



**“The System is Broken!’ Victimization and Anti-Establishment  
Sentiments as Mechanisms of Populism in Contemporary America”**

**By Patrick Song**

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Patrick Song

Professor Bignall

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**Introduction**

The 2016 presidential election has become an event so often discussed it is at risk of semantic satiation. At the heart of the interest around this particular election is the rise of populist candidates, Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders, into mainstream politics. In particular, Donald Trump shocked the world by winning the election against the favored candidate, Hillary Clinton, despite all of his questionable breaks from tradition, such as his criticism of a Gold Star family (Haberman and Oppel, “Donald Trump Criticizes Muslim Family of Slain U.S. Soldier, Drawing Ire”). The rhetoric and policy proposals made by these two candidates used to be on the fringe of politics, supported only by the radical voters of both the left and the right, but the 2016 presidential election presented an interesting case of how these radical policies became the main focus of the election. The scale of the 2016 presidential election is so large that any statement made is, by nature, an overgeneralization. However, the fact of the matter is that the success of Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders sent a message to the government and the public: people wanted radical change in America, and this radical change was virtually unthinkable to anyone not supporting these candidates.

With how radical the two populist candidates turned out to be, by all accounts they

should have been drowned out by more moderate voices in the national election. Therefore, there are two genuine questions to be asked about the success of these two candidates. How does populism in contemporary America politically mobilize voters, and how were they so successful? This paper attempts to use the theoretical framework of mechanisms and processes to answer these questions. This framework is built upon three concepts: mechanisms, processes, and episodes. Mechanisms are a specific type of event that changes the relations among specific sets of elements in identical or closely similar ways in a variety of different situations. Processes are frequently occurring sequences of mechanisms. Episodes are connected streams of social life that often acquire significance due to names that correspond to them. In particular, this paper argues that the process of populist mobilization of voters in contemporary American politics is built upon two sequential mechanisms: victimization and anti-establishment sentiment. The two case studies shall be populist presidential candidates, Bernie Sanders and Donald Trump, during the episode of the 2016 presidential election.<sup>1</sup> This paper will finally discuss the larger question this poses for American politics as a whole.

## **Victimization**

Victimization describes the process of a group of people, across party lines, identifying themselves as sufferers under an establishment, which differs with context. The key characteristic of this mechanism with respect to contemporary American politics is the disregard for traditional party lines. Party affiliation took a backseat to the primary identity tied to a sense

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<sup>1</sup> It is important to note that although this paper attempts to draw abstract mechanisms that all populist candidates in contemporary American share, it is by no means meant to draw a false equivalence of different candidates. This paper was not meant to pass judgement on the actual rhetoric or feasibility of the candidates' platforms and therefore does not so do.

of victimhood and the unrest against the status quo (the latter worth mentioning now, but further elaborated in the next section). The candidates presented the “establishment” as the source of the peoples’ suffering, tapping into the unrest that already existed, and claimed to be against it. The “establishment” itself is an intentionally vague term to be whoever the voters wanted it to be, that was also hyper focused on particular groups and institutions. For instance, Trump supporters often used terms such as “drain the swamp” as fights against “establishment,” with an unclear conception of what the swamp actually is. Sanders differs greatly from Trump both because of ideological differences and the consistency of his message, but the model remains the same. He claims the economic and corporate elite to be the “establishment” that needs to be fought against. According to Dyck, Merkowitz, and Coates, “Support for the two insurgent candidates of 2016 is correlated more with distrust and satisfaction with government and the status quo than with any clear ideological divergence from the party establishment.” Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders were particularly successful in appealing to voters across party lines (or more accurately, outside of party lines) (Dyck, et al, 355).

Donald Trump’s victory in the 2016 presidential campaign came largely from white voters and this was because he appealed to their identity as explicitly white voters. “Trump’s campaign... targeted post-industrial ‘red states’ traditionally associated with conservative white working-class constituencies, combining protectionist rhetoric with anti-immigration tropes. His slogan, “Make America Great Again” was a nod to an idealised industrial period of plentiful jobs, economic security and implied cultural security, but also a dog whistle to nostalgia for a pre-PC, pre-affirmative action and even pre-civil rights era when white men ruled unchallenged.” (Mondon and Winter, 513). Trump conveyed the message that white voters are victims of the

“establishment” that actively benefits from, or at least turns a blind eye, to their specific, yet upon closer inspection, vaguely defined source of suffering.<sup>2</sup> Coates claims, “What appeals to the white working class is ennobled. What appeals to black workers, and all others outside the tribe, is dastardly identitarianism” (Coates, “The First White President”). In his argument, Coates concludes that following the election of President Obama, an implicit assumption of whiteness in American politics was shattered and replaced with the threat of minorities having mainstream political power. The 2016 election proves that this outcry itself forged a new identity, one created out of a sense of victimization.

Trump’s platforms of “Build a Wall,” deport illegal immigrants, and ban and profile Muslims have combined two often disassociated ideological voting blocs, far right leaning and moderate to slightly left leaning voters by appealing to their identity as explicitly white voters. Marc Hooghe and Ruth Dassonneville attempt to analyze the effect of racism and anti-immigration sentiments on the 2016 election. Their conclusion was that “In this specific election, negative attitudes toward ethnic minorities and immigrants swayed independents and some Democrats to opt for candidate Trump, thereby considerably strengthening his electoral-support base” (Hooghe and Dassonneville, 532). Voters on the fence about the Republican party were strongly influenced by anti-immigrant rhetoric made by Trump while people strongly leaning Republican were strongly influenced by overtly racist rhetoric.<sup>3</sup> The

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<sup>2</sup>There is a commonly used argument that white people aren’t racist, and that it is the economy that makes them angry at the elitist establishment. Coates takes issue with this notion because he sees white nationalism as the clear culprit for Trump’s ascendancy and the largest issue at hand. He claims avoiding this fact is being hesitant to acknowledge this problem that is central to the structure of American politics, and this is largely the presumption being used in this particular argument.

<sup>3</sup> See Hooghe and Dassonneville, Figure 3

white nationalist rhetoric espoused by Trump managed to combine two voting blocs that were often disassociated with each other, with clear ramifications. Trump won 8% of the black vote to Clinton's 88% (blacks made up 12% of total voters). Trump however, won 58% of white vote to Clinton's 37% (whites made up 70% of total voters).<sup>4</sup>

Bernie Sanders' unique brand of democratic socialism, with radical platforms such as Medicare-for-all, progressive tax reform<sup>5</sup>, and universal college education, were very different from the policy platforms of the Democratic party, which were much more moderate in its push for economic equality. This is best encompassed by the fact that Bernie Sanders ran as an independent, only affiliating with the Democratic party to win the nomination, and quickly switching to an independent following the Clinton nomination (Dyck et al, 351-352). The establishment he fought against was most certainly more targeted than the one presented by Donald Trump, focusing on the "1%", a catch-all for the systems put into place to keep the rich extremely wealthy and the poor barely able to make means end. The voting demographic that most identified with this plight of economic inequality was the millennial generation. Interestingly, minority demographics and low income Americans who also felt victimized by this establishment generally voted for Hilary Clinton, which can largely be explained by Sanders' failure to engage with minorities (or any major demographic outside of millenials) and Clinton's overall domination in the Democratic primary (Jordan, "Age and race in the 2016 Democratic primary").

The particular challenge with analyzing Bernie Sanders' presidential run was that it was cut short after his defeat in the Democratic primaries. Unlike Donald Trump's definitive polling

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<sup>4</sup> See Mondon and Winter, Table 3

<sup>5</sup> See Cole and Greenberg for more details on his tax reform proposals

statistics, it is difficult to see how Sanders would have polled with a national audience. However, using public polls, there are some key distinctions in Sanders' voting demographic and how his narrative of victimization attracted them. Sanders' voting demographic came particularly from young voters, aged between 17 and 29 by a significant margin. Silver argues that the label "socialist" is a liability for old voters. The data suggests that the older a voter is, the more likely they are to be unfavorable of socialism, but this trend reverses for younger Americans. This is largely explained by the anti-socialism sentiments that stem from the Cold War and the failed USSR's socialist label that resonate the older an American is. In contrast, younger Americans largely associate socialism with the more prosperous countries of Denmark and Sweden. Shelly and Hitt also argue that universal college education was instrumental in targeting the millennial voters. With the rising cost of college and student debts, millennial voters identified as victims of this economic trend and gravitated to Sanders' policy which resonated most with them (Shelly and Hitt, 275). These explanations account why, in the Iowa entrance poll, 84% of young Democratic voters chose Bernie Sanders (Silver, "Why Young Voters Love Bernie Sanders").

### **Anti-Establishment Sentiment**

The previous section describes how populist candidates tap into the peoples' unrest of the status quo with messages that target a particular identity tied to a sense of victimhood.

Anti-establishment sentiment describes the process in which that feeling is politically mobilized by officials who portray themselves as the fighter (perhaps the only fighter) against the "establishment". To further understand the role of anti-establishment sentiment as a political mechanism, this section explores how both Bernie Sanders and Donald Trump benefited from

the media through being perceived as the victims of attacks by the “establishment” and the popular unrest against the “establishment,” of which traditional media was certainly implicated in. This section argues this had significant consequences in making Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders serious candidates in their respective primaries due to the interrelated effect of social media “filter bubbles,” victimization of the candidates, and popular unrest against the status quo.

While there is no doubt that media plays a role in politics, the nature of this role is hotly debated. For instance, the Cambridge Handbook of Experimental Political Science considers it a norm that media messages that are obviously appealing to racial antipathy are in violation of racial norms. “Once messages rise to the level of explicitness, the egalitarian norm allegedly kicks in and the recipient suppresses any incipient prejudices” (Cambridge Handbook, 376). However, both the data established by Marc Hooghe and Ruth Dassonneville and the arguments made by Coates suggest that explicit racism was a key in Trump’s mobilization of voters.<sup>6</sup> This paper does not claim an answer in the causal relationship between media and politics, and instead works with a basic understanding that media coverage of candidates is generally beneficial for them. To this end, Sanders and most notably Trump, have been able to benefit heavily from social media’s ability to specifically target their particular demographics, bound together by the identity of victimhood. In the journal, “Social Media and Populism, An Elective Affinity?,” Gerbaudo argues that social media provides the ideal platform for people who feel victimized to express their opinions to similarly identifying people. Social media creates a “filter bubble” effect, that strengthens the voters’ sense of belonging and commitment to a populist cause (Gerubado, 750). To further support the claim that social media was a major tool for populist

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<sup>6</sup> See Hooghe and Dassonneville “Data and Methods” subheader for more information.



candidates, Shelly and Hitt conclude that Sanders knew where to put himself in social media to be seen by millennial voters. For instance, “He has more Facebook followers than any other senator (1.3 million)... and regularly engages with potential voters through social media” (Shelly and Hitt, 275).

Donald Trump’s immoral actions and unrepugnant statements, such as his racist remarks, attack on a Gold Star family and extramarital affairs, have come under scrutiny. These statements have caused his opponents and what he would infamously label “fake news” to portray him as a racist and bigot. According to Cassidy, this backlash was central in allowing him to stand out against other Republican primary challengers and ultimately win the Republican primary. The media vilification of Trump became a populist beacon for those who felt victimized by the elites. Other more mainstream Republican candidates, most notably Ted Cruz, who was Trump’s main rival in the primary nomination, were seen as career politicians with decades of experience. The constant attacks on Trump by the traditional media served only to validate his narrative of victimization under the establishment. Sanders’ also shows a different instance of this anti-establishment mechanism. Following his defeat in the Democratic primaries, anti-establishment controversy followed him and the Democratic National Committee. Donna Brazile, the former chair of the Democratic National Committee, alleged that Hilary Clinton, Sanders’ main rival in the Democratic primary, rigged the nomination process in her favor (Klein, “Was the Democratic primary rigged?”). This has also pushed the narrative that the “establishment” was out for Sanders, and that his supporters, the millennial generation, must band together to make sure their voices are heard, a point of interest for the upcoming 2020 election.

This anti-establishment sentiment extends far past the victimization of the individual candidates. There was a strong desire by populist supporters for a change in the status quo, bounded by lack of trust in the establishment. According to the Pew Research Center, only 18% of Americans have a lot of trust in national news organisations. “Mainstream media have reacted to attacks on their authoritativeness by decrying them as manifestations of political irrationality and populism.” (Gerubado, 749). This further emphasizes the role of victimization that populist supporters felt, and the reason why, with the use of social media and the “filter bubble” why anti-establishment sentiment was so strong with American voters. “Sanders admitted that Trump had ‘said some outrageous and painful things, but I think people are tired of the same old, same old political rhetoric’” (Coates, “The First White President”). Both populist leaders ran on the idea that the current status quo cannot remain, Trump with his “Make America Great Again” message and Sanders with his “Enough is Enough” message. In fact, those who distrusted the government rated Trump 15% higher than Cruz or Rubio, and Sanders 14% higher than Clinton (Dyck et al, 355). This distrust against the government, anger against the status quo, and the identification of Trump and Sanders as both the victims and fighters of these establishments gave them prominence in the 2016 presidential election. As it was noted by Jill Lepore on the New Yorker, “the people who turn up at Sanders and Trump rallies are wed, across the aisle, in bonds of populist unrest” (Lepore, “The Party Crashers”).

## **Conclusion**

Following the 2016 presidential election, President Trump has proved that his nontraditional methods were not contained to his campaign with actions, with such actions like

racially motivated attacks against Democratic congresswomen (Freidersdorf, “Trump’s Hate makes the ‘Squad Stronger”). There is a strong argument to be made about the rise of populist candidates being seen as a culmination of underlying factors in the United States, many of which are far outside of the scope of this paper. Processes, such as globalization and economic inequality, have been festering in the country and the previous leaderships’ inability to deal with these issues and the partisan bickering regarding them have made many Americans disillusioned with the entire political process. From this feeling, unique coalitions started to form, not based off of political ideology, but on the shared identity of victimization. These groups banded together under populist candidates, often perceived as the only candidate who can fight against the establishment, and whose fight with the establishment only serves to embroil the fight further on social media.

It is definitely possible to recontextualize the relationship between media and politics differently than was done in this paper. This paper only served to elaborate on the general abstract roles media played that could be corroborated with theories and data from other political scientists, but what was said here is very much the surface level in this particular field of study. In addition, the nature of media and politics makes it difficult to identify the causatory relationships between racist media and people with racist sentiments, and even more so to quantify the effect this aforementioned, yet general relationship had on the 2016 election other than (as Gerubado calls) an “elective affinity.”

With the 2020 presidential election quickly looming over the horizon, presidential candidates Sanders and Trump are once again running for office in another unique election cycle. The mechanism of victimization can once again be seen with Trump’s impeachment scandal, a

proceeding that is being split virtually across party lines and further emphasizing the “us versus them” mindset that stands to dominate Trump’s rhetoric. In addition, Bernie Sanders still fights to win the Democratic nomination with the same message as before, but is suffering from his inability to appeal to older voters, largely to his socialist label, minorities, who vote for more mainstream Democratic candidates, and the low participation rates from his main millennial demographic. The question remains to be seen whether or not the election of Trump is an anomaly or the new pattern in American discourse, but this paper serves to offer an insight into the political mechanisms that allowed for the rise of such populist candidates.

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