

A Somewhat Reassuring Defense of Populism

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IS ANY DEFENSE OF POPULISM, even a modestly consoling one, an apology for demagoguery, xenophobia, racism, paranoia, and other evils associated with the term? This question goes to a deeper question: is populism a destructive force in a democracy, one that leads to dictatorship, messianic leadership, and uncontrolled passions of citizens willing to relinquish their liberties for social stability?

An equivocal answer—*Not necessarily*—neglects a powerful argument that grassroots activist movements—populism—are essential to American democracy. Populist movements force established parties and political leaders to undertake reform. Without the social disruption that comes with populism, political reform cannot occur on any large scale. The power of grassroots movements, given the right climate for change, compels established parties to respond by accommodation, concession, preemption, and absorption of populist demands. American history is replete with

these cycles of political disequilibrium, followed by stabilization through reform. Significant reform in American history often begins with populist grassroots movements challenging the established political order.

Populist moments are marked by discord and turmoil, which creates political disequilibrium that forces established parties and leaders to respond by undertaking reforms necessary to stabilize society. Before political equilibrium is restored, however, a sense of profound disquiet pervades society. Grassroots activism and populist protest produce class resentment, social conflict, protest, and violence. In such times, cranks, political revolutionaries, and religious visionaries step forward with schemes to perfect the world. Conspiracy theorists abound, when in the past they would have been ignored. All—cranks, conspiracists, visionaries, and activist followers—unite around the rhetoric of anti-elitism and taking back the power in the name of the people.

Populism comes under its greatest attack during these periods of political disequilibrium. In such an environment, populism becomes a bad word, denoting the irrationality of the masses, and the dark side of democracy. Surely this is the case with the election of Donald Trump to the presidency in 2016 and the rise of nationalist parties in Europe in recent years. The election of Trump led to a plethora of books denouncing populism. Typical was Princeton University political scientist Jan-Werner Müller who in his 2016 book *What Is Populism* described populism at its core as anti-liberal and anti-democratic. Even critics find populism difficult to define precisely. Scholars have spent lifetimes debating the meaning of the term. For the sake of argument, let's define populism within the American political tradition as grassroots activism rooted in an anti-elitist call for citizens to be given a larger voice in politics. Such a definition provides less a taxonomy of populism than an opportunity to see popular grassroots activism, as disquieting as it is to its critics, as essential to democratic reform in the American political tradition.

When viewed in a broader perspective, successful grassroots American reform restores public confidence in the American party system. The importance of grassroots activism to party renewal cannot be understated. No doubt, grassroots activism induces deep discord in the political system. The tempest of grassroots agitation encourages radicalism, demagoguery, agitation, mass demonstration, and at times violence. Anti-party sentiment, denunciations of political corruption, and economic cabals found common expression. Third parties emerge to capture popular discontent, as evidenced in the formation of the Progressive Party and the Socialist Party in the early 20th century, and the rise of the Reform Party, Libertarian Party, and the Green Party in modern America.

Out of this discord, however, emerges political stability, as established parties respond to the demands and necessity of reform. Essential to this dialectic of discord giving rise to political stability are politicians who assume the role of reformers. These politicians might be motivated by genuine concern and political calculation. Nonetheless, this metamorphosis of populist agitation into political stability invites a defense of populism.

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In the period preceding reform, when social disequilibrium is at its highest, populism is denounced by its opponents as an expression of the worst passions of the people. In this manner, populism is contrasted with enlightened, considered opinion—usually educated and elite opinion. A twist on criticism comes from scholars who want to defend “good” populism, truly expressing the legitimate interests of the people, contrasted with “bad” populism in which the people are manipulated by self-serving elite interests. This bad populism is seen in alleged “astro-turf” populism represented by popular anti-communism in the 1950s, the later New Right in the 1970s, and today's Tea Party. Within these critiques of populism, the specter of fascism always seems to lurk.

American populism can be distinguished from populism in Europe and other regions in the world. American populism is unique in its demand for more direct democracy and greater ambivalence toward a strong

leader to save the nation. Furthermore, within the American tradition, at least since the Founding of the nation, populist rhetoric has remained a constant theme. Aspiring candidates and incumbents alike rail against the establishment, the need to clean up government, and throw the rascals out. Regular campaign rhetoric, however, should be separated from populism as manifested in grassroots social movements. Here common rhetoric is turned into genuine protest on a massive scale, sharply critical, especially in its inception, toward established political parties and prevailing powers. Populist grassroots activism tends toward a greater suspicion, deeper hostility, and more pronounced hostility to the established political order. Only when grassroots social movements gain strength and are confronted by the vicissitudes of legislative achievement and winning election, does the reality of actual politics become apparent. Forming alliances with established politicians or political parties creates inevitable tensions for principled activists, already distrustful of the system, and those who understand that compromise is necessary to achieve reform. Here, weighing the balance between principle and opportunity presents a social movement and its leaders with an inevitable dilemma.

Grassroots activism becomes entwined with partisan politics, a natural result within the democratic process. However, grassroots visionaries, often given to moral absolutes, and partisan politicians, anxious to win election for themselves and their parties, are not natural allies. Here, principle and partisanship, the purity of intention and practical achievement, are not easily reconciled.

Discerning the exact impact of a single grassroots cause or movement, or a confluence of movements at a punctuated

moment when established political leaders respond to popular demand, presents a difficult task. Simply concluding that grassroots activism creates an environment for reform does not say much, for the simple reason that demands for reform can gestate over long periods of time. Furthermore, to make a causal link of grassroots activism at a single point in history with coinciding political reform creates an opportunity for specious history. Just because something happens at one moment in history, Point A, while something else occurs at the same movement, Point B, does not mean that one caused the other. For one thing, political reform can be simply a response to an economic or political crisis—external events, if you will—in which long-festered popular demands for reform have no direct relationship. Obviously, an economic or political crisis creates an environment for reform or changes in political leadership and policy and legislative agendas, but the fact remains, grassroots activism in itself might not have a prominent role in influencing change.

The transition from grassroots activism to party reform, when it occurs, is not linear. The gestation of grassroots reform that begins with visionary leaders often spans years and even decades before resulting in a political response. Party response to grassroots agitation depends on the specific historical conditions of the time. Political parties are generally resistant to radical change. As a consequence, arriving at an accurate general principle or a quantifiable measure predicting party response to grassroots agitation is impossible. Grassroots reform, however, remains essential to the aureate fabric of American democracy.

At any point in history, grassroots activism presents a cacophony of voices calling for reform of various sorts without

programmatically coherent. Politicians responding to powerful reform sentiment, if it has gained traction within the larger public, seize upon popular reform sentiment for partisan advantage. Calls for reform within a party are often led by outsiders seeking to challenge established and intransigent leadership. The eruption of reform with the political system often

appears suddenly, but behind this volcanic explosion has been brewing undercurrents of molten activity.

Dissecting every grassroots movement in a brief essay is not possible. Indeed, the myriad of social movements just in the 20th century is suggested in a table compiled by a sociologist in 2005 (See Table 1).

Table 1: Top 25 U.S. Social Movement Organizations in the 20th century, by Mentions in Articles in Peak Year, in the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*

Organization (Peak Year)	<i>New York Times</i> Articles	<i>New York Times</i> Front Page	<i>Washington Post</i> Articles
1. American Federation of Labor (1937)	1,050	205	476
2. Black Panthers (1970)	1,028	111	617
3. Congress of Industrial Organizations (1937)	786	186	325
4. National Assoc. for the Advancement of Colored People (1963)	762	128	446
5. Ku Klux Klan (1924)	672	180	339
6. Anti-Saloon League (1930)	409	99	91
7. Townsend Plan (1936)	402	68	118
8. Students for a Democratic Society (1969)	381	90	174
9. Congress of Racial Equality (1963)	369	32	86
10. America First Committee (1941)	280	24	121
11. American Legion (1937)	263	70	200
12. John Birch Society (1964)	255	32	128
13. League of Women Voters (1937)	246	4	117
14. American Civil Liberties Union (1977)	231	24	102
15. Moral Majority (1981)	221	10	268
16. Southern Christian Leadership Conference (1968)	215	36	142
17. German American Bund (1939)	200	32	71
18. Students Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (1966)	195	47	76
19. Veterans of Foreign Wars (1950)	180	22	104
20. American Liberty League (1936)	174	53	136
21. Christian Coalition (1996)	170	52	253
22. Association against the Prohibition Amendment (1930)	168	56	37
23. Weathermen (1970)	159	22	92
24. Symbionese Liberation Army (1974)	157	23	97
25. Jewish Defense League (1971)	145	31	91

Source: Amenta, Edwin, et al. "Age for Leisure? Political Mediation and the Impact of the Pension Movement on U.S. Old-Age Policy." *American Sociological Review*, vol. 70, no. 3, 2005, pp. 518–518. doi:10.1177/000312240507000308.

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The importance of social movements to party reform have generally been ignored by scholars. As a consequence, two fairly separate literatures have developed: social reform movements and party politics. Historians and sociologists have given greater attention to social reform movements, while political scientists have focused largely on party politics, voter behavior, and the legislative/policy process. Larger theoretical questions such as the dynamics of social movements and political parties—realignments, legislative processes, political and policy agenda setting—are often discussed only in passing. Historians have given great emphasis to the historical conditions that produce grassroots activism, while entering into fierce debates as to ideological nature of American populism. Most attention has been given to the populist movement in the late nineteenth century, although New Deal social protest in the 1930s, especially the Townsend, Coughlin, and Huey Long movements, attracted attention by later scholars interested in the New Deal. Meanwhile, sociologists have given greater study to the dynamics of social movements, the role of charismatic leadership, tensions within movements between leaders and followers, why some movements proved successful and others dissipated in discord.

Explaining social protests solely in terms of economic hardship or temporary hardship associated with social strain offers a simplistic notion as to how grassroots movements gain popular support that is translated into effective political change.

Conditions for social protest remain constant within any society because economic hardship, inequities, conflict between the powerful and the downtrodden remain persistent. Successful mobilization within a grassroots movement that translates into a larger populist expression depends on internal group resources, organization, and successful strategies for collective action. These are internal factors determining a successful grassroots organization or social movement. More important, however, is the particular cultural, societal, and political environment in which protest movements operate. This is especially the case within American democracy in which culture, social structure, and a two-party system absorb potential for class conflict, social violence, and the emergence of populist outbursts challenging the established economic and political order.

Social movements should not be seen as static. Activists come to a movement or cause with definite expectations, and in the course of the struggle itself can develop new strategies and alignments as a result of confronting the established political and social order. Alliances with other grassroots movements present an opportunity for schism, while not forming alliances can lead to sectarianism. If struggle creates opportunities for political education, elites too learn from a prolonged struggle, pursuing a course of repression, accommodation, or assimilation of grassroots opposition. Critical to understanding social movements and reactions by elites is whether individuals pursue selective incentives or the collective

good. As movements gain momentum, definitions of the “collective good” become increasingly diffuse. This becomes fully evident when grassroots activism develops into a mass populist political movement. Fusion with established parties further confuses the meaning of the “collective good” as activists, movement entrepreneurs, and emerging or established politicians accommodate to populism. The entrance of professional politicians into a mass movement increases the likelihood of oligarchic control. The anti-partisan impetus of grassroots activism thus is transformed into controlled party leadership and administration. As politicians—emergent or past—take control of an ascendant movement, the tendency of some followers will be to fall away from the movement and feel a sense of betrayal.

Sociologists have concluded that successful (or failed) social movements do not rest fully on the specifics of their agendas. Essential ingredients (factors) for a successful movement include the following.

1. New ideas
2. The enlistment of organizations initially outside the established political parties
3. Division within the political, social, and cultural elites.
4. The use of a shared language that makes an appeal to a larger audience beyond activist circles.
5. The mobilization of the larger electorate and recruitment of critical party leaders that force political and legislative change.

These are not the only factors for ensuring the success of a reform movement. Historical circumstances, leadership, tenacity of the opposition, and an array of other elements can defeat a reform movement. Not all reform movements succeeded, and even those that

did had limited success if judged in the aspirations of reform leaders. Reform crusaders did not accomplish all of their goals, but they achieved much even in their own terms.

Two important observations can be made about grassroots activism in the late nineteenth century through the mid-twentieth century. First, grassroots agitation forced both political parties, Democrats and Republicans, to respond to demands for reform. In this respect, grassroots activists succeeded. As America entered the Second World War, corporations were regulated, the monetary system reformed, farmers and workers better protected, and welfare for the poor, children, and the elderly much improved. Progressive and New Deal legislation had not created the perfect society; much more needed to be done, and the end result might not have achieved all that grassroots movements had demanded or envisioned. Nonetheless, progress had been made through legislation prompted, in large part, by the politics of the street.

The second observation suggests an irony in the results of grassroots activism: the emergence of the administrative state. Reform, encouraged by grassroots mobilization and the inevitable result of the complexities of an industrial society, led to the creation of a regulatory and welfare administrative state, overseen by a vast bureaucracy of civil servants and experts. These administrators and experts pronounced themselves as guardians of the republic. This was hardly the intention of grassroots reform movements who called for more democratic rule. Demands for popular reform, espoused by grassroots activists in the late 19th century and reignited during the 1930s, coincided with the views of the educated elite that non-partisan expertise was needed in government. As a result, activists’ demands for democratic revival were channeled by those who called

themselves “scientific” reformers—social scientists and business leaders—who sought the depoliticization of the political process.

Post-Civil War grassroots agitation took many forms in the late 19th century. Leaders and activists came and went in these movements, as did organizations and third-party formations. What is important, though, is that calls for reform, grassroots mobilization, and challenges to established political and social leadership built over time, with increasing crescendo, setting the stage for party renewal when forced by a crisis and popular demand for change. Populist-Progressive reforms did not resolve fully many of the problems that still confronted labor, farmers, African Americans, the cities, and the economic order. It took a major economic depression in 1929 and the New Deal to address further need for reform, encouraged again by grassroots activism in the 1920s, but the poignancy of the Progressive reforms in the years between 1900-1917 can only be fully understood within the context of grassroots activism in the post-Civil War years.

Populism emerged in the last decade of the 19th century like a tornado sweeping up through Texas into the South and spilling into the Midwest, across into the Mountain and Pacific Coast states. Gaining force from long agitation, complaint, and calls from reform by farmers and industrial workers throughout the late 19th century, Populism as a party dissipated because of its own internal frictions and contradictory alliances, and was ultimately broken apart by a huge electoral wall erected by Republicans in the presidential election of 1896.

Populism marked the culmination of storms of protest about income inequality, railroad monopoly, unfair and oppressive labor practices, and political corruption on the local, state and national levels. These protest movements were reflected in grassroots agitation expressed in currency

reform (Greenbackism and Free Silver), anti-monopoly third parties, the Single Tax movement (Henry George), utopian socialism (Edward Bellamy), and labor protest and strikes. The formation of the Populist Party brought these reform movements together in an uneasy alliance between farmers and urban industrial workers. Already by the presidential election of 1892 and clearly by the midterm elections of 1894, the Populist Party revealed its unviability as a third party challenging the established two parties. The obvious political solution for Populist Party leaders was to fuse with the Democratic Party under the leadership of William Jennings Bryan and his crusade for free silver in 1896. When Bryan lost to the Republican nominee in 1896, the Populist Party was all but dead. The Populist agenda, however, lived on to find expression and implementation in the Progressive years, 1900 to 1917.

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The political consequences of the Populist movement forced both major parties Democratic and Republican to undertake reform in varying degrees. Already by 1896, both the Democratic Party and Republican Party platforms incorporated calls for railroad regulation and the end of federal injunctions against organized labor. The most direct effect of Populism for the Democratic Party was found in the Bryan wing of the Democratic Party that continued as a major role in the party well into the 1930s,

expressed in anti-imperialist and isolationist foreign policy positions and anti-monopoly and anti-corporate sentiment. The Southern wing of the Democratic Party, largely agrarian, remained as the bulwark of the party. Tragically, the Populist reform agenda was subverted in the Democratic South by the complete transformation of the party into white supremacy, often led by former Populists turned Democratic. In North Carolina, former Populist Furnifold M. Simmons joined Populist newspaper editor Josephus Daniels in making the state Democratic Party into a “white man’s” party. In 1900, Democrats recaptured the North Carolina governorship and secured the enactment of a state constitutional amendment that effectively disfranchised most black voters, who had been able to elect a few black candidates to minor offices in the Eastern part of the state through a Populist-Republican alliance. The Tarheel Democratic redemption was nearly as ruthless as white “redemption” in post-Civil War Reconstruction and occurred throughout the Democratic South.

Republicans on both the national and state levels stood most firmly against Populism, although in a few southern states, such as North Carolina and Tennessee, the G. O. P. fused with Populists to oppose the Democratic Party control. Agrarian radicalism expressed itself among a few Midwest governors and U.S. Senators such as Robert La Follette in Wisconsin, George Norris in Nebraska, and William Borah in Idaho. These few spotty voices within the Republican Party fused agrarian radicalism with urban progressivism.

The outburst of reform following the 1893 Depression and the turn of both parties to reform reflected grassroots agitation following the Civil War. Problems for farmers, industrial workers, the growing concentration of business and wealth, urban problems, and cyclic economic downturns might have

eventually forced political leaders to seek solutions, but it’s hard to imagine that without earlier grassroots agitation and the formation of the Populist Party that the major parties would have enacted the reform measures taken in the Progressive Era and New Deal period. In the first decade and half of the 20th century, this reform impetus was neither complete nor without reaction, but the age of reform had begun. From 1900 through 1915, the budget of the U.S. Agriculture Department grew by more than 700 percent, and with a staff of more than 19,000 people it became one of the largest departments within the federal administrative state. The enactment of the Federal Reserve Act of 1913 helped meet demands for a more expansive currency. Both parties, although without division, accepted greater federal regulation of business, the recognition of labor rights, the direct election of U.S. Senators, women’s suffrage, a federal income tax, and clean government measures. On the state and local level, Populist agitation led to many reforms, including the expansion of public schools and public libraries. In these measures, new government agencies were required. This meant the expansion of the administrative state, a fact the Populists understood when they called for a Constitutional amendment that “All persons engaged in the government service shall be placed under a civil-service regulation of the most rigid character, so as to prevent the increase of the power of the national administration by the use of such additional government employees.”

In the 1930s, grassroots activism erupted with volcanic intensity, channeling labor radicals, the elderly, disenchanted working and lower middle-class Catholics, and Midwestern and Southern farmers. Grassroots movements attracted millions of Americans who demanded reforms to relieve the sufferings of the unemployed, the poor, the farmer, and women and children.

The rich were assailed for having too much; big business was accused of placing profits above humanity; and Wall Street financiers were caricatured as guys in top hats and tails manipulating markets for their own selfish gain. Grassroots agitators attacked the rich, the moneylenders, the gold interests, and political lackeys. Movements led by Francis Townsend for old age pensions; Fr. Charles Coughlin for monetary inflation and an isolationist foreign policy; and Huey Long and his successor Gerald L. K. Smith for wealth distribution were anti-Roosevelt and anti-New Deal, especially in 1935 and 1936, but they all called for activist government to remedy the problems caused by economic depression. Townsend, Coughlin, and Long attracted the followings and drew the greatest attention because they posed a threat (it appeared) to Franklin Roosevelt.

In response to an economic crisis of capitalism and the demands by grassroots reformers and an energized labor movement, the New Deal further expanded the regulatory-welfare state, administered by expert bureaucrats on the federal, state, and local levels. By the time the United States entered the Second World War, a huge regulatory-welfare state had been created. Although it's debatable whether this regulatory-welfare state was as large as those of other advanced nations, and whether its expenditures equaled those of modern states, the fact remains that an administrative state had been created with an array of new agencies overseeing it.

However necessary this new administrative state was in order to meet the needs of the people, the result of popular demands for reform, expressed through grassroots social movements, created governmental institutions that many saw as remote from their lives, arbitrary in its regulations, and serving interests other than their own, whether it

be powerful special interests or bureaucratic self-preservation.

Those Progressive and New Deal reformers who rallied to the call of expertise in government sought to create an administrative state overseen by a new class of well-educated experts. While accepting the need for democratic reform, many expressed anti-majoritarian sentiment. For example, writing on "Democracy and Efficiency" for the *Atlantic Monthly* in March 1901, Woodrow Wilson captured this ambivalence toward democracy when he proclaimed, "It is no longer possible to mistake the reactions against democracy." He observed, "The nineteenth century was above all others a century of democracy; and yet the world is no more convinced of the benefits of democracy as a form of government at its it than it was at the beginning." He called for the "best men"—educated professionals—to be placed into government. He proclaimed, "Representative government, has its long life and excellent development, not in order that the common opinion, the opinion of the street, might prevail, but in order that the best opinion, the opinion generated by the best possible methods of general counsel, might rule in public affairs."

In this way, the politics of the street—democratic agitation—was transformed into the deadening shuffle of papers and studies by government administrators, who asserted themselves as representatives of the public interest. Grassroots activism encouraged, if not compelled, the two parties to accept reform agendas; the unforeseen consequence of popular reform was the creation of more distant government, arguably one less responsive to the demands of the people. Those progressive and New Deal office-seekers, Theodore Roosevelt, Robert LaFollette, and Franklin Roosevelt, sincerely espoused democratic values, and on the local, state, and federal levels, genuine reforms

were instituted extending and ensuring democratic rights, e.g. the ratification of the 19th amendment extending voting rights to women. These politicians responded to popular demands for reform, yet the confluence of popular democratic reform and the call for expertise in government established an administrative state, albeit one within a democratic regime, that distanced itself from the general electorate.

Grassroots activism through popular social movements proved critical for the renewal of the democratic order. Popular social movements encouraged participation in the democratic process. Especially important in this regard was the civil rights movement following World War II. Grassroots agitation for racial integration and black voting rights forced basic social and political change in modern America. This transformation would not have occurred without grassroots activism. Social protest created the context for the enactment of the Civil Rights Act of 1957, the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. By the end of this struggle, both the Democratic and Republican parties had endorsed racial integration and civil rights for black Americans. Mobilization of black voters came slowly, but by the early 21st century black voters had become a key voting block in national elections and in many state and local elections.

Grassroots social movements for reform throughout the late nineteenth century and into present-day America caused great consternation among those seeking to preserve the old order. These movements projected a radical transformation of the established social and political order; they were infused with anti-elitism and encouraged more radical agitators to call

for revolution. Within them, conspiracy theorists stepped forward to tap the worst fears of the people that government was controlled by cabals, whether Wall Street, international financiers, one-world government elites, or communists. Grassroots agitation—populism—created reactionary movements and anti-labor, racist, anti-radical vigilantism. In the end, however, revolution and reaction were redirected and tempered by politicians working within the established political order to accept the political and social necessity of reform.

Do the lessons of past populist movement provide a template for the revival of a reform movement(s) today? The verdict is still out on this question because the factors necessary for successful reform appear mostly missing today. New ideas and a shared language are absent in today's protest movements, whether it be Black Lives Matter or the Tea Party or other groups. A sense of discontent prevails in American society today. Political opinion has become polarized; partisanship has prevented necessary enactment of reform legislation to address problems concerning national defense, the financial health of society, income inequality, a deteriorating infrastructure, and social ills from crime, drug addiction, children in poverty, and immigration. This endeavor might begin on the streets forcing political leaders to respond to popular demands for reform. If such is the case, expect political and social disruption with the hope, if past history is any example, that stability will return. Still in this winter of discontent, new ideas for reform, leadership, and a shared language is called for by those seeking a restoration of national purpose. **A**