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An Inherent Tension Within Populist Rhetoric

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Abstract: Populist rhetoric in America contains two essential features: first, a sharp critique of economic and political life and, second, a call for broader participation by the people that will set things right in response to an elite whose actions brought about contemporary problems. Past work generally assumes that the two goals inherent in this rhetoric – its educative critique and its exhortation to action – are compatible with each other. However, in this paper we argue that there is often an inherent tension between them. That is, the stronger the educative critique, the more it can actually reduce people’s likelihood of taking action. We provide several historical and contemporary examples of this pattern and then discuss a new line of research that examines it using experiments. We conclude by considering ways in which populist rhetoric can avoid the pitfall of voter disengagement.

Introduction: A Tension

“We meet in the midst of a nation brought to the verge of moral, political, and material ruin... we seek to restore the government of the Republic to the hands of ‘the plain people,’ with which class it originated.”

– The Omaha Platform, 1892

Standing before the assembled delegates of the Republican National Convention, Donald Trump offered a vision of American decline. “Nearly four in ten African-American children are living in poverty,” two million Latinos have fallen into poverty since 2009, and more than fourteen million people have “left the workforce entirely.” Reversing these trends would not be easy, as the status quo would be vigorously defended by “some of our nation’s most powerful special interests,” which have “rigged our political and economic system for their exclusive benefit.” But his story was also one of potential rejuvenation, in which the interests of the

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“forgotten men and women of our country,” the “people who work hard but no longer have a voice,” could once again be enshrined in their rightful place. “No longer can we rely on those elites in media, and politics,” he concluded, “who will say anything to keep a rigged system in place.” In order to dislodge this system, the American people would have to “rise to the occasion,” and prove to the “whole world that America is still free and independent and strong.”¹

Despite radically different policy agendas and historical contexts, Trump’s speech would not have been out of place in a People’s Party rally from the late nineteenth century, nor would it have sounded too strange coming from Huey Long in the 1930s, or the leaders of the Anti-Masonic Party, or any other representative of America’s long and rich tradition of populist rhetoric. And despite very different substantive appeals, Trump’s language shared broad similarities with that of Bernie Sanders, whose campaign highlighted a “rigged economy” that worked against the interests of the American people. “This great nation and its government,” Sanders argued, as he announced his campaign, “belong to all of the people, and not to a handful of billionaires” who had taken advantage of a “corrupt” campaign finance system to gain control over American politics. A year later, as he conceded defeat, Sanders insisted that “real change” could only come from “the bottom on up – when tens of millions of people say ‘enough is enough’ and become engaged in the fight for justice. That’s what the political revolution we helped start is all about.”²

These different framings of economic decline as the product of a corrupt elite, which can only be reversed through broad based participation of the people, capture two essential features of American populist rhetoric: what has often been denigrated as “calamity howling” – the sharp critique of the contemporary organization of political and economic life – and the juxtaposition of an elite held responsible for these problems against a people whose revitalized participation will put things right.³

These two rhetorical prongs – the educative critique and the call for broad participation – were not given equal emphasis by the two outsider candidates in 2016. Sanders’ “political revolution” stressed the critique but perhaps even more the call to action. The “media, large corporations, the people who control politically our country today do not want you to participate,” he argued, their nightmare being the possibility that “young people, lower income people, working

1 https://assets.donaldjtrump.com/DJT_Acceptance_Speech.pdf.

2 See the speech on May 26, 2015 <https://berniesanders.com/bernies-announcement/> and the speech to supporters on June 16, 2016 <https://berniesanders.com/political-revolution-continues/>.

3 The expression “calamity howlers” was a common term of abuse against Populists in the late nineteenth century (Gunderson 1940).

people jump into the process.” Trump, by contrast, more often suggested that renewal required not only broad political engagement but his own exceptional ability. “America is a nation of believers, dreamers, and strivers that is being led by a group of censors, critics, and cynics,” he argued: “I alone can fix it.”

Despite the many differences, their respective invocations of a “silent majority” or a mass movement of small-donors who would challenge elite rule and reverse economic decline were part of a larger tradition in American populist rhetoric. The joint impact of the populist critique and the populist call to action has been a source of inspiration for millions, unifying even as it vilifies, empowering a democratic wish even as it describes a democracy betrayed, creating a meaningful ‘people’ that has the ability to collectively control its own fate but only once the rule of elites has been exposed and challenged.

As pretty much everybody who has ever studied populist rhetoric acknowledges, it can have a dark side. The vilification can be directed at the vulnerable rather than the powerful, the redemptive power of the people can be invested in a democratically organized movement or in a leader with authoritarian tendencies, its simplification of policy and political debates can be educational and democratic – rendering complex problems easily comprehensible while drawing out clear solutions around which a political movement can be organized – but can also be completely unhinged. In part for this reason we conceive of populist rhetoric as a style, rather than a clear or consistent ideological project that can be neatly aligned on a left-right, progressive conservative, or any other cleavage that has appeared in American political history. The question of whether populism is on the left or right, after all, depends on which populism one is speaking about. And yet across them all is a common pattern of joining a critique of elite power producing economic and political calamities with a call for broad participation to restore the rightful primacy of the people.

But students of populism have generally taken for granted that the first, the educative critique, was compatible with the second, the exhortation to action. Indeed, the main worry of the critics of populism was that it would be too successful in mobilizing mass participation against the liberal capitalistic order. Critics such as Talcott Parsons, Edward Shils, and Philip Selznick shared a concern that a mass electorate would be drawn to political fads and fashions, while “poorly-organized” elites would fail to sustain common norms of behavior, encouraging “the spread of populism in politics, mass tastes in culture,” and, in Selznick’s phrase, inaugurating a “sovereignty of the unqualified” (Selznick 1951; Wilensky 1964). Critics of populism worried that during moments of economic dislocation, people would “become highly responsive to the appeal of mass movements bent on the transformation of the world,” leading those “who have previously rejected politics [to] turn out in large numbers to support demagogic attacks on

the existing political system” (Kornhauser 1959, p. 61). Political opportunists, looking to take advantage of the irrationality and paranoia of mass opinion, would offer varyingly bizarre conspiracy theories, ornate flattery of the “common man,” and use this to win political power. The populist style, warned its critics, posed a danger to capitalist democracy – its economic and political critique too simplistic, too radical, and too effective in mobilizing citizens.

There is good reason, however, to think that these two features of populist rhetoric – educative and exhorting – are in tension with each other, the strength of one potentially undermining the promise of the other. In particular, recent research finds that the detailing of financial insecurity or the ways in which democracy betrays itself – both essential to the “calamity howling” – may effectively increase voters’ concerns with these issues while simultaneously diminishing their willingness to become politically active in the way that populism’s critics have long feared. The educative role of the populist critique, that is, might undermine the broad participation that the populist vision claims is necessary.

This paper begins by discussing the central themes of populist rhetoric in American history, before turning to an empirical evaluation of how certain forms of such rhetoric can diminish the probability that citizens participate politically. We conclude by considering some of the ways in which populist rhetoric can avoid the pitfalls of voter disengagement.

Section I

Michael Kazin offers a useful definition of populist rhetoric, as a language in which “ordinary people” are cast as “a noble assemblage not bounded narrowly by class” who “view their elite opponents as self-serving and undemocratic,” and which is accompanied by an explicit effort “to mobilize the former against the latter” (Kazin 1995, p. 1). In both the US and elsewhere, populism has been understood as an appeal “predicated on a moral vilification of elites and a concomitant veneration of the common people” as the legitimate source of political authority (Bonikowski and Gidron 2016, p. 1594; see also Mudde 2004, p. 543; Kriesi 2014, p. 362).

In this sense, populist rhetoric has been with us since at least the seventeenth century invention of popular sovereignty as a legitimating principle for government authority (Morgan 1988). But it was only in the context of the new democratic American republic that the populist style began to flourish. The Revolution and its aftermath saw a proliferation of self-constituted “publics” operating “out-of-doors,” in the streets and fields and claiming sovereign authority by virtue of their claim to embody “the people” (Frank 2010). Many of the Patriots, such as the Committee of Privates in Philadelphia and countless others, engaged in a

rhetorical battle during and after the Revolution that warned against the influence of the “great and over-grown rich Men” who could not be trusted, juxtaposing this aristocratic elite against the virtuous people who could be counted on to defend the republic (Nevil et al. 1776). Antifederalists warned against elite “conspirators” who would try and subvert popular sovereignty in pursuit of their own interests, and defended a vision of a robust public sphere “filled with debate in newspapers, pamphlets, broadsides and speeches,” which would continuously educate and mobilize the citizenry against this danger (Hartog 2001, p. 838; cited in Formisano 2008, p. 39; see Taylor 1794). The Democratic-Republican Societies that followed rejected the claim that popular sovereignty could be exercised only at moments of election, warned Americans that monarchists were plotting to overturn the republican experiment, and called on a broad and direct participation of the people to counter the conspiracy (Link 1942; Schoenbachler 1998). These foundational populisms helped inaugurate a style that would endure for the next two centuries, finding expression in the agrarian political organizing of the late nineteenth century, in the rhetorical appeals of the early New Deal, and later in the different strands of the “radical right” represented by Joe McCarthy, the John Birch Society, and George Wallace.

Not all populisms are created equal. Some amounted to little more than a cynical home-style for career politicians trying to hide unpopular policy positions behind a folksy demeanor. But others were fully-organized political movements, far-flung networks of activists and attentive constituencies who through mass organizing campaigns and the judicious use of resonant themes from the broader society created a movement culture. But what has been true of all but the most cynical populisms is that they had an explicit objective of drawing attention to certain political issues, of educating the citizenry about the causes and solutions to these problems, and of inspiring them to action within an organized movement.

What was to be educated was the conspiracy against the public, the malicious organization of the country’s political economy such that it enriched the powerful at the expense of the people. This conspiratorial storyline was generally combined with an extensive detailing of economic inequality and insecurity. For instance, in the years after the ratification of the US Constitution, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, and the Republican party they were organizing warned that Alexander Hamilton and a good number of Federalists were not only monarchists but had a vision of monarchy “bottomed on corruption.” While the ultimate object of Hamilton’s financial reforms, they charged, was “to prepare the way for a change from the present republican form of government to that of a monarchy,” the danger was also one of economic dependence and insecurity. The wealthy, warned Madison, must not be allowed “an immoderate, and especially

an unmerited, accumulation of riches,” which they would invariably achieve if a union could be forged between those who believed “mankind are incapable of governing themselves” and the “men of influence, particular of moneyed, which is the most active and insinuating influence” (Madison 1792a,b). If they continued in their control over the government, the elite would establish monopolies, restrict the availability of land for settlement, encourage the growth of industries that supplied luxuries to the wealthy – and which were thus vulnerable to job losses if fashions changed – and fund the government through debts for which the common man would be liable (Dunn 2004, pp. 53–57).

A century later, Ignatius Donnelly read the Omaha Platform of the People’s Party before the assembled delegates in Nebraska. Economic calamity was no longer just a future danger but an immediate crisis. Business was prostrated, he argued, American homes were “covered with mortgages, labor impoverished,” the urban workmen “denied the right to organize for self-protection, [while] imported pauperized labor beats down their wages,” and a mercenary army was paid “to shoot them down.” The laboring classes of America were “rapidly degenerating into European conditions.” The economic insecurities of the people were evoked in vivid detail, information that the mainstream press would not supply: the “newspapers are largely subsidized or muzzled, public opinion silenced.” The platform, like the Populist speeches that were given across the country by an active army of organizers, sought to educate the citizenry about the real cause of economic distress, the “vast conspiracy against mankind” that “has been organized on two continents, and [] 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.” The conspiracy against the public, achieved through elite control over the government, was breeding “two great classes – tramps and millionaires.”⁴

Forty-years after the defeat of the People’s Party, another populist would detail the severity of economic depression and seek to educate the people about its ultimate cause. “We have today in America,” explained Huey Long in his radio speech to the nation, “thousands and hundreds of thousands and millions of children on the verge of starvation, in a land that is overflowing with too much to eat and too much to wear.” This inequality could only be overcome by placing a cap on incomes and wealth and redistributing the rest. The political influence of the elites, however, prevented any solution so long as the people remained passive and unorganized. The “rich people of this country – and by rich people I mean the super-rich – will not allow us to solve the problems” of economic inequality,

⁴ For the text of the Omaha Platform, see <http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/536.1>.

and only a broad movement – linked together by Long’s “Share the Wealth” clubs – could overcome their influence.

Sixty years later, Pat Buchanan – explicitly rejecting the redistribution of wealth that Long and others emphasized – promised to attract millions of Democrats and non-voters into the Republican party by putting the “financial community and some of the folks heading up the big corporations” on the “back of [the] bus.”⁵ He would end their influence over national policy, restore American manufacturing, and fight back against the loss of democratic control to “the institutions of what I call the new world order,” including the Trilateral Commission, the World Trade Organization, and the United Nations. Attacking “immoral and un-American” trade deals that forced American workers to compete with Chinese workers making “25 cents an hour,” he denounced both the major parties as unconcerned “about the working people.”⁶

The purpose of these very diverse forms of populist rhetoric was never simply educational. The explicit objective of detailing conditions of economic insecurity was to inform citizens that their plight was shared by millions, to explain the cause as resulting from elite control over the government, and just as importantly, to exhort citizens into action, by appealing to a sense of outrage at the exposed evils and to a newly cultivated sense of political efficacy that came with being joined in a broader collective effort.

Populism, then, has never been solely about economic crisis and insecurity, the plight of the people, or elite conspiracies against the producing classes; it has never been just “calamity howling.” It has always, albeit to varying degrees, emphasized the necessity of the “people” rising up in coordinated action through the not-yet-entirely-lost democratic institutions. It is for this reason that a “populist sensibility,” in Richard Parker’s formulation, “measures how much political energy is being expressed” by the citizenry on the explicit assumption that the “expression of such energy is better than passivity or insulation” (1993, p. 556). And populism generally seeks to develop the political capacity and efficacy of the citizen – in pursuit of a given political agenda, for sure – while arguing that “realist” perspectives on democracy that deny such capacity foster “the erosion of self-confidence, passivity, and withdrawal,” and with it, the continued rule of a self-interested elite (Formisano 2008, p. 4).

5 “At the root of America’s social crisis – be it AIDS, ethnic hatred, crime or the social decomposition of our cities – lies a spiritual crisis. Solzhenitsyn was right. Men have forgotten God. Not in the redistribution of wealth, but in the words of the Old and New Testament will be found not only salvation but the cure for a society suffering a chronic moral sickness.”

6 James Bennet. “Buchanan, in Unfamiliar Role, is Under Fire as Left-Winger.” *New York Times*. December 31, 1995, 1.

Evidence of the Tension

But what if the educational project nature of populist rhetoric works against the appeal for broad-based political participation? Building a political movement of the excluded, the disfranchised, and the economically marginal has always been a difficult endeavor. The reasons for this are both straightforward and subtle. Political participation generally involves a trade-off, as it takes time, resources, and psychological energy that might be used in other endeavors. This trade-off impinges especially severely on the choices made by poor citizens, who are constrained by the need to work long hours, search for employment, and negotiate near-constant trade-offs that are induced by extremely limited resources. These trade-offs are not just material in nature, but also cognitive – the process of dealing with resource limitations that necessitate difficult trade-offs consumes large amounts of scarce attentional and other cognitive resources (Mani et al. 2013).

More subtly, however, the rhetoric surrounding economic insecurities can remind citizens of their own economic anxieties and precarious situation, resulting in non-participation and less mobilization than we would expect given the resonance of the appeal and the importance of the issue to them. These dynamics seem to have long shaped populist politics, with the rhetoric persuading citizens about the severity and even the cause of economic problems but also undermining their likelihood of participating in various forms of political advocacy.

Consider the example of the People's Party of the late nineteenth century, perhaps the most important example of populist rhetoric that merged a consistent critique of the American, and indeed global, political economy with a concerted effort to mobilize the people. "What you farmers should do," insisted Populist organizer Mary E. Lease, "is raise less corn and more hell" (Gunderson 1940, p. 407). The educative nature of the Populist program was intended to cultivate a critical and engaged citizenry, by embedding them within a distinctive movement subculture that could help insulate their democratic and egalitarian commitments against the disintegrating effect of elite domination over the media (Goodwyn 1978; but see Parsons et al. 1983). To this end, the Populists undertook a "massive educational campaign, conducted through a network of reform newspapers employing new technologies of mass communication and through a disciplined lecturing system designed to mobilize grass-roots support for political insurgency" (McMath 1992, p. 143).

But even the Populists, with their insistence on mass organizing, their appeals to the excluded and downtrodden, and their genuine efforts to forge biracial alliances, were generally reliant not on the poorest voters but on a "middling" class of farmers for their political support. Based on a detailed study of the South Dakota Farmers' Alliance, for instance, John Dibbern concludes that "Populists

were not poor, but propertied; yet they also faced the possibility that a crop failure could lead to a mortgage foreclosure and the loss of their property.” The Alliances “appealed less to men without property or to men with secure property than it did to men whose property was insecurely held,” with their membership drawn especially from mid-sized farmers with above average debt (Dibbern 1982, p. 691). But Alliance membership – which entailed specific economic benefits from banding together into cooperative stores, mills, and warehouses – was not the same as active participation in the political efforts of the People’s Party or even of the Alliances themselves. The economic benefits were an important factor in the growth in Alliance membership, although there is some evidence that the articulation of an explicit anti-elite ideology was also important (Barnes 1984, pp. 65–67). But the organizers of the People’s Party were aware that Alliance membership “was too costly in terms of both time and money for many farmers,” and hoped that they would be able to appeal to this larger bloc of disgruntled farmers. And while they enjoyed some notable successes in organizing tenant farmers, the Populists were not always able to retain the active support of Alliance members and many of these began drifting away after merchant and manufacturer pressures limited the economic gains (Schwartz 1976, pp. 255–262; Redding 1992, p. 347).

While they ultimately failed to dislodge either of the two political parties, and the Farmers’ Alliances did not survive the entry into politics, the populist critique and political program had an enduring importance in the regions where it was most extensively organized. Populism in the South, for instance, lived well past its destruction as an organized political party in a set of policy goals that enjoyed broad popular support and in a political culture where the rhetorical juxtaposition of the productive classes against state-supported capitalists remained highly resonant (Scott 1963; Sanders 1999). In the new southern context of mass disfranchisement and one-party rule, the populist critique could be picked up by demagogues looking to cultivate identities as supporters of the people against the elite, sometimes even in the absence of any identifiably populist political program. But this was itself in part a testament to the effectiveness of populist organizers in shaping the political culture of the region. The educative critique was accepted, even as former Populists lamented that the broad political participation needed to redeem the promise of American life had failed to materialize, undermined by existing political loyalties, by reduced populist turnout, and, in the South especially, by outright electoral fraud and physical violence.

Looking at the Twentieth Century, we see many other examples of this inherent tension between the educative and participatory goals of rhetoric appealing to people facing severe economic distress and dislocation. For example, both the National Welfare Rights Organization (NWRO) and the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now (ACORN) were organizations that mobilized

people for collective action, but also had difficulty reaching certain populations and, even among those that they did reach, sustaining long-term calls to action.

The NWRO recruited dues-paying members based mostly on grievances with the welfare system. These grievances included people having their benefits cut off without warning or explanation, not receiving the full benefits to which they were entitled, failing to receive welfare checks on time, and being treated in a demeaning way by welfare officers. In addition, they often did not receive special needs grants for which they were eligible – grants that were instrumental in paying for necessities like household appliances, clothing, and furniture. The NWRO would recruit members in large part (at least initially) on the prospect of helping them resolve these important and immediate grievances. The educative part – convincing potential members that they were not alone and that the system should not (and did not need to) work this way – was critical. However, once grievances were resolved and NWRO organizers tried to sustain long-lasting mobilization around broader political goals, it was very difficult. As Bailis (1974, p. 55) writes, “organizing drives almost invariably produced successful first meetings and first confrontations. But few of the local groups created in those drives were able to maintain their momentum – or their membership – for very long.” It’s not that potential members did not strongly support the goals, but instead it was the case that sustained membership was too costly in terms of time and money.

ACORN, which grew out of the NWRO, faced similar challenges. ACORN’s goal was to organize low- and moderate-income people in communities around the country with campaigns focused on local concerns. It was multi-issue in its approach, and much of its advocacy work was focused on community members who were willing to voluntarily spend time or money on its issue campaigns. Swarts (2008, pp. 33–34) describes ACORN as a populist group with a platform that included a “veritable laundry list of progressive positions challenging corporate power and championing ‘the people’” and one in which members expressed a “populist sentiment” dedicated to the idea of “putting power in the hands of the small person or your everyday citizen.” Yet, similarly to NWRO, there frequently arose a tension between raising the educative critique and sustaining broader participation, as Swarts notes (2008, p. 101): “most job seekers and welfare recipients have more pressing priorities than becoming activists, so it was harder to recruit them.” In these cases, we see that when issues relate directly to the material concerns of their everyday lives, people express concern and desire for policy change but at the same time it is difficult to convince them to spend scarce resources of money and/or time engaged in political advocacy due to the severe trade-offs they face in their everyday lives.

A more recent line of research provides even more direct evidence of the underlying tension in populist rhetoric itself between the educative critique

and the call for broader participation. This recent line of work uses experiments to randomly assign individuals to receive various types of populist rhetoric. The experiments then measure some aspect or aspects of political engagement. Some forms are attitudinal – that is, they measure the degree to which people become more concerned about the problems mentioned and/or express increased support for policies that would redress them. Other types of political engagement are behavioral – that is, they measure whether people are willing to spend scarce resources of time, money, and/or attention on issue advocacy. Collectively, the experiments permit sharp comparisons between the effect of alternative kinds of populist rhetoric on precisely the kinds of outcomes that are often critical to a “call to action”.

The general conclusion that emerges from this set of experiments is that, when political rhetoric reminds people about their personal economic concerns or ways in which elites are unresponsive to their interests, it often *reduces* their willingness to spend scarce resources on issue activism. The reasons why differ depending upon the type of rhetoric (as we describe more below), but the overarching point is that the populist rhetoric itself essentially provides a reason not to participate by making salient the kinds of trade-offs or democratic betrayals that themselves reduce people’s desire to spend scarce resources of money, time, and attention on politics and political advocacy. Yet, at the same time, this rhetoric *increases* people’s stated concern about the issue. In other words, a divergence arises between the effect of this rhetoric on people’s policy attitudes and priorities and their willingness to spend scarce resources advocating for changes they support. This pattern is important because, while public opinion can impact the shape of the political agenda and the likelihood of policy change, that link is not automatic. Such change is more likely to arise when there is organized activism pushing for it (e.g. Kollman 1998; Gilens 2012; Druckman and Jacobs 2015). Thus, to the extent populist rhetoric undermines itself by fostering quiescence at the same time it spurs opinion change, democratic non-responsiveness can easily result.

While several such experiments have been conducted, here we describe two in detail. One took place during the debate over health care reform in 2009. Levine (2015) conducted an experiment in which people were randomly assigned to receive one of three messages tied to a political organization concerned about health care. Some people received brief messages that simply identified the organization itself and its overarching goal of policy change. Others received the same message that identified the organization, but then also received extra information about the problem of rising health care costs, a widely-shared economic grievance at the time. The third group received the same organizational identifying information, but then received extra information about a health care related

issue it was working on that was unrelated to costs. Each of these treatments very clearly stated an educative critique of the current political and economic situation related to health care in the US and then also encouraged a course of action in response that was designed to boost issue participation.

Given the widespread concern about health care costs at the time, one might have expected that that message would resonate and spur action. However, it was also the case that that rhetoric directly reminded people about a financial constraint that many were personally facing. Does rhetoric that mentions an important issue, but also reminds people of a personal financial constraint, mobilize people to spend scarce resources of money and/or time? The answer is that it mostly does not. Indeed, Levine found that although respondents overwhelmingly expressed concern about health care costs, they were *less* likely to donate money to the organization when reminded about those costs relative to either of the other two messages. And, if they were in the labor force, they were also less willing to spend time. This follows from the idea that, among those in the labor force, being reminded about a financial constraint also reminds people about a temporal constraint. In short, populist rhetoric that raises consciousness about a widely-shared economic concern can both increase attitudinal engagement and decrease behavioral engagement at precisely the same time.

Here is a second example that more explicitly referenced another common aspect of populist rhetoric – its anti-elite nature. This experiment was conducted during June 2016 and was designed to test some of the common forms of rhetoric that had already become part of the election season (Levine and Stiles 2016). Individuals searching for voter registration information on Google were randomly assigned to receive messages via Google AdWords that either referred to anti-elite populist rhetoric or did not. All ads included a link that people could click on to get more information about how to register (and thus was directly tied to the reason why they were searching Google for information in the first place). This is a particularly interesting group of people to study because, unlike most primary voters, this set of (potential) voters arguably has tangential relations to the electoral system and so encompasses precisely the kind of person that may either vote or stay home (as opposed to habitual voters that will almost always turn out).

The ads in the experiment included three types of anti-elite messages: “Wealthy buying elections,” “The system is rigged,” and “Your voice is not yet being heard.” Each of these statements raises a concern that many recipients probably shared, yet at the same time also makes salient a critical way in which our democracy may in fact not be very democratic. In short, they each note one way in which a core value that most citizens hold dear is being betrayed. The authors also included another statement that (broadly) referenced ordinary citizens not having influence in the political system, but did so in a way that did not

directly refer to existing inequalities in political voice. This statement read: “Be heard this election.” Together, then, there were four statements evaluated as part of four successive experiments, and in each case the statements were evaluated against a relatively-bland “control group” that received this statement about voter registration: “Registering is quick, easy, and free”. The key outcome measure was how often people clicked on the ads, which is a behavioral measure of how interested they are in voluntarily seeking out voting information.

The results were striking. For each of three anti-elite messages that directly referenced how ordinary people’s voices were not being represented in the current political system, click rates were lower than in the control group – in other words, they each reduced people’s willingness to further spend scarce resources on the issue. No such decrease occurred when the authors compared the control group to the non-anti-elite message of “Be heard this election”.

In a companion experiment the authors compared the effect of the same four statements to the control group along other measures of engagement. Similar to the AdWords experiment, they found that the three anti-elite messages reduced people’s stated desire to take part in the electoral process (and so the effects were not simply about clicking on Google AdWords but seemed to have broader implications). Moreover, when they examined a measure of engagement that did not require spending scarce resources, but instead just asked about whether campaign finance reform should be a political priority, people who received the anti-elite messages voiced increased concern. Again, as with the first experiment, there was a divergence that arose between the effect of populist rhetoric on attitudinal engagement as compared with behavioral engagement.

Taken together, these two experiments provide further evidence in support of the tension we identified between providing an educative critique of the political and economic system and at the same time issuing a call for broad participation. While these two experiments by no means cover the full range of rhetoric that could be considered populist (though they come from a broader research agenda that covers more of this range), along with the case studies they help bolster the general argument.

Conclusion

We now briefly return to where we started: the 2016 race. This election comes in the midst of decades of household income stagnation, rising economic inequality, and with a global financial crisis (and government rescue of banks and other financial institutions) in fresh memory. The fact that there is widespread anger along with a feeling that elites are out of touch and/or disinterested is

not terribly surprising. Against that backdrop, the two most prominent outsider candidates in the race – Bernie Sanders and Donald Trump – have both employed varieties of populist rhetoric that are akin to what appeared in the experiments in the previous section. For Trump, it included the warning that the general election would be rigged – “I’m telling you, on November 8, we’d better be careful, because that election is going to be rigged” he said on television in August. And this comment followed similar ones throughout the primary season as well, always with the implicit assumption that a nefarious set of elites (including the Republican establishment and the Democrats) was responsible. While such rhetoric may have successfully appealed to voters that were part of Trump’s base, it remains possible that it will turn off potential new voters during the general election.

On the Democratic side, Bernie Sanders consistently called attention to the unresponsive elite that had turned a blind eye to the economic distresses of average Americans. These populist calls were seemingly quite successful, both at the ballot box and especially in fundraising. His campaign committee raised an impressive amount of money – over \$228 million, 59% of which was via small individual contributions.⁷ At first blush such totals would seem to contradict the findings from the experiment we mentioned earlier – about how populist economic rhetoric reduces people’s desire to spend scarce resources like money supporting a cause. Yet in this case it’s critical to home in on the specific rhetorical choices he made. He called for a “political revolution” and his fundraising messages in particular tended to focus not on the economic distresses of his supporters but instead on the fact that he was not otherwise getting his money from the “billionaire class”. In other words, his fundraising messages arguably side-stepped the concern mentioned in the previous section.

Does that mean that Sanders found the ultimate key to success? Perhaps he did temporarily while the goal was to increase support for himself as a candidate (and against Clinton as his main opponent) during an election. But, we suspect that he will face challenges going forward as he segues into issue-based advocacy. Indeed, many questions have already been raised about the degree to which the Sanders momentum from the primary campaign – now institutionalized as part of the “Our Revolution” organization – can sustain itself. While answers to this question remain to be seen, there is good reason to worry once advocacy turns to specific issues that are likely to resemble the kinds of messages that Levine (2015) studied in relation to health care advocacy. The people that Sanders is often appealing to are pressed for money and

7 <https://www.opensecrets.org/pres16/candidate.php?id=N00000528>.

time, and to the extent that his rhetoric focuses on issues that remind them of these constraints, persuading them to devote resources to issue advocacy may prove exceptionally difficult.

Having said that, we are not claiming that the tension in populist rhetoric can never be overcome. In particular, the tension will be greatest among those who are personally affected. Those who are concerned about the problems raised, but not personally affected by them, may not be negatively affected in this way.

Moreover, at the core of the tension is the fact that populist rhetoric essentially provides a reason not to participate (because you really cannot spare the money or time, or because the system will not be responsive to you anyway, etc.). Yet there are times when the situation is so dire that the kinds of trade-off thinking that populist rhetoric can occasion may not matter very much. For instance, for those unemployed during the Great Depression, the situation had gotten so bad that spending time on political activity was essentially their only option (see Levine 2015 for an extended discussion of this example; also see Schlozman and Verba 1979 for examples of the trade-off considerations expressed by unemployed workers during the 1970s).

Lastly, in situations that are not quite as dire as the Great Depression, the tension can potentially be overcome by invoking other motivations that are not specific to the issue itself. The idea of populist rhetoric being self-undermining in the way we've described is predicated on the fact that its content is what might motivate people to get involved. Yet people get involved in politics for many reasons that are not solely about the personal grievances and policy goals they hold. For instance, community organizations that can foster interpersonal ties and link group membership with the achievement of political goals can be very successful (see Skocpol 2003 for examples). To be sure, this is precisely what groups like the NWRO and ACORN tried to do, and so this is not a foolproof strategy. But, it opens the door to invoking social influence and social motivations (e.g. by appealing to people's desire to be respected by, and want to help out, their friends, neighbors, and fellow organization members whose camaraderie they value) to spur political action. The final possibility is to ignore some forms of populist rhetoric and try to appeal to economically-distressed voters on other grounds. In addition to the "system is rigged" rhetoric, this has also been a key part of Donald Trump's strategy during 2016. While he has sometimes used anti-trade rhetoric to garner support – which itself likely reminds his supporters about their financial constraints – by and large he has focused on race and identity. That may be a way to side-step the tension we have described, yet it also means that political priorities are likely to revolve around race and identity issues (like immigration) rather than policies that more directly relieve the economic stresses that people are facing.

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