left.

There was a similar consensus across party lines to embrace, without much reservation, globalization. It was seen not just as a reflection of Western cultural influence and technological revolution, but also as something morally and culturally enriching. Nationalism and borders would give way to a worldwide homogeneity—even as it left millions of Americans between the coasts with stagnant wages, lost jobs, or a sense of alienation from the centers of power in America.

Writing off large swaths of the American interior as the country of losers has been among the most radical developments in American history. For those who missed out on the advantages of one-world commerce, it was sometimes seen mostly, in Darwinian terms, as their own

fault, either because they did not, for example, pack up and head to the fracking fields of Texas or North Dakota, or because their self-inflicted pathologies excluded them from acquiring the skills and education necessary to succeed in the knowledge-based “information” economy.

---

**Writing off large swaths of the American interior as the country of losers has been among the most radical developments in American history.**

materialists *par excellence*—eager consumers of costly appurtenances that relied on hard labor, such as smartphones, luxury cars, wood floors, organic fruits and vegetables, and expansive homes.

A few obvious disconnects arose. How exactly could millions of Americans out of work be deemed to have had the wrong skills and trades when what they used to do well—build, fabricate, mine, log, and farm—was ever more essential to the enjoyment of the good American life? Did it make sense to fuel an international commercial system in which many of the most successful parties warped the rules of engagement to ensure advantages in trade and employment? Was it really accurate that manufacturing was irrelevant in the United States, given the country’s cheaper power rates, skilled work force, sometimes-lower taxes, and less intrusive government?

Closely connected in 2016 to populist issues of trade and globalization was deindustrialization. Another notion took currency: that the age of the smoke stack and assembly line was over. America, the idea went, had moved beyond an economy fueled by muscular labor and those who provided it. This was a strange mindset. The winners of globalization were

---

**Did it make sense to fuel an international commercial system in which many of the most successful parties warped the rules of engagement to ensure advantages in trade and employment?**

---

**We are still in the midst of a populist pushback against the two political parties.**

At best, Democrats talked about transitioning factory workers or coal miners to wind and solar industries; at worst, they saw the white working classes of the Midwest as experiencing

the same lack of opportunities that minorities had suffered, evidenced by their spiraling suicide rates and opioid addictions. Republicans believed that the market would sort things out; a community's lost aluminum smelters and fertilizer plants proved that they should be lost. "Creative destruction" was simply how the market worked, and it always favored the most efficient outcome—efficiency defined in terms of lowest financial outlay, without regard to the social and cultural costs exacted.

We are still in the midst of a populist pushback against the two political parties. The nature and themes are ancient—on the one hand, an urban and radical effort to redistribute wealth and use government to enforce equality, and, on the other, a counter-revolutionary pushback of the middle classes determined to restore liberty, limited government, sovereign borders, and traditional values.

*Originally featured in Defining Ideas, a Hoover Institution Journal.  
© 2018 by the Board of Trustees of Leland Stanford Junior University.*

---

***About the Hoover Institution: The Hoover Institution at Stanford University is a public policy research center devoted to the advanced study of economics, politics, history, and political economy—both domestic and foreign—as well as international affairs. With its eminent scholars and world-renowned Library & Archives, the Hoover Institution seeks to improve the human condition by advancing ideas that promote economic opportunity and prosperity and secure and safeguard peace for America and all mankind.***